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# Women generating, reproducing and disseminating texts in a Deobandi madrasa in South Africa

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Religion moves into the realm of the rational the moment when specific and specified texts are generated, reproduced and disseminated according to Weber. As such, the capacity to generate, reproduce and disseminate concepts from texts is shown to be consequential. In Weber's work, the presence of women is not overt. Scholarship has explored how women are positioned in religious texts, but comparatively little scholarship has engaged with how they generate, reproduce and disseminate texts. This article interrogates the position of women in relation to a religious textual generation, reproduction and dissemination within an Islamic tradition. Ethnographic data from a Deobandi-aligned education institution or madrasa was drawn on. Data were analysed with regard to how the texts used in the institution of Islamic learning are generated, reproduced and disseminated and the position of women in this regard.

**Contribution:** Findings illustrated that women are key disseminators of particular forms of Islamic (religious) texts. As such, there are opportunities for women to generate and reproduce their own meaning of the texts. The article enhanced scholarship with regard to how women are able to maintain, extend and expand theologies. In this way, it demonstrated how women might be empowered to do so.

**Keywords:** rationality of religion; Max Weber; Deobandi Islamic education; madrasas; religious texts.

## Introduction

Religion moves into the realm of the rational the moment when specific and specified texts are generated, reproduced and disseminated according to Weber (1966:29, 67). The development of a doctrine occurs when texts are generated, reproduced and disseminated. When one is able to generate, reproduce and disseminate concepts from and within particular texts, one may be able to inscribe social life. Throughout the process of developing doctrines as explicated by Weber, the position of women is not made obvious.

A great deal of scholarship has explored how women are positioned *in* religious texts, but comparatively little scholarship has engaged with their position in relation to generating, reproducing and disseminating these texts. The work of Lerner (1986) is of course both an example and a testimony as to why this is so. Scholarly work has been conducted over the last two decades, following Asad's (in Hefner 2018:4) critique of some Weberian accounts of tradition as an unthinking re-enactment of past practices in favour of a notion of tradition constituted by discourses where the practitioners' conception is crucial to its continuation. Much of this scholarly work relates to women and Islam and has been framed within the tradition of anthropological ethnographies. Examples include studies of adult women in the Middle East (notably Cairo, Egypt) (Hafiz 2011; Mahmood 2005), Europe (Jouili 2015) and the United States of America (USA) (Grewal 2014) who navigate their lived experiences, of which Islamic practice is an important part. These studies are centred on quagmires, difficulties and challenges related to how individuals who choose to follow a religion generally, and Islam in particular, make sense of themselves in a world where this is not the norm.

In this article, a process that has been demonstrated by Weber to be central to a particular modality of religion – rational religion – is the focus, and the position of women with regard to this process is assessed. In other words, the ethnography from which data are drawn is sociologically framed and attempts to unpack how authority in a space is legitimised. In addition, how women are

positioned in this process is highlighted. As Grewal (2014:20) acknowledges, a textual basis is central to how authority is legitimised within Islamic traditions. This is not to say that all Muslim lives are equally aligned to the texts but that Islamic discourse emanates and emerges from text. By implication, neither Asad's assertion that tradition is discursive practice, nor Weber's that rational religious ethics are founded in text-based doctrine are refuted here. Rather, the article demonstrates how, when both Asad and Weber's assertions are incorporated into an analytical frame, much can be read from the situation.

This article interrogates the position of women in relation to religious textual generation, reproduction and dissemination. In order to do so, the article draws on ethnographic data from a Deobandi-aligned education institution in South Africa. Data are analysed with regard to how texts used in the institution are generated, reproduced and disseminated and the position of women in this regard. Findings suggest that, in this space, women are key disseminators of particular forms of Islamic (religious) texts. Moreover, and as a consequence, there are opportunities for women to generate and reproduce their own meaning of the texts. Data from this ethnography thus reinforce both Weber and Asad's assertions while showing how each of their insights allows greater understanding of the processes related to rational religious ethics and the position of women therein. The article begins by drawing on Max Weber's theorisation of how religions rationalise to analyse the texts within the Deobandi education movement. The section that follows provides a brief overview of the methodology, followed by a presentation of data. The article ends with a discussion of the data and conclusion.

## Texts in the process of rationalisation

This section of the article outlines the theoretical framing. The work of Weber (1966) as it relates to the rationalisation of religion forms the basis of the discussion in this section. An analysis of texts within the Deobandi education movement is weaved into Weber's proposition for how rational religious ethics are constituted. In doing so, the section demonstrates how the Deobandi education movement and the Protestant movement developed along parallel processes that may be distinguished as doctrinal development. Data presented in the article are analysed as a process of doctrinal development. The education institution at which the data analysed in this article were collected is shown, in the following section, to be situated within the Deobandi education movement. To this end, data gathered at the institution highlight the position of women in relation to religious textual generation, reproduction and dissemination within this education movement.

Max Weber asserts that the most rational form of religion, inner-worldly asceticism or a religious ethic has a significant impact on human action and consequently on society. Weber (1966:45) contends that the rationalisation of religion culminating in a religious ethic (inner-worldly asceticism) is undergirded by a doctrine. The Deobandi education movement, a notable Islamic tradition (Hefner 2007:19), is argued to parallel the development of an inner-worldly ascetic ethic (McDonald 2013).

Prophetic revelation as text is fundamental to religion rationalising. Prophetic revelation provides 'a unified view of the world derived from a consciously integrated and meaningful attitude to life' (Weber 1966:59). Parsons (1966) states:

> In the entire context of the process of rationalisation, Weber emphasises the importance of the development of a *written* sacred tradition, of sacred books [...]. Once there are sacred texts, however, these are subjected both to continual editing and to complex processes of interpretation, and tend to become the focus of specialised intellectual competence and prestige in the religious field and on the cultural level of rationalised systems of religious doctrine. (p. xxxvii, *emphasis in original*)

Talal Asad's notion of tradition as discursive practice (see Grewal 2014) may be used as an analytical hook to explain that:

> Once there are sacred texts, however, these are subjected both to continual editing and to complex processes of interpretation, and tend to become the focus of specialised intellectual competence and prestige. (p. 37)

Neither Weber nor this article claims that rationalised religion is held solely within a static textual tradition. Following Weber, this article, however, claims that a rational religious ethic is constructed on the basis of an existing textual corpus. In other words, the discursive practice is circumscribed by a particular set of texts. This is not to say that these texts cannot be or are not contested. Indeed, in the process of being contested, their position as doctrinal texts is legitimated and upheld as they become the cog within discursive practice or tradition. A *doctrine* is 'the development of a rational system of religious concepts' that lays the basis for a 'systematic and distinctively religious ethic based upon a consistent and stable [...] "revelation"' (Weber 1966:29).

Doctrine can thus be regarded as the textual basis on which rational religious ethics rely. A doctrine is comprised, for Weber (1966:67), out of two kinds of religious texts: canonical writings, or foundational religious texts, and dogmatic writings, which contain interpretations of concepts derived in the canon. As such, distinctions in doctrines could be characterised by a difference in canon, the choice of religious concept(s) selected from a canon for interpretation in dogmatic writings, as well as the manner in which the selected concept(s) are interpreted. Consequently, the potential for generating religious doctrines is almost infinite. Thus, inasmuch as the doctrinal process forms the basis for rational religious ethics, it can also lead to crises of authority, as sketched by Grewal (2014:40–42), for example. When Muslims from various backgrounds and cultures find themselves in the same place due to diverse migration patterns, the interpretation of Islam might become contested.

Weber identified Puritanism as the quintessential rationalised religious ethic or inner-worldly religious ethic in which doctrine features prominently. Protestantism, for Weber (1976:156–162), represents an ideal type in rationalised religion that is inner-worldly asceticism or religious ethic. The doctrine on which the Protestant Ethic was founded is canonical writing (Martin Luther's translation of the Bible) (Weber 1966:198) and dogmatic writings (Jean Calvin's *Institutes*) (Weber 2005:45–46). The Deobandis elevate both the Qur'an and hadīth (Robinson 2004:52). Metcalf (1984:6) contends that, in a bid to construct a true Islam, the [Deobandi] movements tended to be 'scripturalist', by returning to the written records of the Qur'an and the tradition of the Prophet [hadīth]. The Qur'an and hadīth may be regarded as foundational religious texts or the canon. Interpretations of the canon – dogmatic texts – can also been identified within the Deobandi education movement (Sayed 2010:60).

The writings of Richard Baxter (a writer of Puritan ethics who authored the *Christian Directory*) 'derived from [his] ministerial practice' are further shown to be central to the constitution of the Protestant Ethics (Weber 1976:155). The *Christian Directory* authored by Baxter is 'the most complete compendium of Puritan Ethics' according to Weber (2005:103). This text is universally recognised with many editions and translations (Weber 1976:55–156). Scholarship on the Protestant Reformation makes reference to an accessible textual form that was instrumental in its spreading and promoting the patterns of behaviour connected to the calling. The Reformation was linked, according to Loimeier (2005:242), with a 'media revolution', specifically with respect to the printing press. Van der Veer (2004:36) suggests that Protestantism was linked to the rise of a market for books, and those, printed in the vernacular, created new reading publics, which, in turn, were essential to developing a shared consciousness. Following Van der Veer, the term *vernacular writings* will be used with reference to texts, like those of Richard Baxter, that offer an accessible practical guide relating concepts systematised in canonical and dogmatic writings to a pattern of behaviour.

Vernacular writings, achieving, like Richard Baxter's writings, extensive prevalence and readability, have been associated with and identified within the Deobandi education movement. Zaman (2008:57) makes reference to similar texts as *popular manuscripts*. In line with Asad's perspective, popularised text could represent a salient discourse within a particular tradition. In the process reading and rereading vernacular writings become part of the discursive practice of a tradition.

The most significant vernacular writing or popular manuscript associated with the Deobandi education movement which achieved an extensive readership is the *Behisti Zewar* (Thanwi n.d.). According to Robinson (2004:52–53), the *Behisti Zewar*, authored by Ashraf Ali Thanawi [1863–1943], is the most widely published Muslim publication in South Asia, next to the Qur'an. Metcalf (1990:vii) considers it to be one of the most influential books of the 20th century. Moreover, it has been translated into many other languages besides the original Urdu (Metcalf 1984:186). Thanawi is a graduate of the Darul Uloom Deoband (Sayed 2010:43). Metcalf (1990:viii) contends that to 'preach reform and reach women', *ulama* had to break with the 'classical literary genre', and Thanawi did so. This text is taught at Deobandi institutions for women in South Africa (Sayed 2010:44).

Weber provides an exacting explication of how the Protestant ethic came to guide the actions of many, to the extent that, in his view, it brought about an economic revolution society continues to be founded on. Within this explication, wherein texts feature prominently, women are not positioned in relation to how texts were generated or reproduced. None of the texts mentioned in the discussion above regarding either the Protestant or Deobandi movements are authored by women. Female teachers are, however, central to disseminating the texts in educational institutions for women associated with the Deobandi education movement (Sayed 2010; Winkelman 2005). An examination of educational institutions for women could thus further enhance our understanding of women's position in the generation, reproduction and dissemination of religious texts. Data from an education institution for young women, associated with the Deobandi movement, are presented in the remainder of this article in order to make a further contribution to answering the question.

## Generation, reproduction and dissemination of texts at Madrasa Warda

This section begins with a brief overview of how data presented here were collected. Data are then presented with regard to women's position in the generation, reproduction and dissemination of religious texts used in the education institution, Madrasa Warda.[1] Participant observation (Sallaz 2009:251) was conducted at Madrasa Warda. Interviews (Maykut & Morehouse 1994:79) were also conducted with participants from Madrasa Warda. Data were analysed for themes following Schensul and LeCompte's (1999) method of data analysis. Schensul and LeCompte's (1999) method involves categorising themes under domain, subdomain and sub-subdomain. While their method is not entirely unique from other methods of thematic analysis, this particular rendition is what guided the analysis for this article. The data presented in the remainder of the article are the outcome thereof. As part of the introduction to the section, data will be presented that describe the institution, its founders and those who attend it. Data are then presented describing the position of women in the generation, reproduction and dissemination of religious texts at Madrasa Warda.

1.Madrasa Warda is a pseudonym for an Islamic education institution for young women in Johannesburg, South Africa, where fieldwork presented in this article was conducted.

Madrasa Warda was established in 1996 in Lenasia, South Africa, by three men, Mawlana Rafeek Randeree,[2] Yusuf Mohamed and Hafiz Sulaiman Parak, as an independent Islamic education institution for young women. All three founder members had previous involvement with Islamic education institutions. Randeree completed a qualification in the late 1970s at an Islamic education institution in Karachi, Pakistan, and has been working in the capacity of social counsellor at the Jamiatul Ulama[3] since then. Both the institution in Karachi and the Jamiatul Uluma are associated with the Deobandi education movement (Reetz 2011:85). The Deobandi education movement can be traced back to the Islamic education of higher learning, theological academy, university or seminary established in Deoband, India, in 1867 (Metcalf 1982:13). This institution has spawned a network of institutions and as such can be regarded as an education movement (Reetz 2009:7). Associated institutions are recognised according to the curriculum that is followed (Sayed 2010:16–17).

In addition to being a founder member and the principal of Madrasa Warda, as well as a social counsellor, Moulana Randeree is also an imam (leader) at a mosque in Lenasia and a principal of an afternoon madrasa. Mohamed, another founder member, credits his history as an educator within the community as a reason for being a founder, although he is not an Islamic scholar. For example, Mohamed assisted with teaching secular subjects at a Deobandi Darul `Ulum in Johannesburg. Although Mohamed has not undergone formal training in Islamic education, he has been involved with institutions of Islamic education, such as the case of the Darul `Ulum, through his expertise in the field of secular education. Parak is a teacher at a Deobandi Darul `Ulum for young boys.

The strategic management of Madrasa Warda is conducted by a board, according to the founders and teachers at Madrasa Warda. At the time of data collection, there were five male board members, Randeree, Mawlana Abdul Hamid Khan, together with three other Mawlanas, who are all members of the Jamiatul Ulama. The Jamiatul Ulama (2008) reports on Madrasa Warda in the annual report as one of the organisation's projects. The board's connection to the Jamiatul Ulama situates Madrasa Warda firmly as a Deobandi institute. The board members are responsible for the overall management, sustainability and direction of Madrasa Warda. The administrator at Madrasa Warda is Appa Fozi. She is a graduate from a Deobandi seminary for women in Gauteng and has taught at an afternoon madrasa as well.

Most of the teachers are women who had qualified at Islamic seminaries for women. From 1998 until 2004, at any given time, there were between one and two male teachers, all of whom had qualified at Deobandi institutions, on the staff of

2. Pseudonyms are used for all the respondents; however, the title (Mawlana, Hafiz, Appa) that is used to address the individual within the community has been retained because it provides a sense of their religious affiliation and community.

3. The Jamiatul Ulama are an organisation of religious scholars in South Africa.

Madrasa Warda. All the teaching staff at Madrasa Warda, dedicated to teach Islamic subjects, have graduated from Deobandi institutions, female or male. All the students and consequently graduates are female. The graduates who are working are teaching young children Islamic education.

From the above, the connection of Madrasa Warda to the Deobandi movement is evident. Moreover, it is apparent that men are in management and leadership positions at the education institution. It would thus appear that men are at the helm of decisions related to the content knowledge transmitted during teaching at Madrasa Warda. These are not just any men; they are men who are firmly entrenched within Deobandi networks, all but one of whom have qualifications from associated institutions. The remainder of this section examines the texts used in teaching at the madrasa and how these are engaged with by the teachers and students. It would appear from the interactions which occur at Madrasa Warda that this education institution for women is a space where religious texts, associated with the Deobandi movement, are disseminated by and to women.

The excerpt below from an interview conducted with Yusuf Mohamed illustrates that the Qur'an framed the curriculum at Madrasa Warda:

'If I look back, it was saying what would make them good mothers, good housewives, responsible people taking their place in society so that they would be able to know that these are my responsibilities, these are my roles, these [*sic*] is what I am supposed to do. When we drew up the curriculum, I think one of the things we wanted, and I think that is what came out very strongly is, what is the *source* of our religion, what is the message of the Qur'an? We didn't want to give them very *specific* surahs [*chapters from Qur'an*], but what is the *message overall* [*of the Qur'an*].' (Mohamed, interview, *author's own emphasis*)

From the excerpt above, it is clear that inasmuch as the Qur'an framed the curriculum, the aim was not to ensure that the students enrolled at Madrasa Warda knew specific chapters and verses but that they understood the overall message of the Qur'an. The overall message would by implication be an interpretation thereof by someone else, as opposed to, although not necessarily different from, the original text. At Madrasa Warda, the aim was to imbue the young women with a distilled version of the Qur'an, a version distilled by someone else. A version distilled by those associated with the Deobandi movement and ethic. A version in which their role as women included being good mothers, good housewives and responsible people in society.

The Islamic programme at Madrasa Warda consists of 3 years of study wherein a number of texts are selected as textbooks for subjects. A few examples are drawn on in order to demonstrate who have generated the texts taught to the young women at Madrasa Warda. The *Tas-heel* series, authored by the Jamiatul Ulamas, is used to teach elements of faith (`aqidah*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*) across all 3 years. Both the *Tas-heelul-Fiqh* (Jamiatul Ulama Taalimi Board n.d.) and *Complete Taleem ud Deen (Hanafi) Kalimahs, Salat, Beliefs,*

*Zakaat, Tahaarah, Hajj* by Elias (2002) are used for *fiqh* in the third year.

In the second and third years, an Arabic–English translation of *Riyaadus-us-Saliheen* (Abbasi 2006) is used to teach both hadīth and Arabic. The book used at Madrasa Warda is an Arabic–English translation by Abbasi (2006), from the collection authored by Imam Abu Zakariyya Yahya Al-Nawawi (1233–1278 AD) in the 13th century. While Abbasi's version is an English translation, the Arabic text is contained in the text. Each hadīth is written in Arabic first, immediately followed by the English translation. None of these texts are authored by women. The other texts, which can be likened to vernacular writing, taught at Madrasa Warda are also generated and reproduced by men. All of these texts are, however, disseminated in the process of teaching and learning at Madrasa Warda by and to women. In other words, the content of the texts is presented by female teachers to the students.

In the remainder of this section, five incidents will be described that occurred at Madrasa Warda during the participant observation. Each of the incidents highlights a manner in which spaces are opened up where teachers and students generate their own meanings. This is not to suggest that such meanings disrupt the meanings in the texts. They are, however, an indication that teachers and learners are engaging with the meanings of the texts from their own perspectives. The incidents therefore provide evidence not of disruption but of a continued meaning-making associated with the Deobandi ethic beyond vernacular writings, wherein women are centrally positioned. That the ideas generated and reproduced by the teachers and students may not be commensurate with what is normatively regarded as emancipatory is not at issue here. The incidents point to how women are positioned in the generation, reproduction and dissemination of religious texts, within the context of the Deobandi ethic in particular and rational religious ethics in general.

The first incident is a debate among students, a recurring feature on the time-table, held periodically on Fridays. The students are divided into three groups across the 3 years of study and given a topic by the teachers for each debating session. At each session, two groups debate the given topic and the third group adjudicates between them. Each group is expected to develop their own position and arguments. During debates, the teachers are present as spectators and do not question, correct or interrupt the students in any way. They listen and allow the students to express their opinions as they see fit.

Contributions from students during a debate with the topic, 'The status of women in relation to men in Islam', demonstrated that apart from consuming texts generated and reproduced by others', the young women generated interpretations of their own. The students exuded a good deal of competence and confidence in their level of Islamic education and in presenting this to others. The young women engaged the meaning or interpretation of specific verses of the Qur'an in the debate. The students formed their own arguments during the debate based on Qur'anic *tafsir* [exegesis] formulated by them. An example is contained in the excerpt from a debate below:

> The *tafsir* [*exegesis*] of the *ayaat* [*verse*] that you gave does not mean that men have the *right* to maintenance. It shows that men are physically stronger; not mentally and spiritually … That shows that a man has to have *the burden and the stress* of having to take care of his wife which shows the status and the rank of a Muslim woman in Islam, that she does not have the burden. (n.p., *author's own emphasis*)

The debate demonstrated the knowledge students had in respect of Islam, to the extent that they were able to draw from the Qur'an as well as hadīth in many instances. Whether their interpretation was correct or the extent of their knowledge is not considered here. This research also did not attempt to ascertain whether this is a view of the *tafsir* [exegesis] text which they study or whether this view is widely held among women beyond this institution. What stands out is that the young women were engaging with their own formulation of interpretations of the canon, albeit not in published form. During the debate, teachers were present, yet students felt confident to share their articulations freely. The excerpt demonstrates that this education institution provides spaces where women can generate their own articulations of meaning regarding religious texts. Moreover, the excerpt illustrates that students feel competent and confident to use the spaces to generate such articulations of meanings related to religious texts.

A second incident provides evidence of teachers and students generating new insights within the Deobandi doctrine. There were many opportunities during class where contemporary issues were addressed. The Class 1 and Class 2 learners had a period dedicated to deliberating contemporary issues each week. The discussions in class ranged from Mxit[4] to waxing and from *salaah* [ritual prayer] to marriage. The range of topics indicated that the learners were not isolated from everyday life; neither were they interacting with the lifestyle of a distant past only. They were, rather, given a particular orientation with which to view issues of their everyday life. The second incident is represented by one such discussion in a class, where the advantages and disadvantages of Mxit were considered. During this discussion in class about Mxit in particular and cellular telephones in general, there was not a blanket dismissal thereof, although their disadvantages were readily pointed out by the students. Nuanced positions were added to the debate and a steady flow of reflections was encouraged by the teacher, Appa Sabaagh. One student, for instance, mentioned that when someone has to go to the hospital, the communication capability of cellular telephones makes life much easier, to which the teacher agreed. None of the vernacular texts used at Madrasa Warda and associated with the Deobandi ethic consider matters related to social media. Many were first written before the advent of such technologies. Madrasa Warda thus provides spaces in which

4.Mxit is a social media application or platform.

meanings may be generated that relate to the Deobandi ethic but are not discussed in texts. Similar to the first incident, the meanings generated by the teachers and students here are not necessarily different from the texts and intentions associated with the Deobandi ethic. What the incident illustrates is that these young women have an opportunity to consider situations in their daily life and generate meaning regarding them, within the discourse associated with the religious texts related to the Deobandi ethic.

The last three incidents occurred outside of the conventional school day, at the annual *jalsah* [recital or concert], an event at the end of the academic year where the students perform speeches on various topics, short plays or sketches, Qur'an recitals and poems for an audience who are not generally in attendance at Madrasa Warda. The *jalsah* is intended to showcase the knowledge gained throughout a given year and can thus be seen as a public representation of the purpose of Madrasa Warda. Each learner receives four tickets to the *jalsah*, which she is allowed to distribute to women of her choice. Invariably, these are given to the women in her immediate family such as mothers, grandmothers and sisters as well as aunts, cousins and friends, when there are tickets left. The event is well attended, with the students haggling for tickets from those who may not be using all of their tickets. The event is strictly for women only. The principal and board members do not attend. The *jalsah* thus represents an important opportunity where students are able to reflect on and express what they have been taught at Madrasa Warda beyond the confines of the institution.

The third incident is a short play performed by students at the *jalsah.* The theme of the play revolved around success when the *sunnah* or Prophetic lifestyle is adopted as opposed to when individuals act in a contrary manner. A subsidiary but related theme of the short play was that the *sunnah* is relevant in contemporary lives rather part of a dated, distant past or traditional Muslim way of life. In addition, the play criticised syncretic practices, backbiting and opulence and lauded marriage.

The fourth and fifth incidents are speeches prepared and presented by students at the *jalsah*. Generally, the speeches presented at the *jalsah* illustrated that the students are equipped to engage with the Qur'an and *sunnah* in order to make sense of their lives. During the speeches, the students exhibited their aptitude with respect to drawing on the Qur'an and had th when articulating issues of relevance to their lives. The fourth incident relates to a speech about taking and paying interest at the *jalsah*. Taking and paying interest is not permissible according to Islamic law. Fareeda highlighted a verse from the Qur'an, a saying of the Prophet or hadith, as well as pointed to the lack of financial security in the world because of the disregard of these injunctions.

The fifth incident, also a speech at the *jalsah*, related to promiscuity, further illustrates how students articulated

meaning from their perspective. The speech presented by Feirous began by describing the acts that lead to and encourage promiscuity in her view. She noted that as:

> [*A*] result of immodest dressing and conduct, statistics prove that there has been an increase in sexual behaviour and it has produced diseases which were previously unheard of – The Killer, being AIDS. (n.p.)

While the claim would not hold any ground in an academic journal or a newspaper, the point was not lost on the audience at the *jalsah*. The message was clear – wear your cloak and scarf and avoid behaviour that could potentially destroy your life. Feirous concluded her speech by instructing her 'dear mothers and sisters' with the following:

> We need to introspect, is our so-called 'Islamic wear' in conformity with the dressing of *Shariah*. We are dressing for the cat-walk but we do not realise it only leads to Jahannam [*hell*], so let's jump off and take a U-turn to Jannah [*heaven*]. (n.p.)

The play and speeches at the *jalsah* by the students demonstrated their capacity to articulate meanings related to religious texts. Articulations of meaning students used in the speeches at the *jalsah* are not considered to constitute a disruption of the Deobandi ethic. What they do illustrate, however, is that women are not absent from the generation, reproduction or dissemination of religious texts associated with the Deobandi ethic. The incidents at the *jalsah* are illustrative of a specific space provided by Madrasa Warda where the religious texts and the overall message, as intended by the founders of the education institutions, are disseminated beyond the confines of those who are enrolled there. Moreover, the female students articulate meanings of religious texts and the overall message from their own perspectives and in their own voices.

## Concluding remarks

This article has interrogated the position of women in relation to religious textual generation, reproduction and dissemination. In order to do so, the article drew on ethnographic data from a Deobandi-aligned education institution or madrasa. Data were analysed with regard to how the texts used in this institution of Islamic learning are generated, reproduced and disseminated, together with the position of women in this regard. The analysis drew on Weber's notion of doctrinal development within rational religious ethics without discounting Asad's proposition that tradition be regarded as discursive practice. Findings suggest that, in this space, women are key disseminators of particular forms of Islamic (religious) texts. Moreover, and as a consequence, there are opportunities for women to generate and reproduce their own meaning of the texts. This does not necessarily imply that women generate new or unique meaning but that they articulate existing meaning from their perspective – that they engage in discursive practice.

The incidents presented in the findings constitute moments where students articulate meaning from religious texts,

authored by men. In this context of an institution of learning attended by women with female teachers, the meanings are generated, reproduced and disseminated by and to women. Here, young women are re-inscribing how they understand what they have been taught about their tradition. In other words, the incidents at Madrasa Warda presented in this article represent discursive practices within the Deobandi ethic. The articulated meanings are not published texts but are being generated, reproduced and disseminated within the spaces provided by this education institution.

The extent of the generation is, however, tenuous. There is no evidence of sustained disruption in a specific direction, which may lift the meaning, normatively speaking, into a modern era of gendered emancipation. Additional research is required that focuses on how rational religious ethics may be discursively disrupted towards a particular end, by whom and under what conditions. Such research would allow deeper insights into the position of women in relation to religious textual generation, reproduction and dissemination. Vernacular writings are, however, not only difficult for women to disrupt, but for most people, male or female, disruptions fall outside a specific doctrine. The fundamental condition for the capability to generate religious texts, which can be regarded as a vernacular writing, is extensive knowledge within a given tradition; in other words, the nature of discursive practice hinges on the quality and level of one's education associated with that tradition. This is highlighted by Grewal's (2014) cases as well. She follows a number of individuals (student-travelers) who embarked on a search for Islamic education in order to enhance their authority to speak and write about Islam.

The case of Madrasa Warda thus adds further credence to Asad's critique of Weber that doctrine is not static but can be viewed as the discursive practices of individuals' lived experience. At the same time, the incidents at Marda Warda illustrate that discursive practices remain rooted in the doctrinal texts accepted in the tradition, in this case, shown to be a rational religious ethic. The article illustrates, moreover, that educational institutions constitute formidable spaces where women are positioned in relation to religious textual generation, reproduction and dissemination, as such contributing to doctrinal development through what may also be regarded as discursive practices. As such, educational institutions are important sites for further interrogating theoretical claims to doctrinal development and/or discursive practices and specifically the position of women within these. Women's contribution to theology can thus be regarded as tied to their position within educational spaces of teaching and learning where the modalities of generating, reproducing and disseminating religious text are authorised.

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## Author's contributions

## Ethical considerations

## Funding information

## Data availability

## Disclaimer

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