

Review, Sadaf Ahmad's *Transforming Faith: The Story of Al-Huda and Islamic Revivalism Among Pakistani Women*

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*Transforming Faith: The Story of Al-Huda and Islamic Revivalism among Pakistani Women.* Sadaf Ahmad. New York: Syracuse UP, 2009. 227 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8156-3209-2.

Sadaf Ahmad's *Transforming Faith* is the first important study of Al-Huda, an Islamic revivalist movement with a large following among women in Pakistan. While it is not uncommon to find Islamic religious study groups (*dars*) of various ideological persuasions that engage women's participation in Pakistan, Ahmad is quick to point out that the "uniqueness" of Al-Huda lies in "being able to make inroads into the middle and upper classes of the urban areas of Pakistan, a feat other religious groups have been unsuccessful at accomplishing," especially when the group is perceived as being extremely narrow and one-dimensional in its interpretation of Islam (1). Ahmad frankly admits that the impetus to conduct research on the phenomenon of Al-Huda came from her personal perplexity "about why so many women from my hometown [Islamabad], who also belonged to the same class I belonged to, were changing their behavior and lifestyle" (3). The most noticeable of such lifestyle changes include starting to wear the *hijab* (head scarf) or the *abaya* (loose garment worn over clothes) and deeming music and traditional cultural rituals associated with major life events like weddings and deaths un-Islamic (*biddat* i.e. religious innovation not in keeping with the true Islamic principles) (3). Although Ahmad points out towards the very beginning of the study that the movement is no longer confined to the urban, relatively affluent

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Pakistani women anymore<sup>1</sup>, she does maintain that her primary focus remains on the women of the middle and the upper classes of urban areas (21).

Ahmad is extremely aware that her comparatively similar (in some cases, identical) socio-cultural background with her subjects, not to mention her ideological perspectives as a progressive feminist with access to the metropolitan academia<sup>2</sup>, opens up thorny questions of representation and objectivity, crucial in establishing credibility of the project itself. Indeed, it would have been a surprising omission if in the process of discussing the “politics of knowledge production” as it relates to the pedagogy of Al-Huda, the author had assumed a putative objectivity with regards to her own political affiliations (8). Instead, Ahmad provides a detailed rationale of her methodology and epistemological grounding in the very first chapter, aptly entitled “The Cultural Politics of Fieldwork,” persuasively arguing that a situated subjectivity is better than a false objectivity that grants only partial vision. After all, as she puts it simply: “Subjectivity does not imply a lack of rigor” (19)<sup>3</sup>.

Ahmad’s rationale for the popularity of Al-Huda can be broadly categorized into global and local factors, with the necessary disclaimer that these categories can hardly be water-tight in the age of a globalized neoliberal market economy. In the second, third and the fourth chapters, Ahmad focuses on elaborating on the ‘local’ factors that have been conducive to the dissemination and ensuing popularity of the Islamic discourse forwarded by Al-Huda. Ahmad’s account in these chapters contains impressively precise descriptions of various kinds of Islam practiced in Pakistan; the inevitable turn of historical events by which religion came to be the single most important factor in constructing national identity in Pakistan; and how women (Ahmad assumes a cohesive category of women here, probably not to deny the internal diversity within the category, but to merely name and describe a categorization that was enforced repeatedly by the Pakistani state) came to constitute the symbolic Other who would be vanguards of tradition even as it is being redefined in response to various socio-political changes that can be potentially construed as divisive. It is a sign of Ahmad’s descriptive and analytical skill that she manages to tease out the ramified linkages between these three correlated phenomena when she goes on to

discuss the pedagogical techniques of Al-Huda and the kind of Islamic discourse forwarded therein.

Ahmad's descriptive emphasis on the pedagogy of Al-Huda is important, because she credits it as a crucial factor that has led to success of the movement among the social elite.<sup>4</sup> Although the headquarters of Al-Huda is located at Islamabad, it is clear from Ahmad's description that it relies on an extremely decentralized power structure that functions more horizontally than vertically. The graduates who emerge from Al-Huda go through a rigorous (although ideologically limited) training in interpreting Qur'an through the exegetical commentary available in the Hadith in order to earn their diploma. These graduates then begin to offer *dars* to the local population, employing the same pedagogical tools used at Al-Huda. The pedagogy lays a heavy emphasis on instruction of language and translation of Arabic verses along with a strong pragmatic approach in applying the knowledge gained to help the students lead a virtuous Muslim life following the straight, narrow and "true" path. Ahmad borrows from Foucault to delineate this process as the production of the 'ethical subject' who utilizes what Foucault has called "technologies of the self" to fashion what Saba Mahmood calls a "pious self"<sup>5</sup> (66-67). In other words, Al-Huda's motivated discourse in interpretation of the scriptures is designed to make the subject conscious of her moral obligations and behavior, and encourages her to exercise control and engage in self-forming activities in order to attain the ideal piety that names her as a 'true' Muslim.

One of the ways in which Ahmad attempts to analyze the success of the pedagogy of Al-Huda is by comparing it with the *dars* of other ideological persuasions. The pragmatic approach of the Al-Huda ideology comes into sharper relief when contrasted with a *dars* offered by Zulaykha, a woman who retains the folk ritualistic Bairalvi Islam that draws from the *sufi* tradition much more than the *deobandi/wahhabi* Islam followed by Al-Huda. Ahmad notes that "[f]or most of the women in Zulaykha's *dars*, the Qur'an is primarily a means of connecting with Allah, and the entire session revolves around that goal. There is little space for the concrete, the physical" (105). This is seen when in one of the sessions the woman who initiates a discussion of the Hudood ordinance<sup>6</sup> is admonished for shifting the focus away from Allah. On the other hand, Ahmad notes that "Al-

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Huda's gift, many women claim, is the way each and every verse of the Qur'an is made relevant to their lives" (66). This is seen in the way Al-Huda works to incorporate the "experiential commensurability" of the student-subjects for enhancing the transformative potential of their pedagogy<sup>7</sup> (66). In Mother's Forum, a weekly group associated with Colors of Islam (a 'spin-off' of Al-Huda targeted at five- to twelve-year-old children), women discuss their everyday problems and dilemmas that range from dealing with their husbands and in-laws to clashes between religious and social norms in order to generate "Islamic" solutions collectively (52). It is easily understandable that the sense of community and bonding resulting from having a space of their own might help foster a greater credibility and desire for Al-Huda's ideology among these women than in a space where an esoteric and other-worldly love for Allah is privileged over mundane everyday concerns.

In fact, it can be argued that understanding this sense of community in an exclusively woman-oriented space is an instrumental factor to explain the popularity of Al-Huda. It is also evident from Ahmad's description that this space offers an opportunity for social networking and the freedom and mobility within a limited framework (117). It might seem contradictory at first to argue that a woman-oriented movement that relies on such female bonding is working to hold up a narrowly essentialist view of gendered behavior (2, 184). Such apparent contradiction functions as an indication of how sexist and feminist structures have been traditionally understood in an oversimplified single-axis paradigm as being mutually exclusive. Ahmad avoids reiterating such oversimplifications by insisting on a non-monolithic construction of women associated with the movement. Ahmad is as careful in placing Al-Huda in the context of already extant values in Pakistani society pertaining women (which are a result of complex interconnections of religious and nationalist discourses) that paved the way for this revivalist movement<sup>8</sup> as she is in pointing out similar values that oppose the ideology of Al-Huda. These latter "competing cultural codes" may include, as it does in Razia's case, the secular "human rights discourse" that believes in equal rights for all religions<sup>9</sup> rather than upholding a religious (and in this context, Islamic) code of life as the only possibility to attain an ethical and pious self (87, 88). In addition, Ahmad also notes various other 'disruptions' in

Al-Huda's discourse (with the reminder that disruption does not equal disbelief) and underlines that the change of subjectivity to fit the mold of a "unitary religious consciousness" is more accurately described as an open process rather than a closed category that is always already constituted (91, 106).

The last two chapters of the study attempt to understand the significance of this movement in the global political context of the post-9/11 world<sup>10</sup>. Ahmad's analysis does not overemphasize the importance of 9/11 in explaining the impetus to regain a 'true' Muslim identity. Instead, she historicizes the tendency to form a religio-nationalist identity in Pakistan against the alterity of a monolithic West (which figures as a space characterized by moral and sexual decadence and a spiritual void)<sup>11</sup>, and an oversimplified idea of Indian culture which is mistakenly seen as coterminous with "Hindu" culture. The two alterities are used differently to espouse the strict interpretation of Qur'an and the exegetical commentary forwarded by Al-Huda. While the former is used to consolidate the many proscriptive sexual mores that affect women much more harshly than men, the latter is used to root out the indigenous ritualistic practices common in Bairalvi Islam as *biddat*, and hence un-Islamic.<sup>12</sup> The common factor that binds these two 'Others' is that they are both used by Al-Huda as a contradistinctive frame to mold a unitary Muslim identity that is supposedly pure and authentic.

As it often happens, the female body becomes the battleground for constructing a national identity based on a single-axis. Ahmad contends that adoption of the veil is the single, most visible and most consistent effect produced by this revivalist movement among its adherents. Although some of the interviewees like Sammiya "thought that the attention paid to their veiling was pointless and exaggerated," arguing that "[c]hanging things on the outside is very easy," it cannot be denied that veiling is quickly becoming one of the most contentious issues in the post-9/11 world marked by a hysteric Islamophobic discourse that is frequently couched in the rhetoric of bleeding-heart imperialist Western feminism that is an upgraded and more specified version of the colonial Enlightenment discourse (162). In an admirably succinct and thorough literature review, Ahmad not only provides the salient points of the debate (without getting into specific contexts like France, Belgium or Turkey that would have assuredly led the discussion astray), but also analyzes the reasons why the fear of sexual

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agency of the female body cannot be allied only to this one Islamic practice, and how Western patriarchies manifest other means of systemic and discursive validation of repressing this same agency.

In the “Preface” to her similar ethnographic study of Islamic politics in Egypt, Saba Mahmood acknowledges that “progressive feminists” like her have a “profound dis-ease with the appearance of religion outside of the private space of individualized belief” which is “accompanied by a deep self-assurance about the truth of the progressive-secular imaginary” (xi). Mahmood insists on a necessary skepticism of this ideological framework that immediately names “other forms of human flourishing and life forms” as intrinsically inferior (xi). Ahmad, clearly indebted to Mahmood’s work for theoretical grounding and methodological guidance, admits that in this case, any reductionist approach might lead to silencing of the voices of women—not a desirable outcome for any study that hopes to use feminist ethnography successfully (14). Her conclusion that veiling becomes a tool to exhibit agency within the worldview provided by Al-Huda is best examined in this context as redemptive. The larger question of what it means to be Muslim in Pakistan in contemporary times is raised in a less rigorous, anecdotal way towards the end of the book. Deeply personal in tone, the chapter simply called “Reflections” raises questions about the authenticity espoused by Al-Huda, which sound poignant in the context of her observation that the kind of discourse propagated by this revivalist movement imagines the originary center of Islam in the Middle East (more specifically Saudi Arabia) (143). Therefore, when she writes that “[g]iven the rapidly changing sociopolitical scene in Pakistan, I do not think that any of us has the luxury of merely debating the impact of people who consider themselves the custodians of truth at a purely theoretical level anymore,” her project in writing this book becomes more than just another well-executed ethnographic study (191). It becomes the first radical intervention on a matter that invites immediate praxis.

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<sup>1</sup> This is something Ahmad realized when she started the fieldwork. She clarifies that she did not conduct research in rural areas, but did interact with women from the lower middle classes (21). In fact, two of the five *dars* surveyed in the fourth chapter for their pedagogical techniques have women mostly from “lower middle to middle class.” Ahmad does not provide the exact basis of such categorization.

<sup>2</sup> The study is published by Syracuse UP, and is one of the titles under the 'Gender and Globalization' series edited by Susan S. Wadley, professor of Anthropology at the Maxwell School, housed at Syracuse University.

<sup>3</sup> In the Introduction to *Orientalism*, Said quotes Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* to note that a necessary *point de départ* of critical elaboration is to be conscious of what one really is, and to compile an inventory of the historical processes that have led to that consciousness (25). Ahmad's rigorous attention in providing such an inventory throughout the study is very visible. This is not to say that there are no occasional lapses into a 'biased' rhetorical choice, but that it is a sign of her rigorous attention in providing this inventory that the 'bias' immediately becomes apparent, and hence proves the merit of her situated subjectivity.

<sup>4</sup> "I suggest, however, that it is not just the discourse itself but the manner in which it is propagated that has allowed Al-Huda to achieve the success it has, particularly among the middle and upper classes of urban Pakistan" (2).

<sup>5</sup> Ahmad borrows from Foucault and Mahmood liberally to place the subject-forming enterprise of al-Huda into a theoretical grid.

<sup>6</sup> "The Hudood Ordinance, based on the government's interpretation of Islamic law, and largely dealing with issues of adultery, theft, drinking, and gambling, was especially for women. For instance, if a woman reported being raped but was unable to produce four male Muslim witnesses of good character to support her claim, she was charged with the "crime" of engaging in premarital sex or extramarital sex, imprisoned, and lashed a hundred times. Sex outside of marriage became an offense against the state" (33-34). The Ordinance (also known as the Zina ordinance) was introduced when Pakistan was under General Zia-ul-Haq's martial law. Gen. Zia's regime is widely held to be "oppressive and misogynistic" and noted for its overt espousal of Islamizing the state apparatus of Pakistan (Zia 225). The Ordinance was repealed under the military regime of Gen. Pervez Musharraf.

<sup>7</sup> Ahmad borrows the expression "experiential commensurability" from Benford and Snow.

<sup>8</sup> Ahmad uses social movement theory to identify this as 'frame resonance' (62).

<sup>9</sup> I take this opportunity to clarify (at the risk of taking on the role of the native informant) that 'secular' has historically meant according equal and same rights (legal and human) to all religions in the geopolitical context of the Indian subcontinent. The Eurocentric notion of 'secular' meaning separation of Church and State is more or less invalid in this context.

<sup>10</sup> In this context, Khanum Shaikh's criticism in her review that "the thoroughly transnational dimensions and appeal of this organization remain underemphasized in the book" and "Ahmad's decision to situate this movement within the city of its birthplace (Islamabad) rather than framing it as a transnational movement may, indeed, foreclose exciting possibilities for theorizing the linkages between the politics of production and reception of Al-Huda's discourses on Islam" seem to be unfounded (313). It is not understandable how future analyses of al-Huda's transnational effects have been foreclosed by Ahmad's project. On the contrary, Ahmad's account might be said to have upset the Eurocentric expectation that interminable accounts of how the metropole is constituted/affected/effectuated by the Oriental other be produced, sustaining an epistemological framework that continues to bolster itself ad infinitum. One can only hope that Shaikh does not mourn a break in this monotonous routine.

<sup>11</sup> This is, as Ahmad rightly points out quoting Akbar Ahmed, the obverse of Said's *Orientalism* (134). For a very interesting recent discussion of how Orientalist and Nativist discourses have influenced each other over the years, see Joseph Massad's *Desiring Arabs*.

<sup>12</sup> It is only fair to comment that Ahmad succeeds here in creating an implicit bifurcation that might or not might not be unintended. It is not hard to imagine that the Indian soaps and movies

(as they become increasingly explicit with their sexual content) might be seen as overly 'Westernized' contra the sexually pure imaginary constructed in Al-Huda's discourse. But it is true that even in such a case, "India" (not coterminous with 'Hindu' here) can be seen as a culturally imperialistic intermediary that takes on some of the putative West's decadence. It is important to note in this context that Ahmad points out how the festival of Basant in the province of Punjab has not only been seen as an un-Islamic cultural accretion by Al-Huda, but it is also deemed to promote indecency and obscenity through women's participation in public events like flying kites (142).

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