

Title—Transforming Faith: The Story of Al-Huda and Islamic Revivalism Among Urban Pakistani Women

Author—Sadaf Ahmad

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Categories: Ethnography, Islam, Gender, Discourse,

Place: Pakistan

Time: 2004-2005

Argument Synopsis:

Ahmad's book is a detailed ethnographic study of the Al-Huda movement in Pakistan—Al-Huda is an Islamic revival movement that concentrates on women. Al-Huda's aim is to transform the women who engage with its discourse into ethical or pious subjects. Ahmad, who grew up in Islamabad, questioned why this religious school had become so popular among women. She relies on participant observation and in-depth, open-ended interview for her evidence. The interviewees were a diverse group of upper- and middle-class women, with the ages ranging from 16 to 80. She brings to light narratives of urban Pakistani women whose outlook on their lives has been transformed through studying the Qur'an and its exegetical commentary under the guidance of Al-Huda teachers. Ahmad argues that Al-Huda is a social movement because its ideology has spread beyond the urban upper-classes in Pakistan to rural areas, and even other countries. Her book represents an attempt to explore why and how women engage with the types of religious discourses produced by Al-Huda.

The book is organized into seven chapters. After the introduction, the second chapter situates Al-Huda and the Islam it propagates in the larger context of Islam in Pakistan and highlights the techniques of expansion adopted by Al-Huda. She illustrates the success and failure of Al-Huda's attempts to create subjects informed by a unitary consciousness can only be understood once the ideologies making up the larger culture and mapped. The next chapter examine the pedagogies of persuasion that have enabled Al-Huda to make inroads in upper- and middle-class communities. Next, Ahmad looks at the heterogeneity of Islam as a set of beliefs and practices in the social landscape of Islamabad by focusing on both Al-Huda and non-Al-Huda affiliated *dars*. She sheds light on why women choose to engage with *dars* offered by Al-Huda. The fifth chapter is focused on the impact that the larger sociopolitical environment has on women. One set of concerns revolved around the perception of and reaction to 'foreign' cultural values and trends in their society; another set related to Muslims' being persecuted and attacked in other parts of the world. Ahmad claims that both scenarios combined to produce a desire to turn to religion amongst the upper- and middle-class women. The sixth chapter concerns *pardab* and reveals the reasons Al-Huda gives for its necessity, as well as the techniques used to facilitate its adoption. The last chapter questions the impact that Al-Huda has had and will continue to have on the power structures, interpersonal relations, culture and issues of identity within society.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- By organizing women's experiences into a near reductionist framework, we risk silencing women's voices and losing something that may be central to their experiences
- The less diversity there is in a society, the easier it is for an organization, like Al-Huda, to create a unitary subject who believes in their ideology of a unitary religious consciousness
- Part of Al-Huda's success is that its approach to the production of religious knowledge bears deep resonance with the larger religio-nationalist discourse that are apart of Pakistan's history