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Al-Huda & its Critics

Religious Education for Pakistani Women

FAIZA MUSHTAQ

The Al-Huda International Institute of Islamic Education for Women started as a small religious academy for women in Islamabad in 1994. Since then it has mushroomed into a well-organized movement with branches in large and small cities all across Pakistan, and now abroad as well. Dr. Farhat Hashmi, its founder and leader, has become a household name through her lecture tours, radio show, books, and cassettes. The primary activity Al-Huda offers is education in religious subjects that is intended to supplement rather than replace secular academic credentials, and by now thousands of Pakistani women have passed through these training courses. Hashmi herself is not a traditionally trained scholar but has a Ph.D. in Islamic Studies from Glasgow University.

The women of Al-Huda belong to the urban educated classes in Pakistan and span all age ranges. Many graduates from the school go on to serve as teachers and organizers of new branches, as well as conducting informal gatherings at private residences where women can be present in large numbers. The opportunities for congregation and leadership roles that are provided to women are new for many, as is the chance to study the Quran collectively and not just alone at home. Earlier initiatives at offering religious instruction for Pakistani women have either tended to remain informal and localized, or have been subsidiary units of larger male-run madrasas catering mostly to lower socio-economic classes. Al-Huda's education is distinctive in this context as it gives women the tools to approach, understand, and actively engage with the religious texts and also puts this learning at the service of a broader moral vision of character training and social reform.

This education takes the form of rigorous one-and-a-half year diploma courses, less intensive certificate courses, programmes for children and for teenagers, short courses during summer, and in the special months of the Islamic calendar. All of them share a basic format and teaching philosophy. The main emphasis is on study of the Quran in three ways: a) Arabic recitation and listening; b) literal, word for word translation to memorize the basic vocabulary; and c) in-depth contextual explanation of each verse that also relates it to contemporary, practical concerns. Different courses include a mix of other subjects that supplement this core of Quranic study.

Hashmi's followers explain her appeal by referring to her prowess as a teacher, her ability to communicate fluently in English, Urdu, and Arabic, her logical building of arguments where she identifies the source of each opinion rather than invoking blind trust, and her devotion to her work. However she has attracted much criticism and controversy that has snowballed alongside her fame and the increasing visibility of her followers. Her critics come in various stripes but can be grouped into two categories. One is centred around the male scholars of Islam, or ulama, who have traditionally been the interpreters of religion and who perceive Hashmi and her brand of religious education as posing an alternative power structure and a challenge to their own authority. The other is a looser grouping of men and women who identify themselves as belonging to the secular, liberal, educated segments of Pakistani society which include feminist and human rights activists, professionals, and members of the intelligentsia, who see the increasing presence of religion in public life as a threat to their progressive worldview and lifestyles.

In the past decade Pakistan has witnessed the emergence of Al-Huda, an institute offering religious education to women. Its popularity is greeted with hostile scepticism by many in Pakistan. Male religious scholars, feminists, and the mainstream media are amongst those who disagree with the practices of these women and their vision of moral reform. The author argues that by introducing women in new roles Al-Huda disrupts traditional structures for transmitting religious learning.

Between two fires

These two groups of critics level charges at Al-Huda and Hashmi that seem to be mirror opposites of each other. The ulama find her lacking in qualifications that would equip her to interpret core religious texts and reject her innovative pedagogical style on the basis of its rupture with traditional modes of learning. They are also horrified by the elevation of women to visible public roles as teachers and

preachers of Islam. By casting doubts on the education Hashmi herself has received in the West, they go so far as to portray her as an agent of vested interests rooted in a western secular liberal ideology and her movement as a conspiracy to distort Islam so as to lure true believers away from religion. In their evaluation of the group's practices, views and aims, the traditionalist ulama find it to be too modern.

On the other hand, the second group of critics claims that Al-Huda's "brand of Islam is as retrogressive as the mullahs, but because she [i.e. Hashmi] is educated, speaks out against the religious right and is a woman, other women find her teachings more acceptable and legitimate."¹ In the English-language media and in conversations amongst the Pakistani intelligentsia, the movement is regularly described using epithets like "reactionary," "dogmatic," "fundamentalist," "conservative," "anti-feminist," and lambasted for being out of tune with the needs of contemporary women. In other words, they find it to be not modern enough. They have their own version of a conspiracy theory to explain Al-Huda's rise, claiming that Hashmi "epitomizes hard-core, doctrinaire orthodoxy – a worldview which appears to be gaining strength as a result of ambitious funding from certain quasi-governmental organizations in Saudi Arabia and Yemen."² These contradictory evaluations of Al-Huda by different groups of outsiders speak of a more general ambivalence about how the group ought to be categorized. The familiar dichotomies between the traditional vs. the modern, conservative vs. progressive, and above all between fundamentalist/religious vs. secular/liberal are unsettled when applied to this particular women's movement. This confusion is visible in such reports: "Now at social gatherings, women wearing the hijab are increasingly seen alongside those in sleeveless dresses. With religion the new 'in' thing, it is questionable who is now the modern woman."³

Religious expertise and contested credentials

The ulama in Pakistan have been vociferous in their attacks on Farhat Hashmi and her credentials, as well as on the credibility of the entire enterprise she has launched. They argue that she has not been through the eight-year course of education that a religious scholar traditionally has to go through in South Asian Islam. Further, her higher education credentials are of doubtful merit in the eyes of the ulama for having been acquired in a western university under the supervision of non-Muslims who themselves are not qualified for Quranic interpretation. For the ulama, she clearly does not have the authority or capability to interpret and comment on the canonical religious texts of Islam. Her students, having received one or two years of Islamic education at Al-Huda, are not seen as being equipped to teach the Quran either.

Many ulama from prominent Islamic schools in Pakistan have issued *fatwas* (formal opinions) on the work being carried out at Al-Huda, in

response to questions and concerns raised by members of the public. In rejecting Hashmi's authority they explicitly invoke the weight of their own qualifications and the historical evolution of their own role as guardians of the sacred knowledge. Moreover, they see themselves as being comparable to specialists in other fields such as lawyers and doctors. They claim her approach assumes that the text of the Quran can be understood and interpreted only through translation, as if there is a direct correspondence of meaning to words, and dismisses the technicalities involved in Islamic law and theology, and ignores the depth of issues and the evolution of scholarly opinions, debates, and consensus. By chucking out 1400 years of intellectual history, she wants to turn religion into a matter of convenience and expediency. On the other hand, her lay critics argue that Hashmi's "interpretation is dogmatic, fails to recognize the essential flexibility of Islam and that she is engaged more in developing a cult than encouraging a true understanding of religion."⁴

Most of those who have been involved with the group grew up having read the Quran and being exposed to the basic teachings of Islam, and few of them doubt the religiosity of their mothers and grandmothers. Yet all agree that they have been introduced to something new through Al-Huda classes, i.e. a better, more powerful way of understanding the Quran. Instead of rote memorization, they learn to appreciate the Arabic language of the text, the significance of each verse and its relation to history and context, and what relevant personal meaning to extract from it. Similarly, in her own statements, all Hashmi takes credit for is unlocking the power of the text for her students. She emphasizes the need to make the Quran approachable and relevant to all lives, and not let it remain only the subject of specialized discourses. The difference between her approach and that of the ulama is noted by enthusiastic participants: "I always wanted to study Islam in greater depth but balked when hearing the mullahs talk of heaven and hell and the *pardah* (veil)... It [Al-Huda's] is a very practical, very precise version of Islam."⁵

Class and gender concerns

One of the most frequent criticisms of Al-Huda is that it targets women from the well-to-do urban upper and middle classes, and consequently the newfound religiosity of these women can be suspected and brushed aside as a short-lived fad. One of the ulama scornfully points out that "they book expensive halls in the hotels and clubs of the big cities, where fashionable women congregate in the name of attending a dars-e-Quran."⁶ Media reports are full of comments like: "These women spend hours at these religious sermons and could well spend that time doing some positive social work" ... "It is also a cleansing issue. Many amongst our elite are corrupt to the bone. So the women of these houses now want to cleanse themselves."⁷ This assumption blinds the critics to the full array of activities and membership that in fact characterize the group and limits the scope of public attention to their most visible, high-profile converts and events. Wealthy elites continue to be important in the organization's expansion but a lot of the growth has come from middle-class urban neighbourhoods, and regular courses attract a diverse composition of enrolled students.

The ulama in Pakistan disagree especially strongly with Hashmi's interpretation of Islamic custom which states that women are allowed to go and pray at a mosque rather than in the privacy of their homes, and condemn her for not displaying appropriate modesty herself by appearing on the media and travelling internationally. On the other hand, the feminist and secular-liberal critics are disturbed by her and her followers' conservatism, especially their practice of veiling themselves, and of not questioning unequal gender roles within the family and community. They decry the conservative interpretations of the Quran and the unquestioning acceptance of the group leader's views that these classes offer, as well as the confinement of these women to their roles as compliant housewives.

Activism

Al-Huda's innovations as a religious movement lie more in its organizational practices and teaching methods than in its interpretive strategies, and much of Hashmi's intellectual output is based on conventional sources and reformist critiques of Islam. She challenges the more orthodox teachings of male Pakistani scholars on issues like ritual



PHOTO BY FAIZA MUSHTAQ, 2008

Inside an Al-Huda classroom

obligations and restrictive practices for women, leaving some scope for flexibility and contextual understanding, but does not offer a thoroughgoing critique of existing gender relations or contentious Quranic verses in her lectures. She does, however, keep repeating a passionate call for women to gain a well-rounded education, while many of her students and alumni pursue educational and professional careers. Al-Huda participants do not necessarily see themselves as making a choice between their spiritual and moral awakening, on the one hand, and their participation in the public sphere, on the other. Hashmi herself says: "Although I believe that the woman is in charge of the domestic arena, I don't think it should limit you as a productive member of society ... For example, every human being has the responsibility to educate themselves and others ... We don't have time to spend in trivial pastimes."⁸

Hashmi occasionally refers to herself as an "Islamic feminist," and both terms in the label are contested by outsiders. Al-Huda is positioned to offer an alternative to the two extremes that flourished during the regime of General Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980's – the state-sanctioned, male-dominated, and orthodox version of Islam and the stridently secular feminism of its opponents in the women's movement – while selectively utilizing elements of both. Hashmi and her followers emerged against the backdrop of improved access to higher education, mobility, and employment for urban women, and the absence of opportunities for women in mainstream Islamic institutions in Pakistan. The activism of Al-Huda participants is driven by moral concerns, and their enterprise of Islamic education reflexively links the goals of personal and social transformation. The most significant impact of the movement, however, might lie in its disruption of traditional structures and authorities for transmitting religious learning, by the introduction of women in these new roles.

Notes

1. Eman Ahmed, "Not the Only Way," *Fundamentalisms: A Web Resource for Women's Human Rights*, September 2004.
2. "Farhat Hashmi operating in Canada," *Daily Times*, 6 May 2005.
3. Sahar Ali, "Pakistani women socialites embrace Islam," *BBC News Online*, 6 November 2003.
4. Kamila Hyat, "Letter from Lahore – Hijab is new fashion statement among wealthy," *Gulf News*, 7 March 2001.
5. Ali, "Pakistani women..."
6. *Maghribi Jiddat Pasandi aur Al-Huda International* [Western Modernism and Al-Huda International] edited by Mufti Abu Safwan (Pakistan: Jamhoor-e-Ahlu Sunnat wal Jamat, n.d).
7. Kamal Siddiqi, "Dars of Pakistan," *Stringer*. it, at http://www.stringer.it/Stringer%20Schede/STORY/Stringer_story_karachi2.htm.
8. "Empowering women through Holy Quran," *Gulf News*, 14 November 2002.

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