

Preparation of ethical subjects through the technologies of the self: A case study of Al-Huda International acting as women's moral agency

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Abstract

Al-Huda is a school-turned social movement with focus on upper and middle-class women of Pakistani society. The movement, headed by a female, has established a new trend in the South Asian Islamic tradition as it has encroached upon a sphere, the religious authority, which has been an exclusive domain of the male. Al-Huda's discourse, once internalized, is manifest in the changes that these Al-Huda affiliates experience in their ideology, behavior and lifestyle, thus turning them into a moral agency¹. However, its narrow approach with no space for values other than those that are part of the Holy Quran and Sunnah is a matter of concern for many. Its reaction to the process of globalization plays an important role in its popularity. Al-Huda's discourse, through 'technologies of the self,' provides its graduates with self-examining tools to become and remain what Paul-Michel Foucault calls 'ethical subjects.' Al-Huda's rapid popularity and prominence has also invited severe criticism from both conservative and liberal segments of the society.

Keywords: Al-Huda International, ethical subjects, technologies of the self, moral agency, social movement.

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Introduction

Al-Huda International Welfare Foundation was established in 1994. Al-Huda, which literally means 'guidance,' is a school-turned social movement (Ahmad, 2013). The leader and founder of this organization is a female, Dr. Farhat Hashmi (Mushtaq, 2010) who has done PhD in Hadith Sciences from the University of Glasgow, Scotland, (Dr. Farhat Hashmi - At a glance, 2011). The objective of Al-Huda, according to Hashmi, is to prepare people with true knowledge of the Holy Quran and Sunnah to enable them to apply this knowledge to their lives, review Islam's humanitarian message, and invite others to Islam in a peaceful and non-violent way. Its purpose is to prepare females for their future responsibilities as sisters, wives, and mothers by helping them develop their character, personality, and self-confidence (Ahmad, 2010). Al-Huda claims that it is working to inform people about the Holy Quran and *Sunnah*. In addition to education and training, Al-Huda

also focuses on research, publications and provides other services to people through different social welfare programs (Al-Huda International, 2018).

The first Islamic School of Al-Huda was founded in Islamabad and branches of Al-Huda soon spread to Lahore and Karachi. Currently, it has branches in dozens of locations in urban areas across the country (Mushtaq, 2010), in addition to its branches in the UK, USA, Canada, UAE, and Australia (Hasan, 2014). The main branch in each city, called Institute of Islamic Education, houses most of the course and administrative work. According to Faiza Mushtaq (2010), who has conducted long fieldwork on Al-Huda, thousands of females have so far received their diplomas and certificates from its different branches.

Curriculum, courses, schedule and medium(s) of instruction

Al-Huda's curriculum's focus is on Quranic and Hadith texts including translation into Urdu and Hashmi's exhaustive explanation of their meaning, historical background and current application. The lessons taught at Al-Huda aim at enabling women to understand and apply basic principles of Islam to their lives, reform themselves in the light of this knowledge and spread it among others. The interpretation by Hashmi shows that the Al-Huda doctrinal stance can be identified with *Ahl-i-Hadith* branch of Sunni Islam (Mushtaq, 2010).

Al-Huda offers programs like diplomas and certificates ranging from a few weeks to two-year duration. The curriculum includes different courses such as translation, exegesis and recitation of the Holy Quran, Hadith sciences, Islamic jurisprudence, Muslim heroes, Arabic grammar, *Dawah* (inviting others to study, understand and practice Islam), Islamic Calligraphy and *Sirah*---a biography of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH (Ahmad, 2009). It also offers special courses for occasions like *Hajj* and *Ramadan* (Shaikh, 2011).

In order to accommodate women from different fields of life, Al-Huda provides various formats for learning such as weekend classes, evening classes, and day time classes, thus providing an opportunity to housewives, students, and women with other commitments during day time to study at the Al-Huda's centers (Shaikh, 2010).

Though the medium of instruction is Urdu, courses are also offered in English language. This option of English has further enlarged attendance as it is the only religious institution in the country which provides this facility (Ahmad, 2009). Hashmi gives lectures in Urdu, but English and Arabic words, phrases and verses are also used in order to convey her message in a better way (Mushtaq, 2010).

Al-Huda has also established its eCampus where it uses eLearning methods for all its courses. In its distance education, Al-Huda uses facilities like audio and video conferencing, email, and other electronic technologies of communication. This facility enables students and teachers to interact with each other from across the globe. This self-paced learning style enables women to engage with Al-Huda while also continuing their other commitments like full time work, raising a family, or just staying at home (Al-Huda eCampus, 2011).

Factors that make Al-Huda unique

Al-Huda is not the only institution of this nature in the country as there are also other similar institutions that focus on women. However, there are certain factors that make it unique. These factors include:

- 1: In Pakistan, religious education has always been managed by male *Ulema* (religious scholars). We have no precedent in our history to show a female having influence in the religious sphere equal to male. In the case of Al-Huda, its founder Hashmi currently enjoys considerable influence in religious sphere.
- 2: The movement's focus is mostly on middle- and upper-class women of Pakistani society. This is for the first time that these upper classes are the main actors in a movement for religious reforms.
- 3: Hashmi has not studied *Dars-e-Nizami* (curriculum taught in many Islamic *Madrassas* or institutions), and the completion of which is must for becoming an *alim* or *alima* in Pakistan (Shaikh, 2010).
- 4: Unlike other madrassas in Pakistan, Al-Huda extensively uses modern means of communications and recognizes the significance of science (Ahmad, 2010).
- 5: Al-Huda is the first religious institution in the country providing courses in English language (Ahmad, 2009).

Reasons for the success and popularity of Al-Huda

Conducting *Dars* (lesson aimed at preaching Islam) and religious education for women is not a new phenomenon in Pakistan. Jamaat-e-Islami and Tehreek-e-Islam too have been involved in religious preaching among women, but they have not been able to achieve such popularity and success as Al-Huda. This success of Al-Huda can be attributed, among others, to the following factors.

Use of technology

The use of modern technologies has enabled Al-Huda to become an international reform movement. Recorded Quranic exegesis and audio cassettes containing lectures recorded by Hashmi pertaining to diverse topics as well as printed material produced by Al-Huda can easily be found in national as well as international markets (Ahmad, 2009). Al-Huda opened its website in 2001 (Esma, 2015) and thus the material it contains can be accessed from across the globe. The website is a good source of Islamic knowledge especially for those women who live in predominantly non-Muslim countries. Hashmi also appears on television and radio to deliver lectures on various Islamic topics (Ahmad, 2009) and uses video conferences to deliver lectures to students in Pakistan and abroad simultaneously (Esma, 2015). The use of power-point and audio visuals further increases its validity and popularity (Ahmad, 2010).

Teaching method

Teaching method (making Islam easy) of Al-Huda faculty also contributes to its success. Hashmi presents Islam and the Holy Quran in such a manner that it is related to women's practical lives instead of presenting an obscure and unapproachable Islam which is, both contextually and temporally, not directly linked with students' everyday lives. Courses are taught in a way to relate them with living realities of everyday life and the modern world. For example, a graduate of Al-Huda said that whenever she went to class to attend Hashmi's lectures, she felt that she (Dr. Hashmi) was talking about her, knew everything about her and was speaking to her (Mushtaq, 2010). According to Khanum Shaikh (2010), Al-Huda makes Islam relevant to the lives of women who have been educated in English-medium institutions and belong to urban elite families. Hashmi frequently reminds people of Allah's kindness and forgiveness which is in remarkable contrast to the stern warning of hellfire uttered by most of the traditional mullahs. Those who attend Hashmi's lectures confess that other teachers at school, college and madrassas have not been able to communicate in the way she does (Mushtaq, 2010).

Flexibility

Flexibility and accessibility is another reason for its success. In order to accommodate women from different fields of life, Al-Huda provides various formats for learning such as weekend classes, evening classes, and day time classes. Thus housewives, students and women with other commitments during day time have an opportunity to study at the institution. Similarly, the availability of courses in both English and Urdu further adds to its success and popularity. The use of English by Al-Huda plays very important role in drawing upper class women towards it (Shaikh, 2010). Women can enroll themselves in a full-fledged course of diploma or they can be just listeners attending lectures occasionally (Toosi, 2010). Where possible, Al-Huda even provides care centers for children whose mothers come to attend its classes (Naveed & Mohyuddin, 2014).

Dawah

Dawah means inviting others to study, understand and practice Islam. The Al-Huda students are told that being Muslims, it is their duty to invite others to Islam and that they will get reward for it in the afterlife. A course on *Dawah* is taught to students in which students are trained how to invite their family members, friends, classmates and professional colleagues to Islam. The *Dawah* methods may include playing Hashmi's audio cassettes when all family members are around, asking people at work place to pray jointly, and involve peers in religious discussions. The Al-Huda students are instructed to interact in a compassionate and polite manner instead of rigid and confrontational ways. They are told to lead through examples and present themselves and their attitudes in such a beautiful manner that people are attracted towards Islam by themselves (Shaikh, 2010). Al-Huda students are also given summer assignments to organize three-day courses for friends, relatives, and neighbors (Ahmad, 2008). Similarly, Al-Huda students arrange lectures in schools and colleges (Ahmad, 2009).

Broad funding base

Al-Huda's broad funding base also plays an important role in its expansion. As women from well off families are its target, so its students provide huge amounts of money. Some women donate their jewelry to Al-Huda. A former Al-Huda graduate narrated that women are so deeply moved by the Al-Huda discourse that they spontaneously take their gold bangles off and donate them in classes (Shaikh-2010). Similarly, the buildings that house the main branches of Al-Huda in Islamabad, Karachi and Lahore, for example, are donations made by well-off people (Ahmad, 2009).

Proper management

Another reason for Al-Huda's success, as compared to other religious institutions, is its emulating the structures and practices of formal non-religious educational institutions: proper buildings of campuses, requirement of registration and admission, proper syllabus, testing and grading of students, teacher training, and awarding of diplomas and certificates (Mushtaq, 2010) and proper uniform for students (Ahmad, 2009).

Though the above-mentioned factors are among the major reasons for Al-Huda's rapid popularity, research shows that other factors have also played a role in drawing people towards it. A study which focused on three branches of Al-Huda in Lahore discovered that preaching of scholars like Nauman Ali Khan, Farhat Hashmi, Bilal Philips, Ahmad Deedat, Dr. Zakir Naik, Yusuf Islam, and Yusuf Estes have also influenced many women to deeply study Islam and thus joined Al-Huda. The negative portrayal of Islam and its misconstruction in media has also compelled women to join Al-Huda to get deeper understanding of Islam (Munawar et al., 013). The war on terror and the US invasion of Muslim countries also raised questions in women's mind which ultimately led them join Al-Huda. For example, 46% respondents in a survey conducted in one of Al-Huda's Islamabad campuses said they were strongly inclined towards Islamic education by global and national events (Naveed & Mohyuddin, 2013).

Target of Al-Huda

As far as access to Al-Huda's educational activities is concerned, some social groups of Pakistani society are better placed as compared to others. The fact that the movement is located in urban areas of the country and that some basic education is must before joining it puts limits on who can join it and who cannot. Most of Al-Huda branches across Pakistan are in upper and middle-income neighborhoods. For example, till 2010, Al-Huda's branches in Karachi were located in areas such as Defence Housing Authority, Clifton, PECHS, 13 North Nazimabad, Federal B Area and Gulshan-e-Iqbal, all upper and middle-income areas while there was not a single branch in informal and unplanned settlements that hosted about 50% of Karachi's population (Mushtaq, 2010). It is in this context that Nadia Z. Hasan writes that Al-Huda has gained a lot of popularity among "urban, modern, educated women, ostensibly exactly the group one would expect to repudiate such literalist

interpretation" (Hasan, 2014). Al-Huda, however, has started efforts to spread its discourse among females of lower middle class and rural women as well (Ahmad, 2009) for which courses have been designed with matriculation as minimum qualification (Esma, 2015).

Income sources

Though the Al-Huda administrators do not share the income sources of the institution, it seems that it is the donations by the well-off students and other people on which the movement is run. As the target audience of Al-Huda is the upper and middle classes of society, it is better placed as compared to other such institutions as far as donations are concerned. Its website carries instructions for prospective donors about various methods of making donations such as bank-to-bank transfer, directly depositing money in its accounts, depositing crossed cheque/pay order in its accounts, and sending crossed cheques/pay orders through courier/postal services (Ways to Donate, 2016).

In addition to donations, Al-Huda charges some fees from its students for courses which vary according to the financial status of students. Similarly, a part of Al-Huda income comes from its materials' sales (Toosi, 2010). As Hashmi was once a member of JI, many people think that funds of Al-Huda may have a link to Saudi Arabia, as JI is known to have got funds from Saudi Arabia since the 1970s (Shaikh, 2010).

Al-Huda women: a moral agency

Al-Huda graduates, after internalizing its discourse, experience several changes including changes in dress-as they start wearing hijab and *abaya* (an outer garment worn by Muslim Women which covers their whole body) in public, replacement of decorating crystal figures and paintings of animal and humans with landscapes and framed Quranic verses in various calligraphic styles, giving up music, stopping watching films and television programs, refusal to undergo the ceremonies of *mehndi* (applying henna on hands of bride) and photographs at their own marriages and disapproval of *Milad* (celebrations held in connection with birthday of Prophet Muhammad PBUH) and *chaliswan* (gathering/meal organized by a deceased's relatives to offer prayers for the departed soul). The changes that Al-Huda women undergo also sometimes put them in trouble as they face opposition from their parents, husbands, friends and children etc. In many cases, the veiling of these Al-Huda-going women goes against the norms of social class(s) to which they belong (Ahmad, 2009).

By propagating certain values and behavior within this Islamic framework, Al-Huda and her affiliates are actively engaged in the opposition of one culture and the production of another. It is due to their commitment to preserve these (changes) that Ahmad claims that these Al-Huda affiliates show an 'agency' (Ahmad, 2009). Thus Al-Huda provides new action opportunities of imagining womanhood by introducing the educated elite women into the structure of transmitting religious knowledge and giving them courage to lead a busy and active public life like moral

agents (Mushtaq, 2010). Though the Al-Huda students are sometimes faced with very embarrassing situations and very cheap comments are passed on them, still their moral agency continues to move ahead. The accounts of two Al-Huda students, who internalized its discourse, will further contribute to Ahmad's claim that they present an agency.

Fatima, a student at Al-Huda, on her father's insistence not to veil, told him that he could disown her, but she will not abandon veiling. Similarly, Natasha, another student of Al-Huda, while speaking of the challenges she started encountering after association with Al-Huda and the changes she underwent, said that her social circle changed so much that people even stopped inviting her (on occasion of social events). Natasha further said, "there is still in my home, I feel, a certain divide between mum and dad which has an impact on my children because they do not know which side to follow sometimes" (Ahmad, 2009, p. 179).

When Hashmi uses term "our culture," she is referring to her version of Pakistani society as a Muslim society that is informed, or should be informed, by the Islam that she is propagating. By propagating certain values and behavior within this Islamic framework, Al-Huda and its students are actively engaged in cultural production. Hence, Al-Huda women, acting as a moral agency engaged in cultural production, first change their own ideology and behavior and then encourage others to do so (Ahmad, 2008).

Al-Huda and gender

Like women in other parts of the globe, Pakistani women too are considered as symbols of national culture and this view is strengthened by their roles as mothers and wives, their attire, behavior and their association with the private sphere of home. Al-Huda too, like traditional *maulvis* (religious clerks), is reinforcing the patriarchal pattern in society declaring the gender roles as natural and male as the chief of the household. But it does so in a different manner so that females realize that being responsible for the house is a favor from Allah's side (Ahmad, 2010).

The Al-Huda discourse considers women as naturally nurturing, emotional and empathetic with raising their families as their first duty. The ideal woman, according to Al-Huda discourse, is the one who, among other things, fulfills the responsibility of keeping the family intact and by extension the whole social system and she can do this by doing *Purdah* (veil). Thus, the Al-Huda discourse strengthens the already existing principle that women are responsible for misleading men. Hashmi, in her lectures on *Purdah*, highlights the responsibility of women to prevent chaos in the society, thus unintentionally increasing females' perception about themselves as sexualized beings (Ahmad, 2009). Similarly, many Al-Huda women think that it is the women folk who are responsible for preventing *Fitna* (giving in to Satan's whispers and falling into sin) in society by observing *Purdah* as men, by nature, cannot control themselves when they see women (Ahmad, 2009). Hashmi uses to tell her students that they can protect themselves from sexual exploitation by observing complete *Purdah* and that they will be answerable for *Zina* (consensual sexual relations outside marriage) as it is something they can

prevent. The Al-Huda graduates, while doing *Dawah*, draw on *Fitna* theories and urge women to observe *Purdah* to prevent spread of *Fitna* in society (Ahmad, 2009). Al-Huda also prefers separate education for the two genders because it believes that in such a system the female students will feel comfortable and will also be safe from many evils (Naveed & Mohyuddin, 2014).

The above account, however, does not mean that there is no positive aspect of Al-Huda for females. The positive aspect of Al-Huda's religious education is that it is aimed at supplementing rather than replacing the secular education for women (Mushtaq, 2008) and it recognizes the importance of scientific reasoning and logic (Mushtaq, 2010). Other measures of Al-Huda discourse aimed at strengthening women's agency include allowing women to offer prayers in a similar way with male, to lead those prayers, recite the Holy Quran during menstrual period and to deliver lectures that can also be listened to by men. The most important aspect of Al-Huda is the proclamation of religious authority by females of which we have no example in the South Asian Islamic tradition (Ahmad, 2009).

The process of globalization and Al-Huda international

Masooda Bano, who has vast study on the emergence and growth of female Islamic education movements across the Muslim world since the 1970s, states that the explanation offered by Acemoglu and Robinson (2000) to explain the extension of franchise by West as a strategic tool to stop widespread unrest and revolution can also be applied to the emergence of female preachers and female study movements in Islam. She argues that field work researches have established that it was the male *Ulema* who were actually behind the emergence of women religious movements in the Muslim world. The reason for the emergence of this trend was the changes that were taking place in socio-economic and political conditions they were living in. *Ulema*, being conscious that the forces of modernity, supported by the state, global development actors and the process of globalization, will take the women away from Islamic teachings, themselves created room for women preachers within the structure of Islamic authority. The ultimate aim was to stop women's resistance to Islamic way of living in the future (Bano, 2013).

Al-Huda's reaction to the process of globalization, the influx of foreign, especially western, ideas and values into Pakistan through various mediums, plays an important role in the popularity of its discourse. Al-Huda's anti-globalization rhetoric has become a main theme for it to recruit people. A very common theme in Al-Huda discourse is 'western immorality.' For example, a 65 years old doctor who was associated with Al-Huda said, "over there (in the West) neither does a sister have respect for her brother, nor children for their parents, there is obscenity and shamefulness...."Al-Huda claims that the images that come to Pakistani audience through television programs and films revolve around sex, violence and the breakup of families (Ahmad, 2009) and thus have negative impact upon our society. Research shows that many of the Al-Huda associates are concerned about the foreign cultural values and trends in our society and think that Al-Huda can help them deal with these feelings and concerns (Ahmad, 2009, pp.129-133).

Ahmad writes that majority of those mothers who had sent their teenage daughters to Al-Huda told her that the purpose for the enrollment of their daughters at Al-Huda was so that the girls could become cognizant of difference between right and wrong, get support of similar minded individuals, and not become influenced by foreign trends. The mothers of these girls were concerned about them because they thought that the western culture was attracting their children toward itself. For example, the mother of an Al-Huda student said that she requested her daughter to enroll herself in Al-Huda so that she may know how to live her life and may differentiate between right and wrong. She added that after doing Al-Huda course, she will have full confidence in her daughter no matter where she goes and what she does as she will be able to take care of herself. Many women think that religious limitations are necessary and that these limitations (being put in practice in Al-Huda) would help their daughters to adopt proper dress and behavior according to the situation. For example, Maria, one of the participants in *Dars* organized by Al-Huda observed that people, by studying Islam, are going back to their own roots and values, and resist the influx of immoral foreign values. Thus, the concerns of urban women about foreign values, heightened by Hashmi and other Al-Huda teachers, make the Al-Huda solution more attractive (Ahmad, 2009).

Preparation of 'ethical subjects' through the technologies of the self

The focus of Al-Huda discourse is on self-reflection- examining one's own conduct and reforming it for the better. The goal is to make individuals what Foucault calls "ethical subjects." Al-Huda provides a frame to students to judge their behavior through and compare it with the standards set by the Holy Quran and *Sunnah*. The consciousness of behavior is then followed by self-reforming activities- efforts to change one's conduct so that it is in harmony with Islamic principles. Quranic verses are used to provide guidelines about how to interact with opposite sex members, how to deal with relatives, how to dress, what to consume, how much to give to the needy etc. This movement, therefore, has a strong individualizing impact in which an individual must fight a continuous battle with himself/herself in order to become an ethical subject based on hegemonic Islamic guidelines (Ahmad, 2010).

The Al-Huda affiliates, in order to become ethical subjects, undergo what Foucault terms as the "technologies of the self". To Foucault, there are four types of technologies. They are technologies of production, technologies of sign systems, technologies of power, and technologies of the self. The first type allows individuals to produce, manipulate or transform things, the second type permits them to use signs, symbols, and meanings, the third one determines individuals' conduct and submit them to certain ends or domination while the last one enables individuals to subject themselves to different operations on their bodies, souls, and thoughts to purify themselves. With regard to the last one, he writes;

[T]echnologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform I themselves in order to attain a

certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault, 1982, para 9).

In *The Care of the Self* (the third volume of the History of Sexuality), Foucault explained how individuals were subjected to ethical codes and behavior. He also wrote about 'forms of elaboration' and that individuals follow 'techniques of the self' which enable them to believe that they are in need of change. He observes;

The practice of the self implies that one should form the image of oneself not simply as an imperfect, ignorant individual who requires correction, training and instruction, but as one who suffers from certain ills and who needs to have them treated either by oneself or by someone who has the necessary competence. (Foucault 1986, p. 57)

According to Foucault, individuals are constantly in the process of constituting themselves as ethical subjects through both technologies of the self and ethical self-constitution, and a notion of power that is not simply based upon domination, coercion, and repression. Instead of requiring expertise of a therapist or priest to ethically constitute the self, to Foucault, individuals are able to do it for themselves (Besley, 2005). In technologies of the self, the individuals are the objects of their own technical practices such as surveillance, subjection of behavior to rules, and regulation of movements etc. (Behrent, 2013).

AL-Huda uses various methods to facilitate transformation of its students to become ethical subjects, thus providing them means through which they can function by themselves. The aim is the provision of such a disciplinary tool to the students which first brings about behavioral consciousness and ultimately links it with their outer world (outer behavior). The daily assignments at Al-Huda aimed at reinforcing the lessons taught to them that day is an example of such a program. Similarly, students are suggested to think before going to bed about the activities that they went through during the day. They are further required to maintain a weekly diary for noting their thoughts and experiences while going through the Holy Quran. In addition, small groups are formed in the morning to summarily revise the lessons of the previous day. The Quranic exegesis that is taught to students in the class is linked with the everyday experiences and observations that they go through. These whole processes make students conscious of their behavior and are enabled to order their conduct when away from their teachers and institution. The Al-Huda graduates, through the technologies of the self, are made to transform without any coercion and force (Ahmad, 2010). Thus, their disciplining and surveillance is done by themselves.

Al-Huda as social movement

Al-Huda, by disseminating its discourse into mainstream society, is determined to inculcate among the women specific Islamic values so that they can change themselves into ethical subjects. Many of the students who internalize the Al-Huda discourse, irrespective of where they are placed and how they get its message, take

it upon themselves to spread it further. The process goes on taking a life of its own. It is like a domino effect, and it is within this context that we can claim that the Al-Huda school has turned into a social movement. Like other social movements, Al-Huda too is spreading its ideology even among those people who do not attend any of its branches and who spread its ideology further though not necessarily in its name (Ahmad, 2010).

Al-Huda also relies for its success on what is called frame resonance in social movement theory-values that already exist in the society in some form. Ahmad writes that though the majority of Al-Huda women neither knew the Holy Quran nor they strictly followed the norms popularly considered as Islamic injunctions, they all from very young age believed in God, in Muhammad as Allah's Messenger, and the Holy Quran as the word of Allah. The faith they developed at the young age was further strengthened in an environment in which religio-nationalist discourse, propagated by the state through media and text books, has linked Pakistan's creation and identity with Islam (Ahmad, 2008).

Research shows that social network channels are most effective source for recruiting people to a social movement (Ahmad, 2010). In the case of Al-Huda, social networks play a vital role in spreading information. Mushtaq (2010) notes that majority of her correspondents came to know about Hashmi or her tapes and classes through relatives, friends, neighbors and other acquaintances. Similarly, the majority of women attend their first Al-Huda session or gathering on the suggestion of someone else or are accompanied by someone else. According to a survey at one of its Islamabad branches, 94% respondents said they would recommend to others to join Al-Huda while only 2% said they would not recommend it to others (Naveed & Mohyuddin, 2013). This shows how Al-Huda is spreading its discourse in the form of a social movement.

Critics of Al-Huda

The rapid growth and popularity of Al-Huda has also exposed it to severe criticism. Different people and groups criticize it for the religious ideas it cultivates among women. The main critics of Al-Huda are orthodox male *Ulema*, liberal and secular elements and the feminists.

Orthodox *ulema* and Al-Huda

Many Pakistani *Ulema* openly oppose Hashmi and Al-Huda on various grounds. They argue that the Holy Quran and the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) strictly prohibits Muslims from creating factions within *Ummah* (the Muslim community of the world) while Al-Huda is doing the same. Hashmi is accused of interpreting the Holy Quran according to her own whims and wishes. These *Ulema* argue that Al-Huda teachers attach too much importance to direct translation, interpretation and exegesis of the Holy Quran but interpreting and understanding the Holy Quran is not possible without proper knowledge of Arabic language, its grammar, and the principles of Fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence). They suggest that instead of directly interpreting the Holy Quran, Al-Huda should focus on books already written by

religious scholars in the light of the Holy Quran and Hadith (Safwan, 2003, Translation mine). Hashmi is even accused of distorting the teachings of the Holy Quran and Hadith in the name of interpretation. While accusing Hashmi and Al-Huda of having malicious designs to distort Islam, the *Ulema* warn Muslims not to follow Hashmi's Islam of innovations as she is treading wrong path to please Islam's enemies (Elahi, 2003, Translation mine).

These critics argue that *Ulema* are the right people to learn from about religion, that getting correct Islamic knowledge and guidance without *Ulema* is contrary to human nature and that any such efforts result in rottenness, depravity, and corruption, rather than reformation (Safwan, 2003).

Hashmi's credentials, on the one hand, of having a degree from western university and on the other hand, of not having a Durs-e-Nizami degree, also invite severe criticism from male *Ulema*. A religious scholar writes that he got suspicious about Hashmi's activities immediately after knowing that she has done PhD in religious studies from the UK. He states that western universities provide huge amount and facilities to non-Muslim scholars on Islam so that they may study Islamic literature deeply to train Muslim students for anti-Islam activities (Lubaba, 2003, Translation mine). These *Ulema* argue that getting religious education from western institutions under non-Muslim scholars is contrary to the method adopted by the prophets. They claim that Allah not only sent down books but also prophets, which show that teachers should also be pious Muslim (Safwan, 2003). *Ulema* claim that one tactic of Islam's enemies is to enroll 'so-called Muslim students' in their universities and make them write anti-Islam thesis (Elahi, 2003). Thus, *Ulema* term Al-Huda as a tool of western powers and NGOs used for pushing women towards liberalism (Toru, 2005, Translation mine).

Another criticism of Al-Huda by the orthodox *Ulema* is that its students undergo just one-year short courses and then open their own religious schools while one year is not enough even for just learning proper pronunciation of the Holy Quran. They argue that these Al-Huda graduates not only start teaching but also criticize renowned religious scholars and their works. The critics claim that Hashmi herself in written correspondence has accepted that a one-year course is not enough for producing teachers, but still Al-Huda graduates start teaching after completing short courses. Even Jamia Farooqia Karachi issued a verdict declaring the one-year diploma in Islamic education by Institute of Islamic Education for Women, which works under Al-Huda International, as un-Islamic. This verdict was endorsed by well-known religious institutions like Jamia Ashrafia, Lahore, Darul Uloom Haqqania Akora Khattak, and Jamia Nusrat Ul Uloom Gujranwala (Toru, 2005).

Ulema also disagree with Hashmi's interpretation of Islamic customs to permit women to pray in mosques. Other prescriptions of Hashmi that these *Ulema* reject include allowing women to offer prayers in a similar way with male, to lead those prayers, and recite the Holy Quran during menstrual period. They also criticize Al-Huda for allowing male teachers in front of females with no physical barrier separating them and Hashmi for her appearance on media where strangers hear her

voice (Mushtaq, 2010). *Ulema* argue that Al-Huda teachers teach Islam to others but they themselves watch TV, Cable, VCR, go to beauty parlor for cutting hair, and travel without a *mahram* (an unmarried kin) that are un-Islamic. A religious scholar claims that he personally knows about a place close to Hashmi's lecture room where there is a big hall where the women attending her lectures watch dish after the class.

They further argue that Al-Huda is silent about Jihad and NGOs while it criticizes Taliban who are opposed by the whole non-Muslim world (Toru, 2005). In short, these *Ulema* accuse Hashmi of practicing a religion of expediency, convenience and fabrication. However, some scholars believe that the opposition from male *Ulema* is to some extent a struggle over who should speak on the behalf of Islamic tradition. Similarly, material and symbolic resources are at stake as *Ulema's* mosques and madrassas compete for the very philanthropic funds that the Al-Huda draws from (Mushtaq, 2010).

Liberal and secular critics of Al-Huda

Opposed to the traditional *Ulema*, there are also some liberal and secular people who criticize its prescription for women. They question the value of its work for women's lives in the country. This group of critics considers Al-Huda as promoter of orthodox Islam with its focus on secular elite. They argue that the rapid growth and popularity of Al-Huda shows Pakistan's move from moderate and Sufi-Islam toward more conservative Islamic tradition. Religious figures with Sufi tendencies argue that Hashmi is closing the interpretative theological space by claiming that she speaks directly from God's words. Similarly, others say that Hashmi does not take into account the flexible nature of Islam (Mushtaq, 2010).

This group argues that followers of Hashmi, by focusing their energies on hijab, not only show their misogyny but also divert women's attention from real challenges faced by Pakistani women (Mushtaq, 2010). Dr. Pervez Hoodbhoy, a human rights activist, observes that Al-Huda is tearing the fabric of our culture by giving rise to a mindset of women segregation and submission (Toosi, 2010).

Feminists' critique of Al-Huda

Al-Huda and Hashmi also face criticism from feminists. They argue that Al-Huda's discourse is promoting women suppression. Dr. Riffat Hassan, a well-known feminist theologian, writes that Hashmi considers herself as liberal and feminist, but she is neither liberal nor feminist. She argues that Hashmi's approach is similar to that of conservative male *Ulema* and her ideological stance, in some ways, is reminiscent of 'Mr. Bush's compassionate conservatism' (Hassan, 2002). She claims that contrary to her own efforts to recover the gender egalitarian message inherent in the Holy Quran, Hashmi's approach perpetuates the patriarchal interpretations advanced by the orthodox male *Ulema* in the country. Disagreeing with Hashmi's strict criteria of *Purdah*, Riffat Hassan argues that Islam requires both male and female to dress modestly but does not ask for strict *Purdah* suggested by Hashmi. Riffat Hassan further observes that Hashmi is least concerned with social justice or

human rights. To her, Hashmi's patriarchal interpretations of the Holy Quran are used by male to justify violence against women and Hashmi's non-engagement with these distortions that provoke violence against women suggests her lack of interest in social justice.

A Canadian Muslim feminist Farzana Hassan considers Hashmi as 'outdated, orthodox, and antithetical to feminism' who is subjugating half of the population and making it believe that the subjugation is justified. (Shaikh, 2010). Farzana Hassan observes, "we are basically just giving free reigns to fanatics and ultra-conservative creatures like Dr. Farhat Hashmi who in my opinion are doing massive damage by promoting subservience in women" (Khanum, 2010, 63). Some feminists are of the opinion that women activism is of no use unless it addresses women's real issues like usurped inheritance, honor killings, women's trafficking, domestic violence and sexual harassment (Mushtaq, 2010).

Hashmi rejects these allegations. She says that her point of view is that women's primary duty is their homes after which they can join fields of their own choice. She claims that the purpose of evening classes was to facilitate working women. However, she believes that peace in the home depends on women and this angle should not be overshadowed by women's desire to work outside. Hashmi also sometimes calls herself as Islamic feminist, though this claim is contested by her critics.

Narrow approach of Al-Huda: an issue of concern

Pakistan is rooted in a pluralistic mind set in which plural claims about truth can survive together and where the religious and spiritual traditions not only overlap and borrow from one another, but even join together to form a synthesis (Ahmad, 2010). Al-Huda, to the contrary, confesses only "one truth" and provides no space for "multiple truths". Thus, the chasm and intolerance between Al-Huda affiliates and those who practice Islam in a different way can be clearly observed (Ahmad, 2009, 199). Al-Huda affiliates think of their own piety and religious knowledge as "rational, analytical, scientific, literal and modern" (Mushtaq, 2010) and claim to be engaging with Islam in a more rational and conscientious manner which is free from imitative, irrational and mindless Islamic practices that take place under the influence of what they term as "cultural baggage" (Hasan, 2014).

The Al-Huda discourse thus disapproves of practices like *basant* (a festival celebrated in India and Pakistan in spring season), ceremony of *mehndi* and *barat* (wedding procession), *chaliswa* and folk Islamic practices like saint celebrations (Ahmad, 2009). Hashmi claims that these are not 'our customs'. By this claim, Hashmi by extension indicates that being Muslim is her only identity and leaves no space for other parallel identities like regional and ethnic ones. Thus Al-Huda's discourse is praising and representing the Muslim past of the land only with renunciation of the centuries' old civilization the remnants of which also include values and customs practiced in Pakistani society. The vocabulary of Al-Huda women also reflects their narrow thinking. For example, they, while describing the other than Al-Huda class, use words like "mindless, mob mentality, ritualistic, and

ignorant" (Hasan, 2014). The Al-Huda discourse is desirous of cleansing society of cultural practices which it terms as *biddat* (innovations in Islamic rituals and practices) and criticizes practices that *Baralvis* and *Shias* engage in. It is in this context that Ahmad observes that "faith has the potential to become dehumanizing, dangerous and harmful for others" (Ahmad, 2009, 199).

California mass shooting brings Al-Huda to the international limelight

Al-Huda came to limelight at international level when one of its former graduates, along with her husband, carried out mass shootings in California in 2015. Tashfeen, the shooter, had attended classes at the Multan branch of Al-Huda during 2013-14 session. A spokesperson for Al-Huda Multan, while distancing the institute from Tashfeen's act, said that probably Tashfeen was unable to comprehend the message of the Holy Quran (Tanveer, 2015). Al-Huda Canada also distanced itself from the incident. A statement issued by Al-Huda Canada's Operation Manager stated that "Huda Institute Canada strongly condemns such acts of violence. We do not preach, believe in or accept violent extreme religious viewpoints of any nature" (Jeffords, 2015).

After the attack, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) claimed that the couple was its follower though it did not say anything about contact with the couple or direction to it about the attack (Malik, 2015). Four former students of Al-Huda Canada branch had also left for Syria to join ISIS. Three of them were taken back to Canada after they were intercepted by law enforcement agencies in Turkey. The fourth one, according to her family, reached Syria (Sagan, 2015).

Keeping in view the above incidents, apprehensions of some observers that the conservative Islamic discourse of Al-Huda may lead to endorsement of or involvement in Islamic extremism's radical forms are not unjustified. Some also fear that a complete generation of South Asian girls may tread Hashmi's path of religious bigotry due to her increasing access to female space inside Pakistan as well as outside (Feyyaz, 2014).

Conclusion

The establishment, rapid growth, success and popularity of Al-Huda among the upper strata of Pakistani society and the entrance of female religious preachers into the religious power structure has set a new trend in the South Asian Islamic tradition where the religious authority has always been exercised by the male folk. Unlike most of its other counterparts in Pakistan, Al-Huda is open to logic, reasoning and scientific advances and uses modern technologies on a daily basis. Its teachings are not limited to Pakistanis only; rather Muslims from other parts of the world can also use its teachings through audio cassettes and its websites. The discourse of Al-Huda has created a gendered moral agency that effects change in the larger society. The way its teachings and message are spread has turned this school into a social movement the ideology of which is even propagated by people who do not make part of it. The process of globalization greatly facilitates Al-Huda to recruit people into its ranks. Al-Huda, through 'technologies of the self', trains its

graduates to become and remain ethical subjects. Its success, however, has not protected it from criticism. The narrow approach that Al-Huda has adopted is one which does not fit well in Pakistani society which is marked by plural mindset and it is due to this reason that some scholars believe that faith has the potential to become dehumanizing, dangerous and harmful for others.

End Notes:

ⁱ In this paper, the word agency refers to the power or capacity of individuals, either acting individually or collectively, to make independent decisions and effect change. In other words, agency is the expression of freedom against social structures, institutions, and cultural norms.

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