Usha Sanyal. *Scholars of Faith: South Asian Muslim Women and the Embodiment of Religious Knowledge*

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REFERENCES

Girls’ madrasas are thriving in India and growing at a faster rate than boys’ madrasas. Relatedly, enrollment at girls’ madrasas is rising while that at boys’ madrasas is dwindling. And—Sanyal convincingly asserts—as sects (maslaks) continue to compete, female literacy rates continue to rise, the desire for “educated” wives and companion marriage becomes more of the norm, girls’ madrasas will keep blooming in number and enrollment. Alongside girls’ madrasas, another new religious institution, Al-Huda, is flourishing. Al-Huda enrolls upper- and middle-class women in Pakistan and immigrant Pakistani and South Asian-origin women in the global South Asian diaspora. Unfortunately, academics have not always kept up with these developments and the landscape of scholarship on Indian girls’ madrasas and Islamic educational institutions for South Asian women is relatively barren. Sanyal’s new book Scholars of Faith is a welcome addition to this important yet relatively neglected field.

Sanyal’s work is an ethnography of two different educational institutions catering to South Asian and South Asian-origin Muslim females. Her first fieldwork site, Jami’a Nur al-Shari’at is a residential Barelawi madrasa in a small town in Uttar Pradesh serving teenage girls belonging to the lower-middle class. Her second site is the international virtual community of Al-Huda, whose Pakistani founders are affiliated with the Ahl-i Hadith movement. Most students enrolled in Al-Huda’s online English courses “are of South Asian origin, and overwhelmingly Pakistani” (p. 246). In the Al-Huda course in which Sanyal enrolled, students and teachers—while largely ethnically South Asian—were located in multiple countries across South Asia, the Middle East, Europe and North America (p. 13); the students were “middle-class, college-educated, and in many cases married with children and/or employed full time” (p. 13).

Sanyal writes about these two fieldwork sites in distinct sections of the book. Jami’a Nur al-Shari’at is covered first (Part I). Part II of the book focuses on Al-Huda. The book’s Conclusion and Introduction bring together these disparate sections of the book. At these locations of confluence, Sanyal confronts head-on the question of what benefits are yielded by her comparison of “apples and oranges” i.e. such different educational institutions (p. 27). She responds by stating that her comparison enables her to answer broad questions, such as: Why are females enrolling in these institutions? What are their eventual goals? What is the impact of this increased access to education on students’ lives and society at large? (p. 2)

Noting similarities between her two case-studies, Sanyal writes, “in both cases, the goal is to promote an orthoprax lifestyle among Muslim women by means of textual study” (p. 12). This orthopraxy is realized by highlighting the applicability of the texts to
students’ everyday lives and encouraging students to transform themselves and their world by implementing their religious education in their quotidian existence. While Sanyal does not state that this shared goal, and the manner in which it is realized, is the argument of the book, I assert that it is the main thread, and in fact the main argument that ties various chapters and the disparate parts of the book together; at the end of my review, I will discuss Sanyal’s statements regarding her work’s argument. My assertion here regarding what I identify as her work’s argument is not simply born out of my own reading of her work. Sanyal herself identifies the aforementioned issues as central to her book when she notes that the main themes that run through her work are: the embodiment of ethical ideals in everyday life; everyday Islamic discourse (p. 21); and the performance of religious identity (p. 24). A little later in her work, Sanyal identifies other similarities between her two fieldwork sites: a common experience of precarity; a shared sense of the transitory nature of this world and eschatology; a shared moral vocabulary and a common moral universe (p. 37). Despite these similarities, differences exist between Jami’a Nur al-Shari’at and Al-Huda in terms of how some of these themes play out. For example, Sanyal notes that Barelawi identity is performed through etiquette (adab), action (amal), and censure (aitiraz) (p. 25) On the other hand, at Al-Huda, the most important element of identity performance is Qur’anic recitation (tajwid); another way of enacting one’s identity is through providing a commentary on the words and phrases in the Qur’an (tafsir) (p. 26). I discuss this issue of sectarian identity cultivation and performance in more depth a little later in this review.

Part I of Sanyal’s book (which focuses on Jami’a Nur al-Shari’at) is composed of five chapters that cover issues ranging from the history of Muslim girls’ education to the lives of madrasa graduates. Next, I provide a brief summary of each chapter. However, my primary focus below is on highlighting the main contributions of this part of the book and on identifying some main themes that tie chapters together.

Chapter 1 maps a history of women’s education and its move from the home to specially designated educational (residential and day-schooling) institutions. The chapter also introduces readers to Jami’at al-Salehat in Rampur, Uttar Pradesh and Madrasatul Niswan in Delhi. These madrasas accord readers a sense of the layout, curriculum, and overall functioning of two large Indian madrasas which then serve as a comparison to the smaller Jami’a Nur al-Shari’at.

Chapter 2 introduces us to Jami’a Nur al-Shari’at; the madrasa’s founder, Sayyid Sahib; and the “core families” that form the administration and leadership of the institution. Several of the main themes that Sanyal identified as central to her work in her Introduction are vividly apparent in this chapter. For example, we get a tangible sense of the precarity of the madrasa wardens’ lives—all of them had experienced tragedies involving husbands and/or children (p. 123). Another main theme that is evident in this chapter is the teaching and performance of Barelawi identity, for example through Jami’a Nur al-Shari’at students reciting Sayyid Sahib’s Sufi genealogy (p. 108). This emphasis on creating and conveying Barelawi identity also runs through Chapter 3 which provides a detailed sense of how sectarian (maslaki) identity is reinforced without denouncing other sects and movements. For example, by “touching their thumbs to their eyes every time the Prophet was mentioned in a speech or sermon, as a gesture of love and respect” (p. 160). Identity was also conveyed through the texts that were taught, where Barelawi ideas such as the Prophet’s knowledge of the unseen were
expressed (p. 161). The theme of Barelawi subject-formation is also taken up in Chapter 4 where Sanyal discusses various rites of incorporation that create a sense of belonging amongst Jami’a Nur al-Shari’at students. These rites include morning prayer (fajr namaz), supplication prayer (du’a) and a student organized weekly assembly (anjuman). Her descriptions of these rites of incorporation yield details about how Barelawi identity is taught in various ways throughout the day and week. For example, she describes how Barelawi themes, such as love for the Prophet, abound in speeches delivered at the anjuman. These speeches are one of many techniques and avenues that enable the fostering and cultivation of Barelawi identity.

8 Sanyal’s focus on the textures of female Barelawi subject-formation is a significant contribution to scholarship on the Barelawi sect. Studies on Barelawis take for granted the existence of a distinct Barelawi identity that is set apart from other sectarian affiliations. How this identity is inculcated and cultivated is rarely examined. Sanyal’s ethnography brings this to light. Importantly, while Sanyal focuses on female madrasa students, much of what she states can likely be applied to male madrasa students as well.

9 In addition to its focus on subject formation, Chapter 3 also gives readers a sense of daily life at Jami’a Nur al-Shari’at. Drawing on her attendance at a number of madrasa classes between 2012–2016, Sanyal dexterously elucidates how the assigned texts and class discussion were made to relate to students’ everyday concerns. The practical purpose of knowledge was instilled in students, for example by discussing Islamic laws of purity as they relate to women.

10 Chapter 4—while focusing on subject formation and the inculcation of a sense of belonging and community amongst students—also compares Jami’a Nur al-Shari’at with a public school. This school, Islamic Public School for Girls, was housed in the same building as Jami’a Nur al-Shari’at. On the one hand, Sanyal’s ethnography unveils important similarities between these two institutions. Students and their parents, at the Islamic school as well as the madrasa, appreciated and cared deeply about the focus on religious education at their respective institutions (p. 197). However, important differences also exist, particularly when it comes to students’ interest in their education. Sanyal contrasts the high level of engagement that she witnessed at the madrasa (see her ethnography in Chapter 3), with the disinterest that she sees in the public school classrooms. Noting some of the reasons for madrasa students’ passion for their studies, Sanyal writes that the material taught at the madrasa—Qur’an, hadith, Islamic law, and other religious fields—speaks directly to the lives and concerns of the students and shapes their identity, sense of self and their way of being in the world (p. 205). On the other hand, her observation of the public school highlights the inadequacies of the public school system in India where she observes that, “most students are not engaged and motivated to learn” (p. 204). Agreeing with and quoting Nita Kumar, Sanyal states that the lack of engagement she saw at the Islamic Public School for Girls is due to “the schools’ failure to connect the formal educational syllabus with the lives of the students and their families” (p. 204). Sanyal’s fieldwork brings into sharp relief the assumption that public schools offer a better education than madrasas. It also shatters the stereotype of madrasas as teaching outdated, irrelevant information that is only learned through rote memorization.

11 While Sanyal’s observations and analysis are clearly important, one wonders to what degree they are fruitful and fair. Some concerns that come to mind are: the madrasa is
a boarding school where, as we learned earlier, education and Barelawi subject formation is an all-encompassing, unending, and immersive experience. For example, students spend five hours outside of class memorizing their lessons in small groups with a teacher present for consultation and/or correction. In contrast, the Islamic public school is a day school, which is unable to offer the comprehensive immersive experience of the madrasa. Does it make sense then to compare the attitudes of students at these two very different institutions? Moreover, Sanyal spent only one day at the Islamic public school in October 2013. One could ask if the lack of passion she describes would have been as visible on another day. In short, Sanyal's intriguing observations and comparisons might raise more questions than they answer.

Chapter 5, “Life after the Madrasa,” examines how madrasa graduates inhabit and perform their religious identities. In post-graduation life, tensions abound. On the one hand the madrasa (and the Islamic school) enabled students to aspire to a future that was defined by more than “marriage, motherhood and domesticity” (p. 196). On the other hand, the societal and familial expectations from these young women hamper their ambitions. The case of the alumna Khushboo is especially illustrative. Her new husband and in-laws are not pleased with the idea of her delivering religious speeches in public, so she does not do so. However, she hopes to resume this religious work someday. Summing up this tension, Sanyal writes: “Her response was in keeping with the teachings of the madrasa, which emphasized the importance of a married woman acting in accordance with her husband’s wishes as long as they did not go against the shari’ā” (p. 213).

Part II of Sanyal’s book centers on Al-Huda International. Sanyal was a participant-observer in Al-Huda’s classes from December 2009–October 2013. During this period, she was enrolled as a student in a course titled: Taleem al-Qur’an Morning English Course. Sanyal’s class met virtually twice a week; each class period was four hours. The material taught in the Taleem al-Qur’an Morning English Course is the same as that which is taught in Al-Huda’s flagship 18-month course. The only difference between the two courses being that the Morning English Course is part-time and hence longer in duration. Both courses aim to teach students the Qur’an in Arabic.

Chapter 6—the first chapter in Part II—introduces readers to the goals of Al-Huda and how the institute’s focus on teaching the Qur’an in its original Arabic empowers students. This focus on the Qur’an—and especially the word-for-word translation of the Qur’an—sets the curriculum at Al-Huda apart from that at Jami’a Nur al-Shari’at, which, as noted earlier, is more expansive. Despite curriculum differences, several themes that were apparent in pedagogy at the madrasa are also evident in Al-Huda’s virtual teaching environment. For example, we learn how sectarian identity plays a role in teaching and reinforcing belonging. Several academic preferences of al-Huda’s founders and the religious perspectives of the Ahl-i Hadith (with which Al-Huda’s founders are affiliated) are evident in the Al-Huda curriculum. These include, for example, a rejection of Sufism, a focus on Arabic instruction, a rejection of the significance of the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence, etc. (p. 241) Similar to Jami’a Nur al-Shari’at, Al-Huda approaches Islamic education by constantly referencing the students’ own lives and highlighting that what they are learning can be applied to mundane life events and implemented in one’s daily life (p. 252–53). Moreover, as in the case of Jami’a Nur al-Shari’at alumnae, Al-Huda students are frequently torn between competing sets of loyalties, specifically the desires and obligations of their home life.
versus the requirements and teachings of their online community (p. 266). A comparison of Jami’a Nur al-Shari’at and Al-Huda yields the insight that the aforementioned tensions become augmented in instances where students are further along in their life and have additional responsibilities including to their children, husbands and in-laws. Moreover, such tensions come into play when women are in an environment where they are surrounded by individuals who do not always share their exact religious commitments. This is frequently the case for Al-Huda’s virtual students who—once the virtual class ends—are back to interacting with their families. And, this is true for Jami’a Nur al-Shari’at’s alumnae who also often live in homes where other family members have religious outlooks that don’t fully align with theirs; recall the case of Khushboo. Residential students at Jami’a Nur al-Shari’at are spared these tensions since they live with like-minded students and teachers.

Chapter 7’s main contribution is its novel study of the intellectual dimensions of the Al-Huda movement and the scholarly interests of its founders: Farhat Hashmi and Idress Zubair. Sanyal examines Hashmi’s dissertation on the hadith scholar al-Silafi (d. 1183 CE) and Zubair’s similar dissertation work on medieval hadith scholarship. Sanyal’s research here is especially important since hers is the first work that examines Hashmi’s scholarship. This chapter also provides insight into Hashmi’s lecturing style. As in the case of the teachers at Jami’a Nur al-Shari’at, Hashmi frequently emphasizes the relevance of the religious material to her students’ lives. Additionally, Sanyal writes that Hashmi frequently “incorporates references to scientific knowledge, in fields as diverse as medicine, biology, psychology, and so on” (p. 289). Sanyal places Al-Huda’s perspective on science and the Qur’an in historical context and explains in some detail what makes Hashmi’s views modern (p. 292–93). Sanyal does so by comparing pre-modern perspectives on science and the Qur’an with modern perspectives. Unfortunately, such thorough, convincing research on what makes a dimension of pedagogy modern is largely lacking in the rest of the chapter and the book more broadly. For example, at another point in Chapter 7, Sanyal writes, “By speaking in a modern idiom, they [Al-Huda] have attracted the attention of middle-class, urban, educated Muslims …. People who were never attracted to the maslaki identity politics of the ‘ulama” (p. 300). Unlike in the earlier discussion on science, here one is left wondering what exactly is meant by a “modern idiom.” Additionally, one wonders if a contrast is being set up between the “modern idiom” of Al-Huda and “maslaki identity politics”. This comparison seems odd since—as Sanyal herself is aware—maslaki identity itself is a modern phenomenon. I engage with this point about modernity and its definition in much more detail a little later in this review.

Chapter 8 provides insight into how Al-Huda functions online as well as onsite. In keeping with the focus of Chapter 7, here too we are informed of some aspects of Hashmi’s teaching style. Sanyal writes that Hashmi’s lectures are characterized by asking questions of the audience and “a great deal of affect” (p. 319). Hashmi pushes students to become rabbanî, that is, servants of God (p. 304). Moreover, when teaching the Qur’an Hashmi foregrounds “women’s role in bringing about change in society” which stands in contrast to how the Qur’an is taught in South Asian madrasas (p. 311).

Finally, Chapter 9 serves as a window into the lives of select students. We learn of the precarity and gendered Islamophobia some encounter while living in the West. We also read about the spirit of cooperation amongst students and the tight-knit virtual community in which teachers and students participate (p. 343).
In light of the above summary of the work, it will likely surprise readers that the argument of the work, as articulated by Sanyal, is: “Islamic religious education today, in the early twenty-first century—particularly that for women—is thoroughly modern” (p. 4). Despite the unbounded scholarship on modernity—which ranges from numerous theories about what constitutes and characterizes modernity; modernity’s multiplicity; the relationship between Islam and modernity—Sanyal makes virtually no mention of this body of scholarship. While making a one-sentence nod to modernity’s contested nature (“This is a loaded term” [p. 4]), she appears to take modernity as a straightforward, easily identifiable characteristic and states matter-of-factly that she is following Robert Hefner’s definition of a “modern Islamic education.” This includes, “the functionalization of Islamic education, its internal dynamics, and debate over who has the authority to be purveyors of shari’a interpretation among Muslims today” (p. 4–5). Explaining functionalization, she quotes Gregory Starrett as stating that functionalization is understood as taking place when “intellectual objects from one discourse come to serve the strategic or utilitarian ends of another discourse” (p. 5). Given that functionalization is a core part of Sanyal’s thesis, one would expect functionalization to be a thread that ties together the chapters in her work or at the very least that appears in many chapters in her work. I could only find functionalization mentioned in Chapter 8 in discussions of scientific discourse and the Qur’an.

The “internal dynamics” part of Sanyal’s thesis is difficult to grasp. While she takes the term from Hefner, she does not explain what it is about the internal dynamics of Al-Huda and Jami’a Nur al-Shari’at that makes them modern. In the two pages (p. 6–7) where she explains the term internal dynamics and how it relates to the institutions she studies, she does not even once—mention the word modern or any of its permutations and synonyms. Thus, one is left in the dark about how the internal dynamics of these institutions attest to the religious education therein being “thoroughly modern” (p. 4). Without an explanation of how internal dynamics testify to modern-ness, the reader is adrift when reading the book and is unable to grasp when modernity/modern-ness is evident in the ethnography.

The above-mentioned difficulty of knowing when modernity/modern-ness is apparent in Sanyal’s ethnography brings me to a related point: the term modern—completely central to Sanyal’s thesis—does not even feature in the index. This is not because the term is used so frequently in the book that it would be fruitless to have it in the index. In fact, it is the opposite. The term modern is used so few times that it does not merit a separate index entry. There is, however, a sub-entry of madrasas “as modern institutions” under the entry “madrasas”. Of the 13 pages listed in the sub-entry, half are in the Introduction and Conclusion. This supports my critique that the thesis regarding modernity is tacked on almost as an afterthought in the book’s Introduction and Conclusion instead of being the fulcrum around which the body of the book revolves. Along these same lines, on the penultimate page of her work, Sanyal writes that what is modern about the education that students at Jami’a Nur al-Shari’at and Al-Huda receive is that the women turn to Islam as a source of empowerment (p. 366). It is a shame that this important insight is not incorporated throughout the book as an argument.

Another aspect to consider with regard to Sanyal’s stated thesis is her lack of consideration of what her interlocutors think about the issue at hand, i.e., modernity.
and a modern Islamic education. How do these students define, engage with and localize modernity? What is their perspective on Sanyal’s assertion that they are receiving a “modern Islamic education”? What, if anything, do they think makes their Islamic education modern? And, how does their understanding of the characteristics of a modern Islamic education compare to those presented by Hefner (and embraced by Sanyal)? How might Sanyal’s interlocutors push us to redefine the characteristics of a modern Islamic education; or at least to recognize that those characteristics might be inflected differently, or even vary significantly, depending on issues as diverse as geographical locale and the age of students. It is possible that Sanyal’s lack of training as an anthropologist hinders her from turning to her interlocutors to guide her thesis—often a defining feature of anthropological works.2 Despite the aforementioned limitations, Sanyal’s work is a wonderful and much-needed contribution to the sparsely populated field of scholarship on South Asian Muslim women’s educational endeavors. Sanyal’s rich ethnography provides a vivid picture of the textures of Barelawi and Al-Huda identity formation and of how Islamic practices and discourses are embodied and enacted in everyday life. Sanyal’s work is especially novel in studying Barelawi and Al-Huda students in conjunction. As Sanyal herself rightly notes, this allows her to speak to broader issues that transcend sectarian lines. I hope that Sanyal’s captivating work will spark important conversations about the merits of undertaking an ethnographic study of the ‘ulama and will serve to move the field of South Asian ‘ulama studies—which in its current form is deeply textual, androcentric and frequently Deoband-centered—in the direction illuminated by Sanyal, i.e. a direction characterized by the embrace of anthropological inquiry, the study of female ‘ulama and the simultaneous study of multiple maslaks.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. Some important works on these subjects include those by Sadaf Ahmed (2009), Masooda Bano (2019) and Hem Borker (2018).
2. We see this attunement to interlocutors and their ideas at play in Lara Deeb’s fieldwork on Shi’a women in Lebanon and their understanding of, and engagement with modernity. We learn from Deeb how her female Muslim interlocutors conceptualize and define modern-ness; how they tread carefully as they make linguistic choices about what terms to use (and whether modernity, with its Western connotations) is even a good fit. We also learn how Deeb’s interlocutors localize modernity in ways that challenge Western assumptions.

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