Mapping Muslim Moral Provinces: Framing Feminized Piety of Pakistani Diaspora

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Abstract: Over the last two decades we have seen a proliferation in the number of self-proclaimed Islamic scholars preaching piety to Muslim women. An emerging few of these scholars gaining prominence happen to be women, feminizing what is predominantly a patriarchal domain of dawah (missionary work) and proselytization. Traditionally speaking, Muslim missionaries have never been restricted to a particular moral province, perhaps due to the fact that Islam was never intended as a hierarchical religion with a mosque–state divide. This makes mapping Muslim moral spaces in a hyper-globalized world—one in which shared identities and ideologies transcend territorial boundaries—all the more challenging. Using the firebrand female Muslim tele preacher, Dr. Farhat Hashmi, and her global proselytizing mission (Al-Huda International) as a springboard for discussion, this paper seeks to map out the ways in which modern Muslim women in the post-9/11 British Pakistani diaspora navigate these moral provinces. By juxtaposing the staunchly orthodox impositions of niqab-clad Dr. Hashmi, with the revolt from within Muslim spaces, from practicing, ‘middle-path’ Muslims, this paper critically engages with Saba Mahmood’s concept of the ‘politics of piety’ and its various critiques. In so doing, we reimagine Muslim spaces, as well as the moralization versus multivocality debate surrounding them, and the importance of positioning agency and complex lived realities of women occupying these spaces at the center of our analysis on Muslim moral provinces.

Keywords: Islam; Muslim; women; piety; modesty; patriarchy; spiritual abuse; morality; plurality; secularism

1. Introduction

There is no single Muslim moral province. The very notion of a ‘moral province’ is deeply rooted within a Christian ethos, and while some concepts are readily transposable amongst the three Abrahamic faiths, mapping moral provinces seems unlikely to be one of them. This is largely due to the fact that Islam is not a hierarchical religion, but rather a ‘way of life’ as many of its adherents would attest. The essence of the faith and its accompanying articulations and ensuing exchanges regarding ethics cannot be restricted to a particular province, demarcated domain or singular space. Ethical quandaries and moral questioning are not activities restricted to the sphere of theological scholarship. This is because every Muslim is expected to seek out religious knowledge on their own accord, rather than simply relying on the rulings of shaykhs or ulama (religiously learned scholars). Questioning, constructively appraising, and seeking out the reasoning behind religious teachings and practices of the faith are prescribed prophetic teachings in Islam.

However, in an increasingly globalized world, especially in the Global North that is overwhelmingly secular in rule and wherein there exists an overt public–private divide, Muslim moral provinces have, for the most part, emerged and established themselves...
almost out of necessity. These spaces serve multiple purposes: communal worship, proselytization, grassroots organizations, and centers for education, and they can be both real and virtual, not necessarily a tangible space, so to speak. Being a Muslim diasporan in the Global North then has its resulting set of practices and challenges. Especially, with regards to issues that are deemed internal affairs and matters of morality and modesty, the consensus is that they be handled within the inorganically created Muslim moral provinces, often dubbed the Muslim spaces. However, the issue remains that these spaces are often manipulated, weaponized, and exclusivized. While there might not be one single Muslim moral province, these spaces that do exist in the name of the faith, supposedly to serve as safe havens for adherents can become unwelcoming and limited in their scope. This is because, in reality, a certain brand of Muslim molds these spaces and maintains hold of their position within these ‘provinces of piety’. The aim of this paper is to map Muslim moral provinces, chart what happens within, and demonstrate how exclusivist in nature they can inevitably become, and the push from within Muslim communities towards fostering alternatives that are accommodative and accepting spaces for all.

In order to do this, and central to my argument, I focus on the spaces occupied by Muslim women within the British Pakistani diaspora who are engaged with organized religious activities, and the discourses surrounding ‘a woman’s place’ within this framework, which is couched in a rhetoric regarding the relationship between faith, feminism, and the process of ‘feminization’ of such spaces. This paper then critically engages with the byproducts and broader implications of this form of engagement in Muslim spaces, how it can pose to be a grand step in terms of progress, but in fact is rather limiting and problematic as it forms a culture that is readily susceptible to spiritual abuse. The paper offers two solutions to a more fruitful assessment of faith-based spaces: (1) deconstructing rigid binaries of analysis—only by ridding ourselves of limited and reductive assumptions can we move forward to a more holistic and dynamic understanding of what these spaces can hold, and harness powerful, progressive change; and (2) applying aspects of bell hooks’ and Audre Lorde’s radical feminist theory to acknowledge, affirm, and utilize the power at the peripheries of Muslim spaces, I shine light on organized activities that are very much part of the faith-based space, but normally disregarded or deemed external issues. In so doing, we turn the image of the Muslim moral occupiers of space on its head, reinforcing the notion that discourses on Muslim morality are not confined to a specific space and that logic of rigid binaries is what impedes progressive transformations.

2. Methodology

My analysis is partly predicated on ethnographic research in the form of in-depth interviews I conducted in August 2020 with British Pakistani women who self-identify as Muslim and have directly or indirectly experienced the Islamic scholarly proselytization mission of Dr. Farhat Hashmi through her organization, Al-Huda International. All the women whom I interviewed were aged between 25 and 55 years old at the time, and either first- or second-generation Pakistanis in the UK, residing in London, Birmingham, Manchester, or Scotland.

All 12 women I interviewed, of whom seven are featured in this article, have been students of Al-Huda or regularly attended Dr. Hashmi’s lectures, or have had close family members who were students or followers of Al-Huda. I was interested in what drove their initial desires to join Al-Huda, or at the very least what sparked their curiosity to begin with and, eventually, what led them to decide to disband from this movement. In cases where my interviewees had not directly engaged with Al-Huda, I wanted to gauge their perceptions of Al-Huda and similar South Asian woman-led, global, Muslim proselytization missions (of which very few are prominent). I also wanted to understand the deeply complex narratives these women uphold and reproduce with regards to the nuances in making sense of the position of Muslim women in ‘moral’ spaces, particularly in the context of a post-9/11 British Pakistani diaspora.
3. Case Study: Al-Huda

3.1. Drawing Room Dars

In Muslim majority nations, the separation of state, society, and the mosque seem like a strange and unfamiliar demarcation. For Muslims residing in those nations, every and any public space can become an arena for moral posturing and religious discourse evaluation. Religious enquiry is not restricted to the halls of mosques or secluded seminaries. One does not require formal theological qualifications to have a reasoned and informed opinion on such matters. Take, for instance, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, which is a Muslim majority nation with a democratic constitutional framework that is guided by Shariah (Islamic religious law) principles and inspired by prophetic teachings and wisdom. Following independence from British Raj in 1947, the formation and development of Pakistani nationalism was foregrounded by a promise to secure a safe space for the Subcontinent’s Muslims. In so doing, Muslims, as well as other minorities, were reassured that they had every right to practice their faith and openly express their religious identity publicly, thus quashing any notion of a separate space wherein religion would be enclosed. Religious zealots have inevitably exploited this to impose rigid restrictions on ordinary civilians in social and civic spaces.

At the same time, a globalized brand of proselytization techniques and missionary work began to establish itself in pockets of the nation. The mid-1990s saw the eruption of drawing room dawah (proselytization) or dars (lecture) circles where women would congregate to listen to alims (male religious scholars) and alimas (women religious scholars) speak on religious affairs via cassette recordings. This created a space for moralizing Muslim affairs, a literal room for women to come together guided by a female scholar and debate issues pertinent to them. So, while there might not be one singular Muslim moral space, there are numerous pockets that proclaim to be provinces of piety, wherein discussions regarding the faith, its meaning and practices, and worldly implications are demarcated and dissected and discussed. Who controls these spaces and determines the framework and narratives promulgated inside these spaces is a crucial question. In order to understand the complex nature of such Muslim moral spaces, I shall couch my analysis in the case study of Al-Huda International, a proselytization and missionary organization with global outreach, founded and run by a Pakistani Muslim woman.

3.2. Al-Huda: Origins

This activity of drawing room dars and dawah made great traction in the wider Muslim diaspora, particularly the older generation residing abroad (Shaheed 1999). One pertinent and prolific example is that of traditionalist Pakistani preacher, Dr. Farhat Hashmi and her organization, Al-Huda International, which has its headquarters in Canada. Born in the Pakistani Punjabi city of Sargodha in 1957, Hashmi has been engaged in proselytization for over 40 years. Alongside her husband, and fellow Islamic theologian, Muhammad Idrees Zubair, Hashmi embarked upon a PhD in Islamic studies in the 1990s and returned to Pakistan to establish Al-Huda International (which stands for ‘the guidance’ in Arabic). Initially, the purpose of this non-governmental organization was to equip Muslim women with the education and skills required to instill Islamic principles and teachings in their day-to-day affairs. Besides inculcating a sense of personal piety (tawqaf) and patience (sabr) through tough times and hardship, Al-Huda preaches ‘adherence to scripturally enjoined norms of Islamic behaviour, female segregation and public veiling, and acceptance of male authority in the family’ (Sanyal 2020, p. 239).

At the time, Hashmi’s endeavor went against the grain in that it subverted the seminary system whereby large institutes were run by men, and often with an agenda predicated on their political partisanship, vested in the dominant patriarchal societal structures. Although Hashmi’s father belonged to the Jamaat-e Islami (Islamic Political Party), she has been careful not to divulge such information, lest it taint her approach. That said, in its initial days, Al-Huda gained a level of prestige and respect amongst presiding political elites and intelligentsia. Mushtaq notes that then President (1993–1997), Farooq Legahari’s
wife was a fan of Dr. Hashmi and ‘invited her to present dars at the presidential residence’ (Mushtaq 2010, p. 110). This, as Usha Sanyal points out, should not be seen as a political endorsement, but rather a simple ‘personal connection’ (Sanyal 2020, p. 243). I would add that while this might not be as crucial as Mushtaq (2010) suggests, it was certainly an added advantage in cementing the popularity of Al-Huda.

In the mid to late 1990s, Hashmi’s Al-Huda gained mass support, mainly amongst suburban, elite housewives across Pakistan, who most often belonged to the upper echelons of society. In fact, many of their families were non-practicing, liberals who had ‘swayed’ from the faith (Shaheed 1999). By attending Al-Huda lectures, these women were ‘reborn’ into the faith, feeling rejuvenated, defiant in their little act of rebellion against their families and communities (Ahmad 2009). Soon, Al-Huda had established smaller offshoot hubs in smaller cities across the Punjab and Sindh provinces, with the popularity of the movement seeping into the rural peripheries of the country. While for many city-dwelling women, this was the first time they had encountered an alima (woman religious scholar) leading a religious institute, and interpreting doctrine and issuing fatwas (religious rulings), for the rural, village women, a woman leading women’s dars sessions was rather familiar; it was not uncommon for religiously learned women to take on this role in the provincial peripheries.

3.3. Globalized Dars O’ Tadrees

At the height of then Prime Minister, former General Pervez Musharraf’s liberalization and anti-extremism campaign of Enlightened Moderation—which saw a clamp down on illiberal, socially conservative, and religiously orthodox narratives—in 2005, Hashmi and her family relocated to Canada permanently, moving their base location of Al-Huda International with them. Thus, Al-Huda has assumed the mantle of a ‘modern-day rihla narrative (travelling for the sake of religious knowledge)’ as Sanyal (2020, p. 7) suggests. As Hashmi expanded her reach by becoming a member of the global Pakistani diaspora, so too her focal audience shifted. The impact Hashmi has had upon contemporary generations of Pakistani women in the diaspora is profound. Drawing room dars (lecture) circles cropped up across pockets of the British and Irish Pakistani diaspora in a post-9/11 era. Weekly woman’s dars (lecture) circles revolved around a cassette recording of Hashmi’s lecture on a particular topic being listened to on loudspeakers, followed by a discussion led by an elder woman. These lectures were phenomenal and garnered a popular following amongst women of all ages grappling with how to best practice their faith with the backdrop of a deeply hostile external environment, wherein securitization of Muslim identity was commonplace. Many of these women were first-generation young mothers with children coming of age, and they felt unequipped to deal with the multitude of challenges of identity, belonging, and lived Islam. The majority of these women felt rather helpless and overcome with guilt for not knowing their faith ‘well enough’ to preserve it and pass on its practices, and traditions to their children’s generation. They searched for a spiritual guide and, for many, Hashmi’s Al-Huda filled that void by offering them an opportunity to educate themselves in an environment in which they felt comfortable; it was and still is very common for women of the Pakistani diaspora to congregate weekly at one person’s home over a potluck feast. Hashmi’s lectures would start the procession, being played via loudspeakers in the drawing room, while the women sat in silence and listened, nodding along to Hashmi’s spiel.

Al-Huda has self-fashioned itself as a being a sane voice, ‘in the middle’ between all ‘extremes’ (Sanyal 2020, p. 7). While Hashmi has often come under attack for being a woman who interprets Quran (Muslim Holy Book), paradoxically her exegesis on certain doctrinal matters pertaining to women’s rights have hardly been emancipatory for women. In fact, one of Pakistan’s most prominent Deobandi scholars, Mawlana Taqi ‘Uthmani has gone on record to interrogate Dr. Hashmi’s level of knowledge and the legitimacy of her authority. (Mushtaq 2010, p. 203; Sanyal 2020, p. 243). That said, Dr. Hashmi is no martyr against misogyny; in some of her lectures, Hashmi exudes rather regressive tendencies and
reinforces racism, while serving as a patriarchal mouthpiece.² Ayesha,³ a first-generation British Pakistani woman whom I interviewed says she attended a handful of Al-Huda dars in the early to mid 2000s, but on hearing Dr. Hashmi use racist tropes, and offensive comments about Black women’s skin color, she refused to return to the dars, despite ‘the peer pressure’ of attending, as she says:

‘I remember quite clearly, how she [Dr Hashmi] was talking about how Allah’s mercy is so grand that He will forgive a woman even though she is “kali kaloti,” which is a slur for being dark-skinned… I couldn’t wrap my head around why someone supposedly learned would be so brazenly anti-Black? Why didn’t anyone else call it out? My daughter who was about twelve at the time, accompanied me to these dars, and she felt uncomfortable… she had more sense than most of the grown women in attendance. I decided I’d not return, as I did not want to subject myself and my child to a blatantly racist environment’.

Some of her fatwas on marital rape—she denies its existence and condemns women who say no to husbands—are actually far more stringent than some of her male contemporaries even within the traditional schools of thought.⁴ According to Shaikh, Al-Huda believes that it promotes the one ‘true’ version of Islamic ‘values’, and in so doing it promulgates ‘rigid and uncompromising stances on gender and sexual difference, and on appropriate and inappropriate cultural practices in general’ (Shaikh 2011, p. 69). For Irfani (2004) this is a purposeful attempt at ‘Arabization’ by ridding South Asian Islam of the Indus cultures that have forever imbued it.

For the women listening to Hashmi’s lectures in its heyday, this was a definite grey area, but many would rationalize it in their minds by giving her benefit of doubt for being a learned scholar. In so doing, not only did they willfully ignore her insinuating and offensive comments wrapped up in the garb of piety, they internalized her words as being guided by the divine truth of the faith. This was rather dangerous, especially for those women who dared to challenge or question Hashmi’s rhetoric. They were immediately told to leave the dars, as there was no room for ‘bhais o’ mubahisa’ (debate). Such was the cliquish mentality in the Muslim moral space carved and curated by Hashmi’s followers in the British and Irish Pakistani diaspora.

It is in these ‘informal, non-institutional spaces’ that the Al-Huda pietist movement and its millions of followers reside (Zia 2018, p. 102). As Sadaf Ahmad (2009) investigative research into Al-Huda shows, it occupies and makes use of the space on the border between the religious and the political. Al-Huda has adapted to the needs and cultures of those potential followers in the peripheries of the space it occupies. This has proven to be a rather effective and successful ploy in bolstering the global support base of Al-Huda. After all, much proselytization happens in virtual spaces, and Muslim communities are pocketed across the globe and form multiple multicultural diasporas. Thus, Al-Huda has managed to incorporate the inflictions of the local congregants depending on the space they speak to. These cultural markers are then molded by the pietist movement. For instance, when in Pakistan, Al-Huda has taken an approach in-line with the staunchly patriotic interspersion of religion and nationalism so as to resonate with the everyday Pakistani woman who is hardly going to question this rhetoric, which doubles up as a means to have a stranglehold over the identity and ideology of adherents. In contrast, when proselytizing to the Pakistani diaspora, mainly first-generation, relatively elite women, Hashmi’s sermons are littered with pop culture references; in past lectures, she has made mentions of Harry Potter, which she declares haram (impressible) for introducing children to sorcery, but simultaneously has complete grasp over its concepts and working knowledge of its main characters (This is based on first-hand accounts from attending dars’ led by Dr Hashmi’s followers as a preteen in post-9/11 Dublin, Ireland). In so doing, Hashmi preys on the vulnerabilities and fears of young mothers in the diaspora who forebode their offspring being ‘corrupted’ by Western sci-fi and fairytales.

The breakaway or growing despondence amongst the women I interviewed can perhaps also be put down to differences and changes in priorities amongst followers of Al-Huda. In Shaikh (2011) study of Pakistani women students of Al-Huda, she spoke to
some women who asserted that their desire to join such a movement was motivated by a need to be both ‘practicing’ and ‘fashionable’ without compromise (Shaikh 2011, p. 72). Speaking to women of the British Pakistani diaspora in 2020, it appears that many of them are concerned by different objectives, such as a strong drive towards social justice and not just a commodification of piety.

3.4. Politics of the Pious: Performativity and Positionality

Positioning Hashmi in the broader discourse surrounding Islam and the role of women in leadership positions and their agency, can prove to be quite a challenging, but hopeful fruitful, endeavor. In order to make sense of this, some scholars often employ the narrative posited by Saba Mahmood’s groundbreaking *Politics of Piety* (Mahmood 2005) in which she expounds the politics of piety (*tawqa* in Arabic) in order to pursue *dawah* (proselytization) by analyzing the role of women in the mosque movement in Egypt prior to the buildup of the Arab Spring. Mahmood centered mosque-going participants in her analysis to argue that their performances of piety—while not a result of their own autonomous will—‘are the products of authoritative discursive traditions whose logic and power far exceeds the consciousness of the subjects they enable’ (Mahmood 2005, p. 45). Mahmood bypasses the question of agency belonging of women and focuses on its foundations in the ‘historically contingent discursive traditions in which they are located. The women are summoned to recognize themselves in terms of the virtues and codes of these traditions, and they come to measure themselves against the ideals furbished by these traditions’ (Mahmood 2005, p. 45).

Mahmood specifically states that her scholarship is not a sociological exploration of piety, but the underlying purpose is to encourage us to challenge our commonly held beliefs regarding the interplay between politics and ethics, and discernably, religion’s role and presence in the public life; analysis of religion cannot be restricted to the private sphere. Through reading Mahmood’s work, we are also forced to challenge our assumptions regarding the aims and ideals of those at the helm of the pietist movement. Deeming it dangerous to interpret their concerns through liberal lenses, Mahmood implores us to avoid imposing upon them a ‘normative liberal conceptions of politics’ (Mahmood 2005, p. 26). She reminds us of the seminal work of Lila Abou-Lughod, which emphasizes the pitfalls of vast reams of academic literature hinged on the glorification and romanticization of rebellion, resistance and ‘resilience’ of overtly pious Muslim women in Muslim majority countries (Abu-Lughod 1990, p. 42; Mahmood 2005, p. 29).

An academic who has put their thoughts, ideas, and rigorously researched scholarship into the public domain, free for consumption by all, can plead with their audience regarding their purpose and intent, but they cannot steer the direction of the discourse that transpires from it; they cannot guarantee that members of civil society will follow suit. To be clear, this is not about audiences misinterpreting the point made by the original author, but rather that a piece of writing serves as the basis for discussion; it forces people to question and they are free to do so. That is the ultimate purpose of scholarship—to enlighten, educate, and inspire further interrogation of a particular area of research. Granted, Mahmood, in the second edition of *Politics of Piety* (Mahmood 2011) amended the foreword to the book to include its aims and objectives, as the previous edition faced criticism from human rights activists and organizers who claimed that Mahmood was somehow making excuses for orthodoxy and uplifting a narrative of Muslim womanhood that they deem oppressive and lacking agency (Mahmood 2011).

One can admire the remarkable and pioneering scholarship of the likes of Mahmood, who certainly paved the way for countless academic accounts into the lives of Muslim women who occupy positions of leadership or religious authority, be it self-proclaimed or
widely accepted by others around them. As such, Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety* is a standard starting point for wider enquiry into religiosity of Muslim women not just in the Egyptian mosque movement, but across the majority Muslim world, and various Muslim diaspora. Prior to Mahmood’s groundbreaking analysis, mainstream scholarship into the agency of practicing Muslim women was riddled with assumptions and preconceived ideas regarding the agency of Muslim women; they were thought to be devoid of agency, incapable of making autonomous decisions. If anything, Mahmood’s work showcases that Muslim women express their agency in different ways and their approach to decision-making does not neatly fit into the neo-liberal, hegemonic narrative that centers individual autonomy and defiance against frameworks of religiosity. Mahmood’s thesis sets the scene and opens the door to wider conversations around the positionality of practicing Muslim women in the public sphere. Notwithstanding, we circle back to the mainstay of our inquiry: are these places of professing, participating in and unpacking piety, these so-called moral provinces, inclusive sites? It encourages us to question why it is that a particular type of piety, one projected by women like those in the mosque movement, or those like Farhat Hashmi, who have established their orthodoxy and clout, are reigning over such spaces as the archetypal mode of Muslimness. What of those women who might be more expressive of their piety in the private than in the public domain; are they denied occupancy of a ‘Muslim moral province’ simply because they refuse to wear their piety as an emblem attached to their outward garments? More pertinent a question to scholarship: are we to include the experiences of these women in our exploration of Muslim spaces? Essentially, is visibly apparent piety a prerequisite to claiming ownership of one’s position in a Muslim province, and thus power to determine what falls in the remit of the site itself?

3.5. Sacred vs. Secular Spaces

In recent years, Mahmood’s scholarship has not only served as a springboard for other academics interested in elucidating the lived experiences of Muslim women, it has also garnered fierce criticism. In her 2018 book, *Faith and Feminism in Pakistan*, Afiya Zia offers a detailed and at times rather scathing takedown of Mahmood’s work. Zia begins her critical evaluation of the existent body of literature examining Muslim women’s agency by asserting that it neglects the ‘resilience and continuity of secular resistance and desire for secular space in such contexts’ (Zia 2018, p. 3). For Zia, Mahmood and her likeminded scholars, whom she labels ‘post-9/11 post-secularists’, promote ‘religious citizenship as a viable alternative to liberal feminism’ (Zia 2018, p. 8). Such a sweeping statement has inevitably resulted in much pushback within circles of academics engaged in research into Muslim women’s lived realities. Many of the accused scholars have clarified that they take a non-normative standpoint, and Zia’s speculation regarding their intent, and especially one that they might not necessarily even align with, is rather peculiar. Other mislabeled academics who value Mahmood’s contribution to the scholarship—and might not agree with her on some aspects of her approach—find the label ‘post-secularist’ not only unforgiving, but also salacious. According to scholars of Muslim campaigners in the West, the framing of activism must be contextualized. For instance, Massoumi (2015) asserts that we can only make sense of such British Muslim women activists’ agency by acknowledging how it is inevitably bound to defying the state-level securitization of Muslim identity and the perpetual trope of the ‘oppressed Muslim woman’. Khan (2016) has written specifically on the importance of the nuanced hybridity of British Pakistani Muslim activist identities; one can only fully comprehend the layers to their struggle and resistance by situating it in the temporal reality of a post-War of Terror world, wherein diasporic Muslim public spaces were consistently subject to stigmatization, and Islamophobia permeated their lived reality. In contrast, Zia’s insistence on reinstating the demarcation between secular and anti-secular or religious serves her assertion that in order to take on the mantle of ‘progressive’ Pakistani woman, one must always question ‘the strategic worth of religion in their struggle for equal rights’ (Zia 2018, p. 9). However, given how enmeshed faith, identity, and politics are in the context of their lived reality, for the overwhelming majority
of practicing, progressive British Muslim women of the Pakistani diaspora creating such a rigid distinction and questioning the ‘worth of religion’ in their activism seems rather defeatist, derogatory and a disservice to their cause.

Zia’s seemingly inflammatory accusations against her contemporaries notwithstanding, the crux of Zia’s concern is still potent. For instance, interrogating ‘the purpose of the agency’ and the ‘conservative ends’ as well as the means by which that agency of Muslim women is extolled is definitely a worthwhile exercise, and one that quite naturally flows from pre-existing scholarship in the field (Zia 2018, p. 52). There is much weight in Zia’s assertion that feminist scholarship that attempts to move beyond the oft-imposed dichotomy of politics of ‘resistance and subordination’ can be a rather empty activity, particularly if the purpose behind it is to separate ‘self-realisation and empowerment from progressive ideals’ (Zia 2018, p. 62). For Zia, the act of engagement with scholarship on women in Muslim spaces cannot be a non-normative endeavor and claiming to be so is disingenuous. In accordance with Zia’s analysis, there cannot be a separation between self-actualization and autonomy, and the end goal of the process of empowerment must be tangibly emancipatory (Zia 2018, p. 62).

Taking such a staunchly normative approach is quite normal for a self-identifying progressive advocate of women’s rights such as Zia. It is expected that her line of scholarship will critically evaluate not only the agency, but the impact of women who claim considerable clout and occupy pockets of power within Muslim spaces. In assessing Farhat Hashmi’s Al-Huda, Zia agrees with Riffat Hassan (2002) assertion that Hashmi is distinctly right-wing, and what Zia deems ‘retro-Islamist’ (Zia 2018, p. 34). According to Zia’s understanding, Hashmi’s usurpation of Muslim spaces particularly in the diaspora has in large part occurred because of academic scholarship that has chosen to avoid critically evaluating Hashmi’s access to clout and celebrity, instead opting for what Zia would classify as apologeticism. This seems rather logical and some would say inevitable, given the backdrop of rampant Islamophobia reaching new heights across the globe, with the majority of religiously aggravated hate crimes (47%) in Britain targeting Muslims, specifically visibly practicing Muslim women, making it gendered Islamophobia. As such, some academics—particularly those of urbane, elite stock in the Pakistani diaspora, as Zia suggests—skirt around the issue of women’s rights abuses and violations within the community, lest it fan the flames of far-right extremism and xenophobia against Muslims. This inadvertently cements the position of major orthodox forces within Muslim spaces in the West wherein religion becomes ‘privatised and yet politicised’ (Zia 2018, p. 97).

Much to Zia’s chagrin, elite intellectual Pakistani women in the diaspora continue to work ‘within the Islamic framework’ which she claims has ‘diluted and ultimately weakened secular feminism and relinquished considerable space for the recent Islamist political backlash’ (Zia 2018, p. 31). By working within the confines of the ‘Islamic framework’, Zia suggests that these academics and activists are compelled to advocate for a warped form of inclusivity that forces them to pander to the sensitivities of cultural and religious orthodoxy. She berates Muslims civil society actors for holding onto their faith as a key marker of their identity:

‘the spaces for Muslims to be anything other than a religious category have become increasingly narrow over the last decade and it is not only governments or the neoconservatives who are doing this. Academics around the world are increasingly complicit in encouraging a kind of Muslim exceptionalism which is blunted through the lens of anthropology and justified through a concentrated critique and rejection of universalism, secularism and Enlightenment-based rights’. (Zia 2018, p. 46)

There are quite a few notable points made in Zia’s statement above, so much so, that it is worthwhile to unpack and carefully consider how such assertions problematize and exacerbate the challenges posed to religion in the public life further. What Zia is assuming here is that many Muslims in civil society are forcefully pursuing a fervent and singular narrative of identity politics as the basis of their political exchanges. They are Muslims ‘only’, and thus they make excuses for their religio-cultural heritage when it comes in
conflict with a supposedly secular mainstream society. While a handful of outspoken Muslim activists believe that they are first and foremost Muslim, and some do go as far as saying they are ‘only’ Muslim, and refuse to accept any other aspect of their own identity and ethnic culture, claiming that it clashes with their ‘Muslimness’, these are a relatively small minority. Most Muslim activists and human rights advocates amongst the Pakistani Muslim diaspora are adherents of Islam whilst simultaneously immersed in their heritage. Many have taken heed of Kimberlé Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality to make peace with the multiple, intertwined schemas of their identity, which in turn shape their lived experiences and political expressions (Crenshaw 2017). For them, being Muslim might inform their struggle for social justice, immensely, but they would find Zia’s remarks rather reductionist. Instead of seeing it as means to encourage ‘Muslim exceptionalism’ as Zia accuses, one can see the implosion of allyship amongst Pakistani diasporan British and American Muslims extending to other minoritized and marginalized communities. Solidarity along class lines and with LGBTQIA+ groups is only growing, because instead of focusing on singular causes and identity politics to make sense of this activism, one must look at the intertwined nature of these social justice causes that are all rooted in inclusivity, plurality, and equality for all.

4. Beyond Binaries

4.1. Religion vs. Secular

Reflecting on their works and rebuttals, both Mahmood and Zia take the entrenched binary of religious versus secular as a given. Although, Mahmood takes a non-normative stance, making her argument easily susceptible to extrapolation by more orthodox adherents, while Zia is rather overt in her affirmation for the secular to take precedent. Such a rigid binary negates the lived experiences of those women who occupy Muslim spaces whilst simultaneously being self-professed progressives and practicing adherents of Islam. Their identity and narratives cannot be neatly positioned into either religious or secular and thus their existence is entirely disregarded by those contorting and applying Mahmood’s politics of piety thesis, and they are dismissed as falling into the trap of apologeticism by Zia. However, much like how Mahmood’s analysis focuses exclusively on women with a singular narrative (piety), Zia’s uncompromising and unquestionable portrayal of secularism as a benevolent and beneficial force can prove rather narrow. This is indeed an issue that Mahmood showcases in her writings, backed by the work of Talal Asad:

‘the secular’ should not be thought of as the space in which real human life gradually emancipates itself from the controlling power of ‘religion’ and thus achieves the latter’s relocation. It is this assumption that allows us to think of religion as ‘infecting’ the secular domain or as replicating within it the structure of theological concepts . . . Secularism doesn’t simply insist that religious practice and belief be confined to a space where they cannot threaten political stability or the liberties of ‘free-thinking’ citizens. Secularism builds on a particular conception of the world’. (Asad 2003, p. 191)

While still cautious of the secular, and its particular connotations and resulting effects, Asad’s contribution to this discussion can prove beneficial as it prompts us to acknowledge that secularism is not some non-normative, neutral and positive entity. Secularism comes with its own set of assumptions and agenda. To be clear, this is not to suggest that we must do away with secularism; it is necessary that we be cautious, scrutinize and speculate without becoming overly suspicious, which could lead to conspiratorial claims taking form. As Asad points out, secularism is not some desired and inevitable end result or a replacement for religion, usurping the roles traditionally played by religions. Although Mahmood takes Asad’s work as a starting point, given that she uses it to shine light on the agency of religiously orthodox Muslim women, who happen to be opposed to secularism, she still works within a framework that relies on and indeed reinforces an at times unsaid and unquestioned binary between the religious realm and the secular position. Granted, it was not the purpose of Mahmood’s endeavor to discuss the spectrum of spaces ranging from secular to religious with all in between, including the multitude of overlapping
provinces. However, to date, scholarly explorations of these spaces has tended to ignore the overlapping spheres and continued to replicate the binary between what is regarded as religious and what is seemingly secular. In reality, however, the two are not definitively demarcated as Asad says, albeit in the temporal sense, it is not as if religious ends and the secular begins, but similarly with regards to the spatial, situational context, one can occupy the grey area in which one does not have to give up piety in favor of progressivism and vice versa. What is necessary and evidentially missing from the copious literature on Muslim women in ‘moral’ spaces is the experiences of those women who transcend the imposed yet porous parameters between religious and secular domains.

In order to engage with those voices often deemed at the peripheries, and incorporate a multidimensional vision to our approach, we need to radically shift our framework so that it is not pitting Islamic ethos opposed to secular perspectives, but rather investigating the avenues wherein we accept that one can occupy both spaces and we assess how they go about this. Such an outlook perhaps falls in line with the Habermasian approach. Although Habermas attempted to open liberal politick to acknowledge the role of religion, and the purpose was to incorporate whatever goodness is to be found in the ‘moral intuition of religion’ into the ‘post-secular world’, so that in the process religious thought and conscious undergoes a process of ‘modernization’ (Habermas 2003, 2006). Areshidze (2017) argues that applying a Habermasian model to our contemporary society is reliant on certain assumptions embedded within liberal theory that refuse to reflect and consider the more challenging propositions of religious beliefs if they do not bolster our own hypotheses when premised on secular convictions.

Furthermore, Sindre Bangstad puts forward a rather appealing and constructive critique of Talal Asad’s seminal writings on secularism as being too abstract, and the binary of ‘Western’ versus ‘non-Western’ is ill-fitting for analysis of multi-hyphenated Muslims residing in these liberal democracies (Bangstad 2009). Bangstad suggests a more nuanced and considered conceptualization of the secular and its functions. Deeply embedded in post-colonial thought is this narrative of the struggle against ‘Western’ powers and associated with them is secularity. Thus, as Bangstad suggests:

‘secularism in Asad’s reading seems to form part of an historical script pertaining to the West, and to the extent that it has been appropriated by the ‘non-West’ it is seen as forming part of ‘Western’ dominance through ‘Westernized’ elites and as constituting a script written by ‘Westerners’’. (Bangstad 2009, p. 194)

One can consider the history and origins of terms but this does not always inform us about the epistemology, ontology, meaning, and purpose of the term for different groups of people. For instance, not every ‘non-Western’ application of elements of secularism is an appropriation of the ‘West’, nor does it make those implementing secularity as somehow ‘elite’ or ‘outsider’ forces. Such a reading disregards the autonomy of individuals and groups that fall outside neat and accepted categorization. Moreover, as Bangstad and others before him have asserted, such an approach does not ‘account for change or rupture’ of ‘Islamic discursive tradition’ (Bangstad 2009, p. 197; cf. Schielke 2006, p. 243). Some scholars, as Bangstad suggests have taken an anthropological approach to studying Muslim societies such as Marsden (whom Bangstad cites), who is interested in the ways in which ordinary Muslims in the Chitral region of northern Pakistan navigate issues that fall outside the remit of theology and in the domain of ‘practical reason’ (Marsden 2005, p. 53). He examines how ordinary individuals make space for contentious issues that require an element of reasoning in the application of religious precepts, highlighting that, in reality, there is no clear-cut divide between the religious and the secular, and that there is bound to be some overlap. While scholars like Marsden and Schielke are interested in the implications of certain transgressions of orthodox Islam, this article is concerned with understanding the complexities of intersectional identities and an integrated, holistic approach to social issues. Taking such an approach enables us to realize how a rigidly enforced binary between religious and secular has led to a very narrow understanding of the complex everyday activities of religious Muslims. As Hem Borker in her 2018 study of young
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women madrassa (Islamic seminary) students in Delhi shows, most scholarship on Muslim women functioning within the remit of religious spaces—and more specifically, gaining a religious education—paints them as either victims of the perpetuation of restrictive cultural practices that limit their development and agency, or they are seen as creating new paths towards empowerment that redefine autonomy and its supposed inherent significance. By imposing this binary, Borker argues that scholarship overlooks the tedious and dynamic negotiations (both internal and external) that these women engage with (Borker 2018, p. 192). This is often done in retaliation to Orientalist narratives that impose an immutable characterization upon all things deemed ‘religious’. In attempts to somehow reclaim the unlimited possibilities of self-development and enrichment through submission to the Divine, such scholarship can often fall into the trap of portraying the activities of religiously motivated folk as purely positive, neglecting the numerous compromises and complex rationale involved in their everyday negotiations.

Furthermore, the imposed binary of ‘Western’ ergo secular and ‘non-Western’ and therefore religious is incredibly restrictive in our contemporary hyper-globalized world. Especially, when we dissect the dealings and interactions of diaspora folk of Pakistani Muslim heritage, for instance, as is the purpose of this paper, we find that such a binary is not only awkward, but it is not an accurate framework through which to assess their lifestyles and lived experiences. Not every British Pakistani Muslim is going to self-identify as ‘non-Western’; born and brought up in the UK, their lived reality is far more familiar with the concept of liberal democratic governance than the rulings of an Islamic Republic. To be clear, one might offer radical critiques of the political system in which they find themselves, so they might distrust neo-liberal capitalism, but that does not automatically make them ‘non-Western’ and ‘anti-secular’, or ‘pro-religious’ establishments. One can be a practicing Muslim member of the British Pakistani diaspora who happens to be a Marxist, anti-capitalist. Their status as a ‘third culture’ individual means they transcend the territorially defined binaries, as well as secular versus religious dichotomy. Such individuals with highly hybrid and intersectional identities, and with self-awareness, cognizant of the various schemas of their identity expressions disrupt these binaries, turn them on their heads and force us to offer alternative paradigms of analysis in order to better understand the very spaces we wish to interrogate.

4.2. Public vs. Private

Another way in which those Muslims who are more overt in their performativity of piety usurp power in Muslim spaces is by dictating when and how they wish to reinforce the public–private divide; by controlling who gets to speak in Muslim space, and what issues they are permitted to speak on, the pietists, traditionalists harness their rein over the Muslim space, which is a public province, as it is not an individual or privately held, or fixed space. Herein lies a peculiar paradox. On the one hand, the pietists declare that all spaces in the public sphere should be free for Muslims to occupy, participate within, and claim as their own. As such there is no divide between the public and private realm, in that expressions of religiosity cannot and should not be confined to one’s home or personal provinces. They argue that Islam is a lived religion and participating in can require communal worship and adherence in everyday life, which falls within public and civic spaces. However, many who pursue this line of thinking also make it their moral duty to police what is being said in public spaces by other self-identifying Muslims. Expressions of Muslimness are heavily guarded and issues that affect them as Muslims are not addressed, but instead sidestepped, and discussions on taboo topics—such as forced marriages, child abuse, and violence against women—are deemed too challenging and harmful for the community’s image in wider society. Those who are simultaneously
observant, pious albeit not as overt, and equally progressive and practically-minded have their legitimate concerns dismissed; they are told that such issues are not as pertinent, or they are accused of being inflammatory by exclusivizing Muslims and thus providing fuel for Islamophobes. In this way, they are silenced and told that their concerns should be addressed in a private capacity, lest doing so in public spaces—even if predominantly occupied by other Muslims—exacerbate negative stereotypes about Muslims and Islam. As such, very legitimate concerns about safeguarding and protection of vulnerable adherents are dismissed and discarded as anti-Muslim propaganda. Nadia, a thirty-something year-old British Pakistani Muslim activist whom I interviewed aired her frustrations at being ‘silenced’ on matters deemed ‘internal affairs’:

'I am repeatedly told not to “air” our collective “dirty laundry” in public out of fear that some far-right extremist will use it against us...it’s funny how no one cares to do anything about actual abusers. Surely, they do more damage to the collective British Muslim image than someone calling it out’?

In every case, the decision to demarcate and instate a boundary between the private and public realms is for the traditionalist, overt pietists to determine. While the divide is upheld with regards to discussions on social taboos and what can be said in public and civic spaces, including Muslim spaces, the private–public demarcation is overlooked when two sound-minded, consenting adults choose to participate in activities that are in their private space, away from the sight or scope of their community and wider society. According to traditionalist pietists, they are morally obligated to interfere within the dealings of these two individuals in case they embark on something that might jeopardize the Muslim community at large, completely neglecting the religious principle to uphold the privacy of all individuals. This particular issue—the disregard of autonomy, privacy, and consent in Muslim spaces—is something that many scholars of Islamic feminism have highlighted, such as Mir-Hosseini and Hamzić (2010) and Kecia Ali (2006) who explore it at length in their works pertaining to sexual ethics and the meaning and implementation of zina laws in Muslim spaces. Choice and consent are often overridden in Muslim spaces because the structural power propping up such spaces is vested in the command of traditionalist pietists who uphold a system of patriarchy premised on their interpretation of faith-based precepts and practices.

Sara, a twenty-something artist whom I interviewed has grown increasingly despondent with the imposition of an ‘us vs. them’ narrative which she claims is ‘peddled’ by community gatekeepers:

‘... as Muslim women of color we’re always being censured and censored, controlled, even, in what are supposed to be ‘safe spaces’ inside our own communities. We’re told to raise matters of concern inside these spaces, but when the time comes to address the issues, we are met with silence ... We’re not naïve. We know the uncles and elders, and their sons after them will be in control. They will never take our concerns seriously ... domestic violence, child abuse, misogyny. They’re all open secrets. No one seems to care. Everyone is too busy deflecting responsibility. So, nothing gets done. Everyone feigns shock at first ... then it all fizzles out and we’re back to business as usual’.

While the Muslim space is not fixed, it is wherever and whenever Muslims are found to occupy; similarly, the discourses around Muslim morality and ethics are not confined to a specific realm of private or public or ‘Muslim’. Thus, the discussion becomes not one regarding the nature of the space, but rather of question of who—which kind of Muslim—gets to speak with authority and legitimacy on such affairs? Most interestingly, this becomes an issue of who is loudest with their performance of piety. Quite wrongly, then, Islamic traditionalist piety is associated with one’s proximity to Arab identity, given that the Arab region is the birthplace of the prophetic tradition and teachings (Sunnah). This is especially apparent when looking at how Muslim spaces are carved and curated in the British Muslim diaspora. Pakistani Muslims might make up over fifty percent of the British Muslim population; however, this does not mean that the dominant public
expressions of the faith have a Pakistani lilt. In fact, in order to prove that their piety is authentic, British Pakistani Muslims often expound their traditionalist, ‘Arabized’ lived experience. For many, their ethnic culture is stigmatized as being corrupt and maligned as the root cause for the dilution of their religious doctrines. Thus, some traditionalist pietists resort to distancing themselves from their ancestral cultures in a move to be taken seriously, as genuine Muslims. To be clear, this is not true of all those who occupy Muslim spaces, but many traditionalist pietists for whom orthodox religiosity trumps all schemas of their identity. What tends to happen is scholarship on Muslim voices focuses on these voices and their visions, and sidesteps the valued contribution and rightful existence of those Muslims deemed to be at the peripheries of these spaces, despite their plurality of outlooks, identities that are perhaps just as pious—just not as performative—but equally as progressive and accepting of others in the space.

4.3. Feminism vs. Femizisation

Another dichotomous relationship exploited by traditionalist pietists is an orchestrated binary between feminism and feminization. The latter is upheld as a religiously ordained principle for pietist Muslim women, one that entails enhancing aspects of their feminine characteristics deemed divinely bestowed. Being effeminate is prized amongst the pietists, and they encourage each other to play up certain traits deemed feminine, and in so doing they believe they are closer to God in their worship. Meanwhile, feminism, according to many pietists, is an abomination, an act of heresy and liberal conspiracy transposed from the ‘Western’ world to destroy Muslim spaces. Although ‘feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression’, rooted in the belief that all people, regardless of gender, sex, class, creed or religion, deserve equal treatment (Hooks 2014, p. 18), it is misconstrued as a liberal, secular concept that calls for the downfall of religious values. Pietists who glorify feminization do not believe that Muslim women require any external empowerment, and their aim is to rid their society of feminism. Organizations like Al-Huda subscribe to such a narrative, positioning themselves as anti-feminism and instead, pushing forward a campaign of religiously prescribed feminization. In so doing, they preach that men and women are inherently different, serve distinct purposes and roles in life, and thus, calling for equality amongst the sexes goes against God’s divine plan. This is a narrative that is gaining particular traction in and amongst the British Pakistani Muslim diaspora which finds itself confronted by calls to reform their internal spaces so that they are more open, equal, safe, and empowering for women. Gazing inwardly requires a greater level of humility, and one’s choice to do so is negatively compounded by stigmatization that they face in wider society, one in which there is evidence of securitization of their faith-based identity. As a result, they are inevitably far more cautious, distrusting and easily susceptible to the calls of pietists who already hold much sway in their spaces. As such, ‘self-affirmation and social collectivity’ or collective group consciousness might detract from calls for feminist equality within Muslim spaces (Shaheed 1999, p. 153). However, the pietist doctrine formulates a counter-narrative to feminism in the form of feminization, in its attempts to reclaim the meaning of being a ‘good Muslim woman’ by utilizing religiosity to their advantage. In the case of Pakistani Muslim women based in Pakistan, Afiya Zia suggests such anti-feminist struggles on part of the pietist movement is ‘a prescient testament to the failure of the progressive women’s movement to tap into the huge reservoir of potential faith-based resistance and that as a result, this potential was usurped by another (conservative) force instead’ (Zia 2018, p. 101). This is something that is becoming rather apparent within the British Pakistani Muslim diaspora of late, where traditionalist pietist women will be at logger heads with Muslim women who are the helm of women’s rights campaigns, spearheading change from within these very spaces. Bisma, a forty-something year-old homemaker whom I interviewed recalls how, on one occasion, during a dars session in the mid 2000s, she was bullied by other women in attendance. She says their ‘holier than thou’ was malicious but shrouded by the cloak of faith, and well-meaning naseeha (favor or advice):
... it was towards the end of the dars when the lady leading the congregation asked us all to raise our hands in communal prayer and said—in Urdu—something along the lines of 'let us pray that Allah grants Bisma the ability to realize the importance of haya [modesty] and guides her to wearing proper hijab [headcover]. I felt so violated... At first, I became speechless. There was no reason for this woman whom I had only met that day, hardly interacting with her at all, to single me out amongst a group of thirty-five other women... It’s nothing short of bullying. No one stood up for me, and when I said her remarks were unfair, I was told by other congregants that I was ungrateful for not accepting her sincere duas [prayers].

By playing upon this imposed binary of feminism versus feminization, pietists have yet again managed to create a wedge within the Muslim space, by sitting firmly on their moral high horses and deeming Muslim women who disagree with their approach—those who are plural and progressive and at the same time religiously driven and practicing—as ‘bad’ Muslims, and usurping their position in the Muslim space. Many are chastised, castigated from these spaces, others are maligned as being ‘native informants’ for working alongside governmental bodies, or ‘pro-Prevent’ and counter-violent extremism, the biggest mantle to discredit a British Muslim within the Muslim space. This binary of feminist versus feminization serves a deeply insidious and dangerous narrative, one that silences progressive voices within the space, and denounces them as non-Muslims.

5. Broader Impacts

5.1. Patriarchal Dominance

Accepting such binaries as unquestionable and taken for granted can have severely detrimental implications, as they encourage the replication and reinforcement of certain toxic norms and problematic structures of power. For instance, Al-Huda functions on dividing Muslim women into either pious by their standards—which means covered in a specific way, adhering to a particular school of thought and self-conscious of their femininity as a driving force of their relationships and interactions—or not. Farhat Hashmi has consistently lectured on the proper etiquette of Muslim women and their relationship with their husbands; as mentioned earlier, she has issued rulings that it is a cardinal sin for a woman to ‘refuse’ her husband intimacy, and that there is no such thing as marital rape within a Muslim marriage, a woman must always submit to her husband’s demands, catering to his needs above her own (Ahmad 2009, p. 89; Zia 2018, p. 103). Hashmi does this under the guise of using both religion and, supposedly, reason. However, her purpose is that a monolithic form of Islam is propagated as truth (Ahmad 2009, p. 75; Zia 2018, p. 103). Al-Huda pushes a very specific brand and rigid interpretation of Islam that preserves patriarchal structures wherein women are to give way for their male guardians to rule over the household, and they should obey and be gracious (Ahmad 2009; Zia 2018).

Working within the patriarchal system without subverting it serves only to reinforce violent structures that keep women subdued and submissive. As argued by critical theorist and Black American feminist scholar, bell hooks, such an approach does not bring about any positive transformations; instead it proports and further embeds double standards rife within society, reinforcing their underlying assumption that women are expected to suffer and bear it. What is perhaps most bothersome is how women in diasporic Pakistani Muslim spaces use the same line of rhetoric, parroting Al-Huda’s internalized misogyny disguised as pious commandments in order to stifle any debate of constructive feedback. In so doing, the women of Al-Huda and others who propagate the same toxic patriarchy are nothing short of pawns or foot soldiers for a wider (global), violently patriarchal system.

5.2. Spiritual Abuse

Another aftereffect of imposing such divisive binaries like religious or sacred versus secular creates a breeding ground for spiritual abuse. Spiritual abuse, or violence, is the misuse of religious edicts and precepts by those in positions of power to control, coerce, and manipulate vulnerable believers into thinking and behaving in ways that are harmful to
them. It is a highly overlooked yet deeply insidious problem in Muslim spaces. Very little is known about it, and some, quite wrongly, equate it with possession by spirits, or sorcery. Instating a divide between what is deemed sacred, and who has authority to speak on such matters, and all else is declared outside the faith space, thus secular, serves to normalize violent rhetoric that castigates those ‘forbidden’ to speak on matters of morality in Muslim spaces. It forces the removal of practicing, progressive women, those who are unabashedly feminist and self-identify as adherents of Islam from Muslim provinces, relegating them to the peripheries, regardless of their qualifications, how learned and experienced they might be. Farheen, a thirty-something academic whom I interviewed, talked about being side-lined in Muslim spaces, despite the ample expertise she holds:

‘As a woman I am refused space. Meanwhile Muslim men will host all male panels on the topic of women’s place in Islam, but God forbid they had a woman on the panel. We are deemed unworthy; it doesn’t matter how many degrees I hold, I am still treated subpar. Actual male scholars engage in abuse, but no one seems to care . . . all is forgiven if you are a man, but as a woman I go in guilty, simply for existing’.

The case of Al-Huda illustrates this very problem in that Hashmi and her preachers—many based in the Pakistani diaspora—are outspoken about women who dare to question violence against women in Muslim households. Women who stand firm against domestic abuse and campaign for change are slandered by Al-Huda and its affiliates as ‘bad’ women, of loose character and desires to topple the traditional, nuclear family. In so doing, Hashmi and her ilk, under the auspices of a supposedly acclaimed educational institute not only engage in cliquish behavior, forcing women to become like them in order to be categorized as pious and practicing, otherwise be damned as ‘fahasha’ (vulgar, devious) women should they rally for an end to violence against women and girls. As such, not only is this organization at the forefront of usurping Muslim spaces, isolating and ostracizing vulnerable practicing-progressive women, Al-Huda is also complicit in spiritual abuse against anyone they deem to fall outside of the fold of Islam, and thus unworthy to occupy positions within Muslim provinces, for alleged lack of performative piety.

Kiran, a twenty-something student whom I interviewed states that the biggest problem in Muslim communities, which creates fertile ground for spiritual abuse, is that the word of fake shaykhs, YouTube da’i (people who are involved in dawah, proselytization) posing as learned scholars is ‘treated like hadith (teachings of the Prophet (pbuh))’:

‘As long as we keep platforming and pedestalling these ‘dawah brothers’ we’ll continue descending into chaos. Their ethos is closer to far-right incels [involuntary celibates] than it is to ordinary, practicing Muslims . . . Stop encouraging and enabling them. Their anti-feminist narratives are treated like the norm, while in Islam, such inequality is not acceptable’.

5.3. One Ummah, One Islam?

By reinforcing rigid patriarchal rule and normalizing spiritual abuse, the Muslim space is cemented as a highly exclusivist place, wherein a linear, singular, orthodox interpretation of the faith dominates the discourse. The space and analyses of it overlook the plurality and multivocality of experiences and views of Muslimness, thereby excluding the lived realities and challenges faced by those who cannot be confined to either secular versus sacred, or feminine versus feminist struggles. The global Muslim Ummah contains over one billion people, and not every one of them is going to subscribe to a particular orthodox interpretation to guide their implementation of religious edicts. This is a commonsensical reality that cannot be dismissed. Reducing Islam to this singular approach, one that removes others from the very fold of the faith, is not only dangerous but also not fruitful to scholarly analysis. Denying their existence is not only abusive but academic negligence.

What scholarship needs to do is look for the plurality of visions and voices, the multiple and overlapping, conflicting expressions of Muslim identity, and focus on the intersections for a more nuanced understanding of the Muslim space and the sorts of conversations permitted within it, and those that are removed, denied agency and autonomy.
This way, the role of scholarship is not purely one dimensional and non-normative (it can never be truly non-normative, even to the best of our attempts) but far-reaching and that of advocacy. In so doing, our literature is far more enriching but also does not shy away from supposed taboos that we as scholars often skirt around lest it offend the powerful. What is worth remembering is that scholarship is not creating new spaces or categories or identities but merely showcasing what is apparent to gain a broader, more nuanced understanding of our world. Shying away from this or claiming to be purposefully narrow for the sake of focus can be rather despairing and self-defeating.

6. From Center Stage to Marginal Spaces

6.1. Progressive, Pious, and Powerful at the Peripheries

The above discussion begs the question: where are those voices and visions that are often denied the agency to occupy Muslim spaces? In order to retain the embedded power structures in society—be they classist or patriarchal—those who break away, reject, and debunk the neatly categorized binaries, are kept at the peripheries of the Muslim space, at the behest of gatekeepers, custodians of these provinces of piety, to determine how much engagement they are to be afforded. Thus, being a progressive and practicing Muslim, particularly one in the British Pakistani diaspora is no easy task. They engage knowing full well that they are a minority within a minority, and that it will take generations to unlearn the toxic trappings of hierarchical power deeply rooted in their society. They know they will never make it from the margins to the center of knowledge exchange, dialogue, and impact. However, there lies the turning point; they no longer seek to be at the center. Their goal is not to become one with those at the center because that would require an element of homogeneity. They believe in stretching the margins as widely and broadly as possible so that the notion of a centripetal force is no longer taken as given, and thus civil society begins to question the very interpretation of power itself.

Instead of feeling defeated and deflated, resigning themselves to a seemingly second-class status and rather subdued existence, they rise above set-backs by working outside of the confines of the rigidly demarcated structures of power. For many of these individuals and collectives at the peripheries of British Muslim spaces, being marginalized and minoritized does not mean being powerless. Moreover, by fashioning themselves in the manner akin to American Black rights activists and scholars, they have found solace and a mantra to move beyond the stigma and subjugation from those occupying the center stage of Muslim circles. ‘The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’, as Audre Lorde (1984) neatly put it, is a good reminder of how working within the system and calling for reforms can often lead to frustrations and the perpetuation of the very injustices one claims to tackle, because those at the center are unmoved, unwilling to negotiate. However, activist Muslim feminists have taken to shifting their own understanding and interpretation of what it means to be at the ‘margins’, and thus believing in the might of those not at the center. This is what bell hooks would call transformative power of language. The self-actualization in this act of transformation is not only liberating and uplifting for the individuals concerned, but also a means to dismantle the embedded structures of power by pointing towards other spaces that can and do exhibit their own selfhood and power. It is not simply about denying the legitimacy vested at the center but rather about acknowledging the plurality of visions and voices which demand and deserve the attention and affirmation of scholars and activists alike.

Alongside reinterpreting key concepts, they aim to reevaluate their values and principles, questioning the very premise of their own deeply held convictions. They self-reflect, often with incredible scrutiny, lest they become ‘co-opted’ by figures at the center, and unwittingly begin to replicate the same oppressions of those at the center. This occurs as, bell hooks warned in her book, Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center:

‘... because feminist activists naïvely assumed women were opposed to the status quo, had a different value system from men, and would exercise power in the interests of feminist movement. This assumption led them to pay no significant attention to creating
alternative value systems that would include new concepts of power. Even though some feminist activists rejected the idea that women should obtain power on the terms set by the dominant ideology of the culture, they tended to see all power as evil. This reactionary response offered women no new ways to think about power and reinforced the idea that domination and control are the ultimate expressions of power'. Hooks (2014, p. 89)

Learning from bell hooks, many British Muslim women of Pakistani heritage at the margins of moral spaces reflect heavily and take their role as changemakers with great responsibility and care. They must be savvy in their engagements and activism. They are not reactionary simply for the sake of being; in ‘rejecting’ power on the terms of those at center, these women endeavor to reconceptualize what it means to be powerful, through cultivating, as bell hooks suggests, ‘new organizational strategies’ that are pluralistic, inclusive in nature, and pride ‘internal democracy’ (Hooks 2014, pp. 89–90). In so doing, these women carve out their own identities that are not restricted by the reductive binaries of what they exhibit and what is expected of them (Golnaraghi and Dye 2016). They bolster whatever ground they occupy in Muslim spaces, as Golnaraghi and Daghar (2017) state, in order to ‘recover, resurface, and reauthorize the hybrid voices, experiences, and identities . . . on their own terms in order to challenge hegemonic discourse’. Not only are they countering the stereotypes affixed to them by external forces, riddled with orientalist tropes of meek, gentle and subdued Muslim women (Said 1978), they are also defiantly denouncing orthodox traditionalism (Zine 2006), which wields skewed interpretations of religious texts in order to subjugate them. By choosing to situate their resistance within the parameters of Muslim spaces, wherein discourse on ethics, morality and piety are commonplace, these women not only assert their autonomy on their own terms, but also affirm their very existence and experience as practicing yet pious activists, breaking multiple binaries.

6.2. Practice, Preach, and Persevere

There are numerous ways in which these women exist. According to Golnaraghi and Daghar (2017), they are heavily reliant on social media, harnessing the power vested in virtual Muslim spaces online. Many of the younger millennial and Generation Z British and American Muslim women of the Pakistani diaspora are exposed to a variety of expressions of Islam, thanks to the global connectivity of virtual Muslim spaces. They are afforded options and many are making more informed decisions about whom to take as a religious guide. As such, they are no longer joining groups like Al-Huda International due to lack of a better suited alternative, and thus, the number of young women in these pockets of the diaspora choosing to study with Al-Huda is decreasing. Those amongst them who are inclined towards orthodox thinking will perhaps align with non-Pakistani religious scholars; as is the nature of globalized Muslim Ummah (kinship), one does not necessarily affiliate with a scholar based on their shared ethnic heritage. It must also be said that although Al-Huda has lectures and resources in the English language, Dr. Hashmi’s dars (lectures) in Urdu are by far her most popular, thus limiting the number of second- and third-generation British Pakistani women who would subscribe to her content.

While the expansion of social media technology has certainly increased autonomy in one regard, paradoxically, it has also led to the increase in number of subsects, communities and communal ways of being that often require bayyah (giving allegiance) to a shaykh (religious scholar). Although some religious scholars have and continue to abuse their position of authority, and there has been a rise in ‘fake shaykhs’ duping people into following them, the social media Muslim space has also served as a formative turf for collectives of campaigners calling for justice, accountability, and transparency within Muslim spaces. They refuse to follow blindly or make excuses for abuses; this is fertile ground for emancipatory change. Fatima, now in her late twenties, is another interviewee whom I spoke with. A child survivor of spiritual sexual abuse and now a campaigner, Fatima believes that real change can only be affected if one works, as she says, ‘outside the box’. By ‘box’ she means the focal center of Muslim spaces. She states:
As a survivor, I’m already written off as inappropriate, not the “right kind” of Muslim, even though that’s not for others to decide on my behalf. I don’t engage in those circles because they are cliquish and no one wants to own up, do anything to help survivors, so naturally we will gravitate towards likeminded folk.

Jasmine Zine, in her study of diasporan Muslim women in Canada who have broken away from both racialized Islamophobia and religious extremism, suggests that the scholarship can better understand their agency and lived experience by employing a ‘critical faith-centered framework’ (Zine 2004, p. 169). For Zine, such a framework would recognize ‘faith-centered voices’ as ‘valid sites of knowledge and contestation’, and it is done whilst ‘maintaining a critical eye toward the ways that religion is co-opted to serve in the perpetuation of oppressive regimes and practices’ (Zine 2004, p. 181). This is precisely the approach to take in order to make sense of practicing yet pious Muslim women in and amongst the global Pakistani diaspora. In so doing, one does not neglect any facet of their identity in shaping their activism. Maintaining a middle ground or balance (meezan), and remaining modest and moral is imperative to practicing, progressive Pakistani Muslims, especially those who reside in liberal democracies and cherish the ethos of freedoms and liberties being upheld as universal rights to be protected. It is important that our scholarship considers the nuances of their lived realities.

Scholarship that excludes their invaluable experiences is not only one-sided and biased, but it also replicates the power imbalances in Muslim spaces. As Mir showcases in her 2009 study, ‘some Muslims ‘ice out’ less religious Muslims, thereby pushing them out of Muslim spaces, discourse, and representations . . . Muslims coconstruct, with the dominant majority, an idealized image for popular consumption’ (Mir 2009, p. 250). This not only stigmatizes minorities or those at the margins of Muslim spaces, but also causes them to ‘shrink to fit the identity options afforded them’ (Mir 2009, p. 252). Giving them due recognition in our scholarship is one way to undo their relegation and by seeing their experiences documented without being exceptionalized as some sort of anomaly should serve as a means to increase their self-esteem and encourage them to be resilient and feel affirmed.

In order to avoid such narrow and exclusivist approaches, Liebelt and Werbner argue that we focus on the ‘everyday’ lived realities of Muslim women navigating these spaces. They implore scholars to acknowledge the ‘gendered’ nature of this way of being wherein ‘women claim leadership roles, not in spite of their everyday modes of living, but through their mastery of the minutiae of everyday life as part of a deeper ethical project of self-transformation’ (Liebelt and Werbner 2018, pp. 7–8). Clarke (2018) builds on this idea of focusing on the everyday lived realities of British Pakistani Muslim women by exploring the variety of factors involved in their decision-making processes regarding veiling practices. They argue that we must approach the subject beyond ‘moral discourses’ and give due attention to ‘the wider raced and classed structures in which such choices are embedded’ (Clarke 2018, p. 10).

7. Conclusions: The Future of Muslim Spaces

While human rights organizations led by Muslim women, such as Women Living Under Muslim Laws (MLUML) (established in 1984) and Musawah (established in 2009), already exist and attempt to reclaim Islam from both the orthodoxy and external, negative stereotypes, by applying a feminist interpretation to fiqh (Islamic jurisprudence), local and global-level collectives of Muslim women have mushroomed more recently, over the last five years. These groups seek to form coalitions of Muslim women and allies who identify as both progressive and practicing, and aim to make Muslim spaces safe and inclusive for all those who self-identify as Muslim. These collectives have, for the most part, formed online in virtual spaces like Facebook groups and Clubhouse rooms, and some have even established in-person get togethers. An example of such a project is the Feminist Islamic Troublemakers of North America (FITNA), which was set up in 2016 and is spearheaded
by scientist, Zahra Khan, and academic, Dr Shehnaz Haqqani. The term fitna in Arabic translates to temptation, discord, or corruption, and it is often used as a term to slander Muslim feminists. This is a perfect example of reclamation of identity and ‘owning’ the term at its best. FITNA functions primarily through its Facebook page, where discussions on all matters related to Islamic theology, fiqh (jurisprudence), Muslim lived experience, and community issues happening within Muslim spaces are discussed, challenged and campaigned about. The group has over 6300 members across the globe, and the aim of the group is to foster healthy discussions in a respectful and safe environment that is plural, inclusive and accepting of all Muslims and non-Muslims.7

In the UK, the Inclusive Mosque Initiative (IMI) (established in 2012) is a grassroots organization set up by Muslim women of color that is ‘committed to centring and uplifting the voices and experiences of marginalised people within our communities, and creating inclusive, safer spaces’.8 Their inclusive project is rooted in Islamic ethics and principles, and is inspired by the teachings of the Prophet (pbuh). In so doing, the IMI is very much inside the Muslim space, although many Muslims at the center of the space attempt to shun it. IMI, like FITNA, is committed to fostering acceptance of Muslims at the margins of the space, particularly those whose identities are intersectional, which means that they face multiple forms of hate and abuse simultaneously from wider society and within the Muslim space. This includes trans Muslims, as well as working class, immigrant, and less-abled Muslims, by providing Friday khutbahs (sermons) in British Sign Language. Thus, cultivating inclusivity within Muslim spaces goes beyond accepting the apparent or visible differences, but also bringing down barriers to access and mobility. Another example of an initiative that works towards spreading awareness and teaching resources for less-abled Muslims is the Interkulturelles Institut für Inklusion e.V. (iiiev org), which works mainly over the virtual space of Instagram, providing toolkits and educational videos in German Sign Language (Deutsch Gebardensprache).9 This campaign is fronted by a group of Generation Z Muslim women and men, and it has a massive positive influence and global reach for German-speaking Muslims across the world.

Another impact of the hyper-globalization of Islam is that Muslim issues are no longer framed with one specific region in mind. For example, when addressing the violation of Muslim women’s rights, campaigns led by Muslim women are organized in a nuanced manner, which is inclusive of the experiences of Muslim women in both ‘the West’ who are facing state securitization, and in Muslim majority countries who are living under authoritarian, traditionalist rule. This endeavor of situating Muslim women’s rights in a globalized world at its heart reflects Audre Lorde’s words: ‘I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own’ (Lorde 1981, pp. 7–10). Thus, the policing and paroling of women’s bodies is deemed deplorable, regardless of how it is manifest; forcing them to remove hijab in France or forcing them to don it in Iran, both are considered problematic. The aim of practicing, progressive Muslim women is to stand with all women, and to not become selective and political in their approach to justice. Some write about this in blogs, others turn to art forms such as spoken-word in order to give life to and share their own personal experiences. They call for nuance and a strong need for compassion, mercy and empathy within the Muslim sisterhood, so that there is no reason for exclusionary viewpoints to have an upper hand. This is how we transform our understanding of authority and how we take it back.

Muslim women the world over are refusing to be used in a tug of war between traditionalist extremists and orientalist white saviors; while the external threat of white feminism needs to be rooted out, so too do Muslim spaces need to be cleansed of toxic misogyny and patriarchal notions that prohibit the progress of women’s rights and exacerbate spiritual abuses. In this way, they are transforming the Muslim moral space from a restrictive, authoritarian arena to a place for plurality and meezan (balance), without pedestalling, platforming and exclusivizing, or reinforcing the unhelpful binary of religious versus secular narratives. Here, accommodation is key. Acceptance, plurality and dialogue, and inclusivity are fundamental to this endeavor of reconceptualizing the Muslim space.
so that it is open and welcoming. The growing demand for this to occur from within it seems an almost inevitable process. This is particularly true in a post-COVID-19 world wherein our ‘new normal’ of virtual and globalized spaces suit a diasporic Islam that is simultaneously rooted in the multiple places its members call home.

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**Glossary**

- **Alimas**: Women religious scholars
- **Alims**: Male religious scholars
- **Bhais o’ mubahisa**: Debate
- **Bayyah**: Giving allegiance
- **Da’i**: Person who is involved in dawah, proselytization
- **Dars**: Lesson or lecture
- **Dars O’ Tadrees**: Lectures and learning
- **Dua**: Prayer
- **Fahasha**: Vulgar, devious
- **Fatwas**: Religious rulings
- **Fiqh Islamic**: Jurisprudence
- **Hadith**: Sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)
- **Haya**: Modesty
- **Hijab**: Headscarf
- **Jamaat-e Islami**: Islamic Political Party
- **Khutbah**: Sermon
- **Madrassa**: Islamic seminary
- **Meezan**: Balance
- **Naseeha**: Favor or advice
- **Quran**: Muslim Holy Book
- **Sahr**: Patience
- **Shariah**: Islamic religious law
- **Shaykh**: Muslim religious scholar
- **Sunnah**: Prophetic tradition and teachings
- **Taqwa**: Personal piety
- **Ulema**: Muslim religious scholars
- **Ummah**: Kinship

**Notes**

1. The term ‘moral provinces’ is attributed to French Philosopher and Christian theologian, Blaise Pascal through his writings in the *Lettres provincials* (Provincial letters) written between 1656 and 1657. This series of eighteen letters, which Pascal wrote using a pseudonym, served as a defense for Jansenists and, simultaneously, a critique of Jesuit casuistry. While Islamic history has ample examples of critiques and rebuttals regarding theological methods, transposing the moral province discourse deeply embedded within Christian theology would not work, nor is it within remit of this paper’s purpose.

2. This is based on comments from some of my interviewees, which I will elaborate on in due course.

3. All names of interviewees have been anonymized.

4. More on this story can be found here: [https://www.mangobaaz.com/farhat-hashmi-of-al-huda-tried-to-justify-a-wife-submitting-to-her-husband-and-it-has-triggered-a-lot-of-people](https://www.mangobaaz.com/farhat-hashmi-of-al-huda-tried-to-justify-a-wife-submitting-to-her-husband-and-it-has-triggered-a-lot-of-people) (accessed on 10 May 2021).

5. This is based on first-hand accounts from attending *dars’* led by Dr Hashmi’s followers as a preteen in post-9/11 Dublin, Ireland.
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