

Book Review

Tauseef Ahmad Parray, *Perspectives on Interpreting Islam in the Contemporary Indo-Pak Subcontinent: Issues and Trends*, Chennai, Berlin, Lausanne, and Oxford: Peter Lang, 2025, pp. 242. ISBN:978-1-80374-694-4. Pb.

Characterized by its rich and evolving engagement with both tradition and modernity through diverse scholarly approaches, the Indo-Pak Subcontinent has historically served as a vibrant centre of Islamic intellectual thought. In the 18th century, Shah Wali Allah pioneered a revivalist-synthetic methodology, uniting theology, jurisprudence, and Sufism into a cohesive intellectual framework. His legacy was carried forward by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Muhammad Iqbal, Fazlur Rahman and others. In contrast, Maulana Wahiduddin Khan, in the 21st century, reinterpreted Islamic teachings in conversation with secular modernity and promoting interfaith harmony by advanced a conciliatory-apologetic method. More recently, scholars like Muhammad Nejatullah Siddiqi and Muhammad Khalid Masud have adopted reformist-contextual strategies, addressing contemporary in Islamic economics and legal reform through critical engagement with classical sources and adaptive reasoning.

This rich intellectual tradition—shaped by thematic Qur’anic exegesis, Prophetic biography, *ijtihad* and dialogue with Western thought—continues to adapt to evolving socio-political context. The book under review stands as a significant contribution to highlight this legacy, offering an analysis of modern Subcontinental Islamic scholarship and its global relevance. Authored by a scholar deeply familiar with the region’s intellectual history, drawing inspiration from Asma Afsaruddin’s historical contextualization and Carool Kersten’s analyses of progressive Muslim thought while providing fresh insights into the ongoing interplay between divine revelation and contemporary challenges.

The primary objective of the book, as underscored in the introduction, is to examine “the recent trends and tenors that have taken place in the academic discourses on Islam and things Islamic with respect to the contributions of Muslim scholars of the Subcontinent” (5).

Situating these discussions within broader currents of Islamic intellectual history, the study highlights the distinctive, and often underexplored, role of South Asian scholarship in engaging with modern challenges. Structured thematically, the book examines key domains such as Qur'anic studies, the Prophetic biography (*Sīrah*), legal thought, and the complex interface between tradition and modernity. It further engages with pressing debates on democracy and gender, offering insights into how Muslim intellectuals grapple with questions of reform and renewal. Comprising six substantive chapters, an introduction (1–11), bibliography (203–231), and an index (233–240), the contents of this book can be broadly divided into three main thematic sections: (i) foundational explorations of the Qur'an and *Sīrah*; (ii) legal and jurisprudential deliberations on tradition, modernity, and *maqāsid al-sharī'ah*; and (iii) critical engagements with contested issues such as the relationship of Islam with democracy and gender justice. The first three chapters, focusing on the works of specific scholar, critically examine their contributions to the understanding of key themes. The subsequent three chapters shift attention to the perspectives of a few other scholars, critical reflections on their works, and engagement with relevant secondary scholarship.

Chapters 1 and 2 engage with contemporary trends in Qur'anic and *Sīrah* studies by evaluating the contributions of two prominent contemporary Indian Muslim scholars, Abdur Raheem Kidwai and Muhammad Yasin Mazhar Siddiqui, respectively. Seeking to foreground their scholarship within the broader context of 21st-century Islamic thought, these chapters particularly focus on the emerging genre of “thematic studies.” Chapter 1 offers a descriptive and analytical account of Kidwai's works, focusing on his engagement with key Qur'anic terms, critical assessments of English translations, and his effort to extract practical, daily guidance from the Qur'anic text. Parray underscores Kidwai's significant methodological shift from the traditional verse-by-verse exegesis (*tafsīr tartībī*) to a thematic (*mawḍū'ī*) and literary approach, a transition exemplified in works such as *The Qur'an: Essential Teachings* (17–22) and *Translating the Untranslatable* (24–32). These contributions are commended for their methodological clarity, accessible style, and sensitivity to gender-neutral language. Parray further highlights Kidwai's engagement with the vast corpus of English translations of the Qur'an as a noteworthy intervention in the field. Reflecting on Kidwai's overall contribution to Qur'anic studies, Parray summarizes his contribution as a significant enrichment of contemporary Qur'anic studies, describing him as “a Professor of English by profession” but “an expert of Qur'anic Studies by vocation, capability,

and competency” (45). The second chapter offers an in-depth exploration of the *Sīrah* scholarship of Professor Muhammad Yasin Mazhar Siddiqui (d. 2020), highlighting his significant contributions to 21st-century *Sīrah* studies. Parray notes that Siddiqui is widely acknowledged by scholars and academicians, regardless of ideological or religio-political orientations, as an “authority” on the *Sīrah* and is ranked “among today’s first rate scholars” in the field (53). Parray underscores how Siddiqui’s works stand out for their innovative themes, critical insights, and methodological rigor. They are not only distinctive in their subjects, ideas, and issues but also marked by analytical depth, objectivity, fairness, and a robust methodological framework. Through a close reading of Siddiqui’s studies, particularly his analysis of the Prophet’s socio-political, legal, and economic reforms, demonstrates how Siddiqui bridges traditional devotional reverence for Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) with critical historical inquiry. This thematic and analytical approach, as Parray observes, situates Siddiqui’s scholarship as “a continuation of the [intellectual] legacy set forth by luminaries” such as Dr M. Hamidullah in English and Shibli Numani in Urdu (66). Overall, Siddiqui’s contributions are presented as both distinctive and momentous, enriching not only contemporary *Sīrah* literature but also underlining the enduring relevance of the Prophet’s life and teachings for modern contexts. Parray concludes that these selected works make a significant contribution to the growing body of thematic studies on the *Sīrah* in the 21st century (65).

The second thematic section of the book effectively underscores the intellectual legacy of South Asian Muslim scholars, tracing a lineage from Shah Wali Allah and Sayyid Ahmad Khan in the 18th and 19th centuries to Iqbal and Rahman in the 20th century, and culminating in contemporary figures like Nejatullah Siddiqi and Khalid Masud in the 21st century. These scholars, as Parray notes, have made remarkable contributions across diverse domains—religious, legal, social, and political—demonstrating the vibrancy of reformist thought in the region (94). Deeply anchored in Islamic tradition, they have nonetheless strategically appropriated aspects of Western modernity, aligning them carefully with Islamic epistemological and ethical frameworks. Parray adopts a diachronic approach to map how these scholars grappled with the challenges of modernity while remaining faithful to their intellectual and spiritual heritage. For instance, Shah Wali Allah’s traditionalist revivalism is presented as laying the early foundations for reform, while Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s modernist project reflects a critical engagement with Western rationalism and scientific paradigms. Iqbal’s philosophical dynamism and Rahman’s methodological rigor, in turn, signal an evolving discourse that moves beyond defensive traditionalism toward constructive renewal. Contemporary scholars such as Siddiqi and Masud

further extend these paradigms, offering frameworks that address legal, economic, and ethical issues in light of *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah* (objectives of Islamic law). This scholarly mapping not only historicizes the production of Islamic knowledge but also underscores the contingent and context-specific nature of reformist discourses. Within this framework, the chapter focuses on pivotal concepts such as *Islah* (reform), *Ihya* (revival), *Tajdid* (renewal), *Maslaha* (public welfare), *Ijtihad* (independent reasoning), and *Ijma* (consensus) as mediating tools in the interaction between tradition and modernity (68–69). Notably, *Ijtihad* is portrayed not merely as a legal instrument but as a broader philosophical and methodological framework enabling Muslim thinkers to harmonize religious principles with contemporary realities (72, 79, 84, 86, 88). A key strength of the chapter lies in its rejection of the binary opposition between tradition and modernity. Instead, it persuasively argues that these categories are not mutually exclusive but can be integrated in constructive ways (67). This aligns with the broader view that Islam, when properly understood, supports change, dynamism, and progress (70–71). The fourth chapter explores a significant dimension of modern Islamic reformist thought—*Maqasid al-Shari'ah*—through the intellectual legacy of the Muhammad Nejatullah Siddiqi (d. 2022). The chapter positions him as a pivotal figure in articulating and advancing this discourse in the South Asian context, particularly in relation to pressing global challenges (95). Siddiqi's contribution to the *Maqasid* discourse marks a significant evolution from classical, often rigid formulations to a more dynamic, context-sensitive, and purpose-oriented legal framework by bringing a reformist perspective that aligns scriptural integrity with contemporary human challenges (105). The use of *Ijtihad* is a vital tool for interpreting *Maqasid* in response to complex modern realities and issues, including globalization, social justice, minority rights, and weapons of mass destruction (106, 109). Moreover, Parray situates Siddiqi within a broader intellectual movement that includes earlier revivalists like Rahman and Masud, and more recent scholars such as Muhammad Hashim Kamali and Jasser Auda, who have advanced the field through integrative theological, ethical, and epistemological methods.

The final thematic section of the book engages with two most contested and pressing issues in contemporary Islamic thought: democracy and gender. In the fifth chapter, Parray critically examines the complex and evolving relationship between Islamic political thought and democratic ideals, focusing on the intellectual contributions of South Asian scholars. The chapter provides a historical and ideological overview of how key thinkers from influential movements such as

Deoband, Jama'at-e-Islami, and Tanzeem-e-Islami have conceptualized and responded to the Islam-democracy nexus (127–128). Central to Parray's analysis is the argument that the discourse on Islam and democracy within the Subcontinent is neither monolithic nor static. Instead, it reflects a rich diversity of perspectives and exhibits significant shifts over time. By analysing the writings and ideas of prominent figures such as Mufti Muhammad Shafi (133–137), Mawlana Mawdudi (138–145), Dr. Israr Ahmad (152–159), and others, the chapter underscores how these scholars—while deeply rooted in Islamic tradition—engaged seriously with modern political concepts such as democracy, and public mandate. A key contribution of this chapter lies in its exploration of the transformation in scholarly attitudes over the decades. Parray highlights that while earlier positions, particularly those from Deoband and Jama'at-e-Islami, tended to regard Western-style democracy with skepticism, a notable shift occurred in the post-1980s period and became more pronounced in the post-9/11 context. This later phase witnessed an increasing willingness among South Asian Muslim thinkers to reassess democracy, not as an inherently Western or secular construct, but as a political framework potentially compatible with Islamic values, especially through principles such as *Shūrā* and accountability. Khurshid Ahmad's assertion that "Islam and democratization are two sides of [the] same coin" (124) exemplifies this perspective. The sixth and final chapter focuses on contemporary Muslim scholarship on gender in India, critically engaging with both traditionalist and progressive interpretations. Parray examines selected Urdu and English works by prominent Muslim scholars and academics, including Maulana Wahiduddin Khan (167–171; 181–186), Abdur Raheem Kidwai (186–190), and Zaira Ashraf Khan (190–196). These contributions collectively aim to "draw out the real position and place as well as features of the Muslim woman's character as outlined in the Qur'an and Sunnah" while arguing that many perceived "Islamic rulings" concerning women are, in fact, products of "social traditions" and "cultural taboos" (166, 201). The chapter begins by framing the discourse on gender within Islamic thought as a highly contested terrain, shaped by deeply entrenched misconceptions, socio-cultural taboos, and doctrinal rigidity. Parray contends that numerous restrictive notions regarding women's status, roles, and contributions—often viewed as doctrinally sanctioned—originate instead from inherited social practices and patriarchal exegesis rather than from the foundational Islamic texts. This critical stance underscores how contemporary Muslim scholars are increasingly uncovering egalitarian dimensions within Islam, offering reinterpretations that emphasize gender justice. Parray situates these reformist efforts within a broader intellectual movement across the

Muslim world, where gender justice is now recognized not only as a socio-political imperative but also as a theological priority. Such reinterpretations highlight the transformative potential of Qur'anic hermeneutics and Prophetic traditions in challenging entrenched patriarchal structures and affirming women's agency within both religious and socio-political spheres.

Perspectives on Interpreting Islam is a thoughtful and thematically rich contribution that successfully foregrounds South Asian Islamic scholarship within the broader academic discourse. The book reflects Parray's scholarly commitment to exploring how Muslim intellectuals from the Subcontinent have dealt with reconciling Islamic tradition and modern challenges. By employing methodological tools such as *ijtihād* and *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, and critically engaging with contemporary discourses on democracy and gender justice, Parray presents a compelling portrait of Islamic thought as dynamic, adaptive, and capable of internal renewal. Each chapter carefully dismantles reductive binaries—tradition versus modernity, Islam versus democracy, theology versus social reform—and illustrates the intellectual vibrancy of Subcontinental Muslim scholarship. Asma Afsaruddin underscores this in her foreword, noting how the book “sheds light on overlooked 21st-century South Asian Muslim scholars” whose efforts to reinterpret Islam for modern realities remain marginalized in Western academia. Parray “fills this lacuna admirably” by bringing these underrepresented voices into global academic discourse (ix-x).

Despite its valuable contributions, the book exhibits certain methodological limitations that constrain its analytical scope. A primary concern is Parray's selective focus on a narrow corpus of texts and thinkers, which, while significant, raises questions about representational balance within Subcontinental Islamic scholarship. By concentrating predominantly on a handful of prominent figures, the analysis overlooks other contemporary scholars in the region engaging with parallel intellectual concerns. Furthermore, the absence of comparative engagement with thinkers beyond South Asia limits the study's ability to contextualize these developments within broader Islamic thought. This insular approach ultimately restricts the book's capacity to fully trace how Subcontinental scholarship intersects with or diverges from wider intellectual trajectories in the Muslim world. The constrained scope thus leaves unexplored opportunities for cross-regional dialogue and comparative analysis that could have enriched the study's theoretical framework. Moreover, the work exhibits a high degree of self-referentiality: Parray cites 38 of his own earlier reviews across the thematic sections and relies heavily on prior analyses of Kidwai, with 31

citations to his corpus alone. This repeated invocation of earlier appraisals, along with a tendency to echo what others have already said about these works, gives the volume a somewhat derivative quality at times, attenuating its potential to offer fresh analytical insights.

Nevertheless, the book remains a valuable resource for scholars and students of Islamic studies, especially those interested in the intellectual currents that shape 21st century South Asian Muslim thought. By shedding light on underrepresented voices and drawing attention to themes that are both contested and crucial, Parray contributes meaningfully to ongoing discussions about the renewal of Islamic thought and its relevance in a rapidly changing world.

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