

## Book Review

Jalal, Ayesha. *Muslim Enlightened Thought in South Asia*. 330pp. Routledge 2024.

Dr Eve Tignol<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> CNRS (Centre national de la recherche scientifique), France

E-mail: eve.tignol@cnrs.fr

Published: August 2026

Ayesha Jalal's *Muslim Enlightened Thought in South Asia* is an ambitious work with a clear agenda: to reach a non-academic audience while upholding scholarly precision. Written in the long shadow of 9/11, the book seeks to foster dialogue both between Muslims and non-Muslims, and between liberal and conservative Muslims, by dismantling binary divides and reclaiming Islam as an "enlightened" religion to counter common biased conceptions that Islam inherently "prevents Muslims from embracing liberal values" (p. 5). Drawing on a wide range of sources, Jalal focuses her analysis on late nineteenth- and twentieth-century roshan khayals – i.e. "enlightened" intellectuals, artists, and public figures who are loosely defined as embodying an "attitude of mind consistent with curiosity, moderation, and openness to new ideas" (p. 23).

The first part (Chapters 1 to 4) sets the stage for her argument by examining the "epistemic rupture" of 1857 (p. 9), which reconfigured the meaning of religion from a matter of personal faith into a category of social identification and differentiation under British direct rule. Through the Urdu works of north Indian intellectuals – Ghalib's poetry and letters, Sayyid Ahmad Khan's historical, ethical, and religious essays (*Asar us-Sanadid*; *Tabyin ul-Kalam*; *Tahzib ul-Akhlaq*), Zakaullah's lectures, and Nazir Ahmad's novels (*Ibn ul-Waqt*; *Ruy-i Sadiqa*), Jalal discusses how they accommodated faith and reason. She argues that religion was not lived as "a set of doctrines and rituals" but "first and foremost a personal experience" (p. 43). As they considered that "the measure of a religion is the extent to which it is consistent with human nature" (p. 112), Muslim roshan khayals encouraged the cultivation of knowledge, ecumenism, and critical engagement with the world. For them, enlightenment was a religiously grounded project rooted in Islamic traditions like tauhid (unity of being), ijtihad (independent reasoning), and nurun ala nur (light upon light): it was not a rejection of faith but its very fulfillment.

Jalal's use of roshan khayal as a unifying category, however, raises questions. While she prefers this emic term over Western labels like "liberal", "progressive", or "modernist", its origins and definition remain somewhat unclear; as she notes, Sayyid Ahmad Khan described himself instead as a "big liberal" (p. 43). The category's coherence is further complicated in later chapters by the divergent views of its supposed members on issues like egalitarianism, colonial loyalty, or gender equality.

Shifting from the reconciliation of faith and reason, Jalal turns in the second part – the next four chapters – to the question of the compatibility between science and revelation, a debate that was central to Muslim responses to colonial critiques of Islam as "irrational". She explores how Muslim professional and public historians like Sayyid Ameer Ali, Zakaullah, Abdul Halim Sharar, Altaf Husain Hali, Muhammad Husain Azad, and Shibli Numani, reflected on predestination, human free will, and the nature of the Quran (as created or uncreated) through their varied engagements with select episodes of Islamic history. Their historical imagination, Jalal argues, reclaimed Islamic history as a narrative of rationalism, enlightenment, and pluralism, against religious bigotry, by stressing Greek-Arabic knowledge exchanges, Mutazila debates in the Abbasid court, and Mughal-era broadmindedness and gender inclusivity. These historical narratives aimed to "buttress [new] conceptions of the self" (p. 119), countering Orientalist stereotypes and the authority of "bigoted" ulamas.

In the final part (Chapters 9 to 11), Jalal analyses Indian Muslims' resistance to colonial rule and postcolonial instability in Pakistan until the late 1960s, tracing how intellectual and artistic movements, from Iqbal's philosophy to Sadequain's murals and the works of scholars like Fazlur Rahman and Ghulam Ahmad Parvez, sustained roshan khayali amid adversity. Jalal first aims

at dispelling misconceptions of Iqbal's philosophy of time, which prioritised intuition ('ishq) to participate in the dynamic movement of divine creation. Inspired by Iqbal's verses, Sadequain's murals (one of which features on the book's cover) "memorialised" Indians and Muslims within a global Enlightenment tradition, akin to Paris's Pantheon – though his works faced attacks from Islamic fundamentalists. Despite this backlash, Jalal highlights the persistence of enlightened thought in 1960s Pakistan through Ghulam Abbas's critique of mullahcracy, Fazlur Rahman's fusion of Quranic and modern historical methodologies (p.208), or Ghulam Ahmad Parvez's distinction between *din* and *mazhab*. However, Jalal argues that Pakistan's Constitutions fetishised Islam, reducing it to a limiting force (p. 282) rather than the creative, dynamic vision that Iqbal envisioned. She attributes the marginalisation of enlightened thought to its entanglement with authoritarian military rule, and, to a lesser extent, to the elitism of English-language expression. The book concludes on a hopeful but cautionary note, celebrating the endurance of figures like Sibte Hasan, Habib Jalib, Tahira Mazhar Ali Khan, or Asma Jahangir, while warning of the rise of religious vigilantism across Asia and the "very real danger" of South Asian Muslims "losing the essence of their religion" (p. 297).

Muslim Enlightened Thought in South Asia offers a rich narrative of enlightenment by emphasising the significance and agency of Indian Muslim intellectuals in the global history of liberalism. Central to Jalal's argument is the claim that liberality (or "enlightenment") is not a "Western preserve" (p. 11) but that Muslims have found in Islam itself the resources for cultivating critical knowledge, modernity, and tolerance. The book's agenda – to demonstrate that Muslims could and can be "enlightened" – and its desired accessibility to a non-specialist audience, may however occasionally lead to simplifications of scholarship. For instance, Jalal challenges historians who frame Muslim liberalism as exceptional due to the tradition of Prophecy – quoting Bayly (2012) – by arguing that Muslims can indeed be liberal. But Bayly does not claim that Muslims could not be liberal – or, as he puts it, "only if we accept a narrow, idealised understanding of classic liberalism from Mill's writings on domestic British issues" (Bayly, 2012, p. 232) – rather that they were so in their own way. Interestingly, Jalal's own evidence aligns with this interpretation, as she demonstrates how her actors mobilised Islam as a modernist resource.

Similarly, Jalal resists the label of "apologetic modernity", insisting that her actors' engagements with modernity were proactive and confident assertions of Islam's compatibility with progress. Yet, as scholarship has shown, apologetics need not be incompatible with agency. In fact, they are often understood as a dynamic process of defending against misrepresentations while engaging with Western

frameworks to reclaim agency: apologetics are not passive or dialectical but do provide "some degree of autonomy" (Devji, 2007, p. 64). To further strengthen her case against false binaries, the book would benefit from a subtler analysis of South-South connections, such as late nineteenth-century intellectual exchanges with the Nahda (Arab Awakening) movement in the Middle East, and ulama engagements with "enlightened thought".

Ultimately, Ayesha Jalal offers an impressive narrative grounded in a diverse corpus of works from the late nineteenth century to the present, carefully contextualising it while providing vivid anecdotes. The book is rich in detailed descriptions and close readings of often-overlooked works – such as Nazir Ahmad's *Ruy-i Sadiqa*, Sadequain's murals (previously referenced in Sibte Hasan, 1990), or Sharar's *Meena Bazaar* – although its depth may pose challenges for readers unfamiliar with the cultural context (terms like *sayyid* are not explained p. 44). While not strictly academic, scholars will note the absence of more extensive footnotes and the presence of minor inaccuracies – for instance, the mistranslation of *sabk-i hindi* (i.e. the "Indian style" of Persian poetry) as "literally Hindi for everyone" ("Sabke Hindi") (p. 25), or the incorrect description of Altaf Husain Hali as one of the "illustrious products of Delhi College" (p. 68). Tailored for an educated South Asian audience, the book's true strength lies in its engaged call to reclaim Islam's traditions of enlightened thought and critical reasoning.

### References:

- Bayly, C.A. (2012). *Recovering Liberties: Indian Thought in the Age of Liberalism and Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Devji, Faisal (2007). "Apologetic modernity". *Modern Intellectual History* 4 (1): 61-76.
- Sibte Hasan (1990). *Adab aur Roshan Khayali*. Karachi: Maktaba Daniyal.