Abstract

This paper is aimed at exploring the emergence of Urdu novel as a result of colonial encounter between the indigenous economies of Persio-Arabic education system and the moral regimes of British educators in nineteenth century North India. This paper demonstrates that the form of the early Urdu novel was in many ways shaped by the currents of reform generated by colonial interactions between the British and the Indian intelligentsia, who deployed novel as a means to convey the ideology of improvement. This paper focuses upon the educational novels of Nazir Ahmed (1832-1913), whose association with the colonial education department as well as the Aligarh school somewhat turned him into a proponent of women’s education and a reformer of Muslim community. My research examines the nature of the new Muslim self, which Nazir sought to forge by replacing the Indo-Persian ideals of Muslim aristocratic class with the new “middle-class” values embodied in the characters of his first three novels.

Introduction

The British indictment of the moral corruption of Indian society roughly began with Charles Grant’s Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain, particularly with respect to Morals and the Means of Improving it (1792), which represented the evangelical criticism of the moral fiber of India, describing Indians as “a race of men lamentably degenerate and base; retaining but a feeble sense of moral obligation…strongly exemplifying the effects produced on society by great and general corruption of manners, and sunk in misery by their vices.”¹ James Mill’s criticism of Indian institutions in The History of British India (1817) exemplified the intersection of the reformist zeal of the Christian missionaries with the radical

social reforms of utilitarianism.² British government’s surveys of Indian indigenous education in mid-nineteenth century located the immortality of the Indian character in the Persio-Arabic system of education. William Adam’s³ Second Report on the State of Education in Bengal, District of Rajshahi (1836) stated that the “radical defect of the system of elementary education seems to explain the radical defect of the native character”. He argued that “no material improvement of the native character can be expected,” without a large infusion into it [the system of elementary education] of moral instruction”. Discussing different stages of instruction imparted to students in Persian elementary schools, Adam pointed out that the pupils are taught only the art of reading and making correct pronunciation of Sadi’s Padamnamah, “a collection of moral sayings, some of which are above his comprehension”. The other text books taught in these schools were Jami’s Joseph and Zuleikha, Leila and Majnu, and the Sikandar Namah, whose “supposed” moral bearings “would have a beneficial effect on the character of the pupils” but “those books are employed like all the rest solely for the purpose of conveying lessons in language...not for the purpose of sharpening the moral perceptions or strengthening the moral habits.”⁴ Writing about Persian schools in his second report of 1858, William D. Arnold⁵ expressed astonishment at the prevailing concept of education in India, that is, the ability “to read fluently and if possible to say by heart a series of Persian works of which the meaning was not understood by the vast majority”, and even when understood was “for the most part little calculated to edify the minority”.⁶ Most of the Persian text books taught in indigenous schools in British India were viewed as obscene by the British in the mid-nineteenth century, as “obscenity” for the British was “a catch-all-category”, covering such widely different genres as sex manuals, popular romances, or texts offering advice on sexual relationships.⁷ In an age which excluded the

³ Adam, who came to India as a Baptist missionary in 1818, was appointed to study the state of education in Bengal and Bihar, which were submitted in 1836 and 1838.
⁴ Joseph DiBona, ed, One Teacher, One School, the Adam Reports on Indigenous Education in 19th Century India (New Delhi: Biblia Impex Private Limited, 1983), pp. 58-60.
⁵ William Delafield Arnold (1828-1859) was the fourth son of Thomas Arnold, who was the headmaster of Rugby School. His brother Matthew Arnold was a famous Victorian poet and critic. William joined service as an educational administrator in Punjab. He was appointed Director of Public Instruction in Punjab in 1856. His novel Oakfield; or the Fellowship in the East was published in 1853.
⁶ J. A. Richey, Selections from Educational Records, Part II, 1840-1859 (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing India, 1922), 301.
⁷ Charu Gupta, Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslim, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005), p. 50.
frank treatment of sexuality from the realm of morality, Persian literature bore the brunt of this criticism for its erotic content. The history of the English translation of Saadi’s *Gulistan* in the nineteenth century throws light on the damage done by Victorianism to a text, which was “the standard favorite of all good Mussulmauns” for “the beauty of his diction or the morality of his subjects”.\(^8\) Francis Gladwin, who was the first English translator of *Gulistan* (1806), made a number of excisions to obviate the supposed indecency of *Gulistan*.\(^9\) The second English translation (1823) of the book was made by James Ross, who complained that “even the morality of *Gulistan* is occasionally tarnished with such indecorous allusions”.\(^10\) Despite his praise of the book, Edward Backhouse Eastwick, who made the third translation of *Gulistan* in 1852, left out eleven of the twenty one stories in chapter V on love and youth, with many other minor omissions in the text.\(^11\) John T. Platts articulated the often repeated issues of obscenity while translating certain passages.\(^12\) The theme of *amrad parasti*, popularly known as the Greek vice, in the book was considered a matter of embarrassment.

In the mid-nineteenth century, Persian, which was considered a mark of distinction and culture among the nobles and masses alike,\(^13\) began to be viewed by Indian reformers as the source of moral corruption. Persian literature was charged with the moral and sexual degeneration of the Mughals (under whose royal patronage Persian had flourished),\(^14\) as a corollary of the argument that sexual indulgence had brought about the fall of the Mughal empire. The loss of Mughal sovereignty in India meant the defeat of the cultural norms of Persio-Islamic civilization, whose symbol was Persian. As a consequence, to Indian reformers, who represented the new *ashraf* class, frank discussions of sexuality necessarily implied sensuality and moral depravity, which in the post-Mutiny period came to be associated with the Mughal nobility. Inayatullah Kanboh’s Persian text *Bahar-e Danish* (*The Spring of Knowledge, 1651*),

\(^11\) Ibid, pp. 17-20
which took up the subject of women’s treachery, was one of the “mischievous and degrading” books to appear in the famous book-burning scene in Nazir’s The Repentance of Nussooh. Nazir Ahmed (1834-1912), who received both traditional and modern education, went on to become the Deputy Collector with the British government. In this paper he is the representative of the new ashraf/middle class. In Nazir Ahmad’s Taubat-ul Nusoooh (1874), Nasoooh expresses his reservations about Gulistan’s status as a text book meant for women’s instruction. Hence, before Fahmeedah’s lessons, he would ink over sentences and pages of Saadi’s Gulistaan because they were “unfit” for her to read. Nazir’s novel Fasana-e Mubtila (1887) suggests that the protagonist turns narcissistic as a consequence of the development of his taste for Persian literature. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the new ashraf class set out on the project of evolving its own moral codes.

Nazir Ahmad’s Middle Class Values

Margrit Pernau has noted that in the second half of the nineteenth century, the meaning of the term ashraf came to imply “a bourgeois habitus”, which stood in opposition to the “nawabi comportment”. In sharp contrast to the ethics of nobility, such as munificence and leisure, the new ashraf/middle class created its own cultural capital, which emphasized the efficient use of resources, charity, and hard work. The following section is a discussion of Nazir Ahmed’s novels Mirat-ul Uroos (1869), Banaat-un Nash (1872) and Taubat-al-Nasuh (1874), which were articulation of the values of the Muslim middle class.

In Mirat-ul Uroos (1869), the character of Asghari was an embodiment of the husbanding of resources. On entering the house, she realizes that hers is a family whose income was small, “and their habits extravagant.” Asghari shares with Khairandesh Khan her intention that “the

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15 Francesca Orsini, Print and Pleasure: Popular Literature and Entertaining Fictions in Colonial North India (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009), pp. 129-130.
17 Ibid., p. 62.
accounts of all these people [the creditors] should be investigated and put into writing". By exposing Azmat’s fraudulent practices in the family transactions, she displays her skill in putting the finances of the home back on track. Asghari introduces good order in the house by avoiding wasteful expenditure. It is precisely the “stingy” character of Asghari, as named by Mama Azmat, which is actually admired as a virtue in the novel. This stinginess, which was an attribute of Nazir’s character as testified by his pupil Farhatullah Beg in Nazir Ahmed ki Kahani Kuchh Unki Kuchh Meri Zabani, evolved as an important middle-class ethic.

Nazir’s second novel Banaat-un Nash was modeled upon Thomas Day’s History of Sandford and Merton (1783), which had adapted some of the stories from Aesop’s Fables as a vehicle of reform. Day’s The History of Sandford and Merton was a contribution to Richard Lovell Edgeworth and Honora Edgeworth’s collection of short stories Harry and Lucy, which their daughter Maria Edgeworth continued some years after Honora’s death. Banaat’s attack on the idleness of nawabi lifestyle derives a great deal from Sandford. Asghari diagnoses idleness as the primary cause of the ills found among women of the ashraf class, owing to which, the ashraf

21 The Bride’s Mirror, p. 85.
22 Ibid, pp. 112-113.
23 Nazir Ahmed, Lekcharon Ka Majmua, Jild Dom, ed. by Bashiruddin Ahmed (Agra: Mufid-e Aam Istemar Press, 1918), p. 438. Raja Shiva Prasad, Joint Inspector of Schools in the Benares Circle from 1856, had translated Day’s book into Urdu and Hindi around 1860. (An Empire of Books, pp. 231-33). Day (1748-1789) was a British writer, whose first published work was a poem The Dying Negro (1773), one of the first pieces of literature in the campaign for the abolition of trade in Britain. But Day’s reputation rests on his works for children The History of Sandford and Merton (1783-1789), and The History of Little Jack (1787).
24 The original Harry and Lucy of 1780 appeared in a revised form as a volume of Early Lessons (1801). The Early Lessons, which was a whole series completed from 1801 to 1825, included: Early Lessons (Harry and Lucy, Frank, and Rosamond, 1801); Continuation of Early Lessons (1814); Rosamond, A Sequel (1821); Frank, A Sequel (1822); Harry and Lucy, Concluded (1825). Day (1748-89) expanded it into the first volume of Sandford (1783), followed by two more volumes published in 1786 and 1789. Richard and Honora Edgeworth had composed the story about two children, Harry and Lucy in 1779. Since Day’s book was inspired by Richard Edgeworth’s interest in children’s writings, it is often associated with Edgeworth’s work in the field of education. (Marilyn Butler, Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972. P. 59.) Marilyn Butler writes: “perhaps as a result of Edgeworth’s influence, he (Day) discovered the modern primitivist Rousseau, and found his austerities so appealing that he became a disciple for the rest of his life.” (Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography, p. 29.) Richard Edgeworth, who wrote only the first volume of his Memoirs, gives a detailed account of his own and Thomas Day’s experiments with Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s model of education in chapter V and VI. Richard makes a confession of his failure in this experiment. Richard Lovell raised his son according to the educational theory advanced by Rousseau in Emile. Therefore, the boy “was not wearied with the dreary learning by rote which other children were subjected to, but instead was encouraged to observe, ask questions, and learn about the things around him.” (Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography, pp. 37-38.) Day, on the other hand, conducted an experiment of bringing up a foundling girl in perfect isolation from society on the model of Rousseau’s Sophie in the hope that she would make an ideal wife. But this plan finally did not yield any result. (Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography, p. 39.)
24 Richard Lovell Edgeworth to Mrs. Barbauld, n.d. (1778), quoted in Maria Edgeworth: A Literary Biography, p. 61.)
women suffer from all kinds of diseases such as constipation and dysentery. Banaat’s prescription for the cure of these maladies is replacement of idleness by hard work. Device of contrast is employed to underline the idle and useless lifestyle of the ashraf women as opposed to the life of hard work led by Humsai, who is the embodiment of values of effort. Though Humsai grinds wheat whole day, she never complains of the heat and humidity while working; she is acclimatized to hard work, which is the very essence of her life. Leisure was a marker of the class of nawabs, who were part of the ashraf class. Just as Day wrote Sandford to guard his generation against “the infection of the ostentatious luxury and effeminacy”, Banaat sought to deliver the teachings that the inheritance/possession of money should not result in a life of idleness and a disregard for the needy. Nazir’s criticism of the luxurious way of living in Banaat has echoes of the teachings of Nasr ud din Tusi’s Akhlaq-e Nasiri, which prescribed moderation/temperance as a warning against the excesses of wealth, that “the purpose of wealth and estates and slaves, of retainers and horsemen and the spreading of carpets, is the comforting of the body and the preservation of health”, while Nazir attacks the very idea of elaborate retinue that surrounds the nobility.

The target of Sandford was the idle aristocratic man, while Banaat sought to cure women’s quarters of the decadent values of idleness, arrogance, and lethargy that in the post-Mutiny period came to be associated with “the decadence of a nawabi lifestyle”. Banaat records the transformative power of education on the character of Husn Ara, who is the embodiment of all sorts of bad habits that are bred by pampering and wealth. Her character closely resembles that of Tommy Merton in Sandford. Like Tommy who assumes that “he had a right to command everybody, who was not dressed as finely as himself”, Husn Ara treats the daughters of service class or peshadar as her bondmaids. In order to deflate Husn Ara’s

26 Ibid, p. 23.
29 Banaat-un Nash, pp. 30-31.
32 Banaat-un Nash, p. 12.
arrogance, which hinges on the assumption that one “who possesses money is never in want of anyone”, Mahmuda tells her the story of the origin of money, citing example of the Mutiny of 1857 in which money was of almost no value in getting daily provisions.

The chapter “Comparison between the Climate of the City and Country” in Banaat is not so much a discussion of the opposition between the country and the city as it is the criticism of now extinct Muslim aristocratic way of living. The comparison drawn between the rural and urban lifestyles relies very heavily on the lists of accusations each side level against each other. What lies concealed in the age old dispute between the country and the city is that the number of charges brought against city-dwellers is much higher, and what are presented as the negative aspects of urban living is more often than not identifiable with the ideals of Muslim aristocratic class. By making Husn Ara the spokesperson of urban life, Banaat facilitates the easy identification of the ills of city life with the nawabi way of living. Closely related to the Mughal aristocracy’s concern with status was the culture of munificence which appeared to have defined courtly finesse. Responding to the accusation made by Husn Ara against the village-dwellers that they are ignorant (ujadd), uncouth (akkhad), and ill-mannered (badsaliqa), Khair-un Nisa, the spokesperson for rustic life, calls people of the city useless (nikamma), rascal (kambakht), coward (past himmat), and ostentatious (zahirpasand). Chapter 39 demonstrates the city-dwellers’ love for display of wealth through a long description of the behavior of people in the wedding Khair-un Nisa attended, showing that the guests were “a picture of bragging and show”, without slightest sensitivity towards the needy.

In Banaat, discussion on the elegance of conversation has elements of the criticism of the elaborate forms of addresses used by the Mughal nobility. Abdul Halim Sharar explained the evolution of the elaborate forms of greeting in India and Persia, where “it was the custom to show great respect for one’s seniors and superiors”, the simple form of Islamic salutation As Salam Alaikum (which emphasized equality) looked “lacking in respect to the arrogant rich.” Following the examples of the Mughal court, which abolished many Islamic practices that

36 Ibid, pp. 21-22.
38 Banaat-un Nash, p. 82.
40 Ibid, p. 96.
41 It was originally written in the form of articles, published under the title of Hindustan Mein Mashriqi Tamaddun Ka Akhri Namuna in the Lucknow journal Dil Gudaz over a number of years from 1913 onwards.
interfered with the deference and respect displayed to them, most nobles replaced Assalam with a more elaborate and cultured forms of greeting such as taslim (obeisance), kornish (adoration), bandage (servitude), and adab (respect). David Lelyveld documented that training in the elaborate forms of polite address and etiquette was part of the instruction imparted to the ashraf class. The related topic of nazakat, which was a characteristic feature of nawabi lifestyle, is subjected to ridicule in Banaat. The quality of nazakat is seen as possessed by a person who has a lean body (dubla deel), thin arms and legs (sunte hue haath paon), a small appetite (kam khuraq), and inability to endure difficulty and do labor, a quality which in the final analysis is reduced to illness and disability (rogi aur apahaj). Banaat’s attack on the nawabi ideals of nazakat partly derives its energy from Sandford’s mockery of the reigning idea of gentleman exemplified by Master Compton: “a pair of buckles, so big that they almost crippled him, a slender emaciated figure, and a look of consummate impudence.”

Nazir’s Taubat-al-Nasuh (1874), which was modeled upon Daniel Defoe’s The Family Instructor (1715), shows a break with the ethics of nobility. In the novel, Kalim is an embodiment of the lifestyle of the noble class. His rooms, the “Palace of Delight” (ishrat manzil) and the “Place of Retirement” symbolize the extravagance of a nawabi life. The contents of the “Palace of Delight” are listed in the novel to underline the inherent luxuriousness of Kalim’s life: “a carpet, and a creaseless drugget of white cloth stretched over it; and a dais, with a costly rug and pillows, and a hookah and spittoon-vases, conveniently placed.” The chairs in his room are made of “polished wood” and “a punkha, with fringes of gold and silver lace”. The seemingly never-ending luxury of the room also contained chandeliers and globes of coloured glass.

Stunned by the wastage of money on the pursuit of leisurely pleasures in Kalim’s palace of delight, Nasuh wishes that this money was spent instead for the help of the indigent. Nasuh’s indictment of Kalim’s lavish lifestyle has echoes of the European criticism of the immorality of the nawabs and nobles of Lucknow, who lived in conspicuous splendor while their subjects were

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42 Lucknow: the Last Phase of an Oriental Culture in The Lucknow Omnibus, pp. 196-97. Abul Fazl’s Ain-e Akbari has a chapter on “Regulation regarding the Kurnish and Taslim”. (The Mughals of India, pp. 89-90).
43 David Lelyveld, Aligarh’s First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 52.
44 Banaat-un Nash, p. 95.
45 Sandford, p. 175.
46 The Repentance of Nussooh, pp. 58-59.
47 Nazir Ahmed, Taubat-al Nasuh (New Delhi: Maktaba Jamia, 2001), p. 188.
condemned to lead a miserable existence. In his declaration to Fāhmīda of his defiance of Nusūh’s reformatory ways, Kalīm dwells upon his achievements admired in his society: “In poetical competitions, my odes always stand first; in chess I can hold my own with the best players; and in cards I can make as much of a bad hand as most people. My pigeons are the best in the city. As for kite-flying, I can cut strings of the largest kites with a dhelchi.” In his analysis of the sharīf culture, David Lelyveld documented that chess, pigeon-flying, kite-flying, and poetic competitions or mushairah were some of the activities of pure pleasure which were essentials of growing up sharīf. Kalīm’s total absorption into the art of poetic vocation is apparent by his possession of a large collection of Persian and Urdu poetry. Before making a conflagration of the books, Nusūh stands marveling at “the beauty of the binding, the excellence of the lithography, the fineness of the paper, the elegance of the style, and the propriety of the diction.” Kalīm’s cultivation of the ideals of elegance and finesse was inextricably linked to the Indo-Persian culture in which the Persio-Arabic script had evolved. Mohammad Mujeeb has commented in his observations on “The Persian-Arabic Script”: “Calligraphy was also an art which had absorbed in itself the aesthetics of composition, line and movement, and cultured persons were expected to derive from it the exquisite pleasure of poetry.” Nusūh’s contempt for Kalīm’s taste for poetry and elegance is indicative of Nazir’s rejection of the culture which produced them. The Persian language and literature, most importantly poetry, which Francis Robinson identified as “the first pillar” of Persio-Islamic culture in Mughal India, is viewed by Nazir as decadent. In the novel, Nusūh’s examination of the “cabinet of books” in Kalīm’s “Place of Retirement” serves the novelist’s purpose of associating irreligiousness and indecency with Persian and classical Urdu poetry. For Nusūh, Kalīm’s extensive knowledge of poetry (as

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49 Ibid, pp. 45-46.
51 The Repentance of Nussooh, p. 59.
54 The Repentance of Nussooh, p. 59. Taubat-al Nasuh seems to locate the cause of Kulleem’s immorality in the kind of books he reads. “There was a large collection of volumes; but whether Persian or Urdu, all were of the same kind, equally indecent and irreligious.” Nussooh finds their contents “mischievous and degrading”. A list of bad books that Kalīm bought is provided: the Fisnah Ajaib, Gul Bakaoli, Araish Mahfil, Masnavi Mir Hasan, the Jokes of Niamat Khan Ali, Chirkin’s Odes, the Satires of Sauda, the Diwan of Jan Sahib, the Bahardanish, a Diwan by Nazir of Agra (The Repentance of Nussooh, p. 60).
he had “a quotation ready for every emergency”) is nothing more than a waste of time. The message that Nazir tried to convey through the novel is that the adoption of the profession of poetry at a time when Mughal patronage had dried up is useless. Kalim’s tragedy is that this truth has not dawned upon him as he expects that some good appointment awaits him in the offices of the Government or in one of the native states. Having squandered his money (which he had received after selling the village which was registered in his name), he goes to Daulatabad in search of a job. The President of Daulatabad, who had been appointed by the British Resident to check disorder, imparts Kalim a lesson: “Munificence conditioned by moderation is a laudable quality’, gravely observed the President; ‘the Prince’s extravagance has emptied the treasury, and the English have interfered in the interests of the State’. Kalim’s pride in his claim of being “an unrivalled poet” is demolished by the President’s declaration that “there is no berth for a gentleman of your profession”. Kalim’s death and repentance in the end is served as a warning to those who refuse to reform themselves.

Bibliography

Urdu

56 Ibid, p. 63.
57 Ibid, p. 76.
58 Ibid, p. 77.


**English**


