

Nazir Ahmad and Middle Class Morality

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Abstract

This paper seeks to examine how Nazir Ahmad's early novels developed a pedagogic emphasis on the moral edification of Muslims, which was a complex engagement with some aspects of the colonial critique of early nineteenth century Indian indigenous education. This paper is an investigation of how Nazir's project of moral reformation was influenced by nineteenth century British notions of obscenity. The argument of the paper is that the new conception of morality caused a larger aesthetic shift in the Muslim intellectuals of late-nineteenth century India.

Keywords: Nazir Ahmad, morality, middle class

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."ⁱ 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.ⁱⁱ British government's surveys of Indian indigenous education in mid-nineteenth century located the immorality of the Indian character in the Persio-Arabic system of education. William Adam'sⁱⁱⁱ *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."^{iv} Writing about Persian schools in his second report of 1858, William D. Arnold^v 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".^{vi}

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.^{vii} Persian literature bore the brunt of the British criticism of the perceived immorality of Indian literary imagination: *Tutinam*, *Bahar-e Danish*, *Joseph and Zulaikha*, *Gulistan* were some of the casualties of British Victorianism. *Tutinama* was the fourteenth century Persian version of the Sanskrit classic *Sukasaptati*, which dealt with the parrot-narrated stories of adultery.^{viii} Inayatullah Kanboh's Persian text *Bahar-e Danish* (The Spring of Knowledge, 1651) treated the subject of women's treachery.^{ix} Jami's *Joseph and Zulaikha* drew charges of eroticism and profanity in British India.^x In an age which excluded the 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 Mussulmans" for "the beauty of his diction or the morality of his subjects".^{xi} Francis Gladwin, who was the first English translator of *Gulistan* (1806), made a number of excisions to obviate the supposed indecency of *Gulistan*.^{xii} 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". 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.^{xiii} John T. Platts articulated the often repeated issues of obscenity while translating certain passages.^{xiv}

This increased emphasis on the moral instruction of the people of India necessitated the arduous task of selecting, composing, recreating, and translating suitable text books for the pupils in government schools, a task which became all the

more difficult when the issue of elementary schooling in provinces confronted the government in the mid-nineteenth century, the time when the colonial policy was being expressed in terms of moral improvement.^{xv} James Thomason's introduction of elementary education in North Western Provinces under his lieutenant-governorship and his scheme of the vernacularisation of elementary education of the agricultural classes involved the composition of the textbooks under the supervision of Henry Steward Reid, Visitor General of Schools in North Western Provinces.^{xvi} As the inculcation of the "pure principles of morality" was also an essential part of the system of elementary education, the stories were composed for the moral edification of the masses.^{xvii} The composition in the Hindi of the books of improvement by Pandit Shri Lal included *Buddhividya* (1851) and *Soujanya-Tarangini*, which was ready for press in 1851. The former was an exposition of the advantages of learning and the duty of parents to educate their children. The latter was a "Moral Class Book, illustrating both by dissertation and examples, the excellency of the moral virtues", which was modeled on Robert Chambers and W. Chambers's *Moral Class Book* (1839) in which "moral" virtues were described by means of a narrative with individuals exemplifying them.^{xviii} In 1851, Seth Biddhichand Narain translated from Marati into Hindi a book called "Aalsi aur Divaliyon ka Updesh" (the Sermons of the Idle and the Bankrupt), which was an illustration of "the evils arising from sloth and idleness".^{xix} In the early 1860s, Matthew Kempson, then Director of Public Instruction, NWP, composed a story called "Dastan-e Jamila Khatun". The "Preface" of the book pointed out the lack of ethical instruction in the books of the time, highlighting the dominance of the themes of love and sensuality in such books. The objective of Kempson's book, which was written for the schools, was the promotion of virtues, the awareness of one's duties, and the importance of the life of moral and religious life.^{xx}

In the mid-nineteenth century, Persian, which was considered a mark of distinction and culture among the nobles and masses alike,^{xxi} 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),^{xxii} 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. The Muslim intelligentsia of the middle class distanced themselves from the supposed moral depravity of Persian literature, 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), which took up the subject of women's treachery^{xxiii}, was one of the mischievous books to appear in the famous book-burning scene in Nazir's *Taubat-ul Nasuh*.^{xxiv} In *Taubat-ul Nasuh* (1874), Nasuh 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.^{xxv} The underlying assumption behind the imposition of textbook culture on Indian education was

that the moral reformation of the Indian character was achievable through the agency of the text. With the elevation of the text to a sacred symbol, its selection, editing, translation, adaptation, and production became a really difficult task. The primacy of the text along with the spread of elementary education led to the paucity of suitable instructional written material in all Indian languages. The participation of Indian Muslim reformers in this exercise of moral purification via texts of morality was substantial. In his speech of 9 January, 1864 at Scientific Society, Syed Ahmad pointed out that the translation of history books by the Department of Public Instruction for use in schools was bereft of "that full description of the morals, virtues, and vices of nations...necessary in order to confer any real benefit on the native mind."^{xxvi} The dispute in the early 1860s over the publication and use of Babu Shiva Prasad's history book *Itihas Timirmasak* in vernacular and Anglo-Vernacular schools in North Western Provinces touched upon the issue of morality.^{xxvii} Syed Ahmad's objection to the book was not only over the depiction of Medieval Muslim rulers as lascivious and decadent, but also over the question whether such indecent narration in government textbooks should be allowed.^{xxviii} In 1867, C. Pearson, Inspector of Schools in Rawalpindia Circle, highlighted the difficulty of acquiring "even satisfactory school-books in the vernacular."^{xxix}

In *Taubat*, Kalim'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, Nusuh stands marveling at Kalim's book-shelf, which appears to be "an invaluable treasure to Nusuh. He notices the excellence of the books, the neatness of the *khatt*, the smoothness (*safai*) of the paper, the beauty (*khubi*) of the style, and the propriety of diction."^{xxx} Kalim'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."^{xxxi} Nusuh's contempt for Kalim's taste for poetry and elegance is indicative of an aesthetic shift in Nazir's time. The Persian language and literature, most importantly poetry was viewed by Nazir as decadent. In *The Family Instructor*, the mother's burning of the eldest sister's French plays and romances is justified by associating lewdness with them.^{xxxii} In *Taubat-al Nasuh*, Nasuh's objections to poetry are based on its common use for the expression of improper thoughts (*behuda khyalat*) and a mockery of religious precepts.^{xxxiii} Altaf Husain Hali's *Muqaddima-e Sher-o Shairi* (An Introduction to Poetry, 1893) pointed out that the excessive use of the metaphors of love in Urdu *ghazal* has reduced the meanings of the word like heart (*dil*) to a mere object, which can be snatched, returned, lost, found, bargained, stuck in the tresses of the beloved. The artificial and exaggerated treatment of the conventionalized theme of love in Urdu poets stretches the beloved's tresses to such an extent that they become longer than all eternity, and the exaggeration of the note of complaint leads to a violation of faith. Hali's *Muqaddima* pointed out how the modern poets' imitation of the classical theme of wine in Persian *ghazal* is carried to such an extreme that the creation of the atmosphere of

intoxication in the poem leads to a satirical attack on the preacher and devout men (*koi waiz par phabti kehta hai, koi zahid ki dadhi par haath lapkata hai*).^{xxxiv} References to wine and the tavern, which constitute an essential ingredient of the 'nature' of *ghazal*, are accompanied by sarcasm and insinuations at the pious men and the observers of religious precepts (*ahl-e zahir*). Declaration of pride in the consumption of wine, resistance to penitence, frequent visits to the tavern, followed by aspersions at the adherents of *hadith*, form elements of *ghazal*.^{xxxv} However, Hali's awareness of the history of the persecution of the *ahl-e batin* and *rai* by the people of *fiqh* and outward observers of Islam rendered this criticism of the devout attenuating.^{xxxvi} Hali is also conscious of the Persian poets' metaphorical usage of the words such as wine, cup-bearer, and tavern to express their spiritual state.^{xxxvii} In Muhammad Hadi Ruswa's *Sharifzada* (1900), poetry (*sher-o sukhan*) is viewed as the expression of illegitimate fancies (*najaiz takhayalat*) adorned in beautiful words.^{xxxviii}

The nineteenth century British denunciation of the so-called obscenity of Persio-Arabic literary sensibility exerted pressure on nineteenth century Muslim intelligentsia to review their inherited literary traditions and metaphors. The result of this literary reform along with the moral reform of the community was a devaluation of the traditional themes, motifs, and imagery of Persio-Arabic literature and a greater purification of morality.

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- i Charles Grant (1797), *Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain, particularly with respect to Morals and the Means of Improving it* (Nabu Public Domain Reprints, ISBN 9781175804341), 39.
- ii "Utilitarianism hoped to improve morals by reforming society; evangelicals hoped to improve society by reforming morals."ⁱⁱ Francis G. Hutchins, ed, *The Illusions of Permanence: British Imperialism in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), p.10.
- iii 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.
- iv DiBona, ed. *One Teacher, One School, the Adam Reports on Indigenous Education in 19th Century India* (New Delhi: Biblia Impex Private Limited, 1983), 58-60.
- v 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.
- vi J.A. Richey, *Selections from Educational Records, Part II, 1840-1859* (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing India, 1922), 301.
- vii Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community, Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslim, and*

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- the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005), 50.
- viii Frances W. Pritchett, *Marvellous Encounters: Folk Romance in Urdu and Hindi* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1985), 98.
- ix Francesca Orsini, *Print and Pleasure: Popular Literature and Entertaining Fictions in Colonial North India* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009), 129-130.
- x Avril Powell, "Old Books in New Bindings: Ethics and Education in Colonial India" in Indra Sengupta and Daud Ali, ed. *Knowledge Production, Pedagogy, and Institutions in Colonial India* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 201-202.
- xi Mrs. Meer Hasan Ali (1832), *Observations on the Mussulmans of India Descriptive of their Manners, Customs, Habits and Religious Opinions Made during a Twelve Years' Residence in their Immediate Society* (London: Oxford University Press, 1917), 256.
- xii Sheikh Saadi, *The Gulistan or Rose Garden of Sadi*. Trans. Edward Rehatsek, (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964), 14.
- xiii *Ibid*, 17-20
- xiv Sheikh Sadi, *The Gulistan or Rose Garden of Shaikh Muslihud-Din of Shiraz*. Trans. John T. Platts (New Delhi: Indigo Books, 2007), 25.
- xv Avril Powell, "Old Books in New Bindings: Ethics and Education in Colonial India" in Indra Sengupta and Daud Ali, ed. *Knowledge Production, Pedagogy, and Institutions in Colonial India* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 199.
- xvi William Muir, *The Honourable James Thomason* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1897), 80-83. The 1850 'Resolution' elaborates Thomason's plan: "The present scheme contemplates the employment of an agency, which shall rouse the people to a sense of the evils resulting from ignorance, which shall stimulate them to exertions on their own part to remove their ignorance, which shall furnish them with qualified teachers and appropriate books. There are few of the agricultural classes who are not possessed of some rights of property in the soil In order to explain and protect these rights, a system of registration has been devised, which is based on the survey, made at the time of the settlement, and which annually shows the state of the property. It is necessary for the correctness of this register, that those, whose rights it records, should be able to consult it and to ascertain the nature of these entries affecting themselves. This involves a knowledge of reading and writing, of the simple rules of arithmetic, and of land measurement." (84).
- xvii Henry Stewart Reid, *Report on Indigenous Education and Vernacular Schools in Agra, Aligarh, Bareilly, Etawah, Farrukhabad, Mainpuri, Mathura, Shahjahanpur for 1850-51* (Agra: Secundra Orphan Press, 1852), 111.
- xviii Robert Chambers and W. Chambers, *The Moral Class Book* (Edinburgh: Published by William and Robert Chambers, 1839), 03-04. Chambers' *Rudiments of Knowledge* (1838) and *Introduction to the Sciences* was used by Pandit Shri Lal in his revision of Babu Shiva

- Prasad's *Bhugol Vrittant*, to be called *Bidyaankur* (ready for press in 1851), which was translated into Urdu by Pandit Bansi Dhar as *Haqaiq-e Maujudat* (ready for press in 1851) (*Report on Indigenous Education for 1850-51*), 210-215.
- xix *Report on Indigenous Education for 1850-51*, 210-211.
- xx Garcin de Tassy, *Khutbat de Tassy*. Trans. Nawab Masud Jung Bahadur, Abdul Wasit, Yusuf Husain Khan (Aurangabad: Matbua-e Anjuman Taraqqi Urdu, 1935), 434-435.
- xxi Abdul Halim Sharar, *Lucknow: the Last Phase of an Oriental Culture*. Trans. and edited E. S. Harcourt and Fakhir Hussain in *The Lucknow Omnibus* ((New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 101.
- xxii S. A. H. Abidi and Ravinder Gargesh "Persian in South Asia" in Braj B. Kachru *et al.*, *Language in South Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 105.
- xxiii *Print and Pleasure*, 129-130.
- xxiv Nazir Ahmad (1874), *Taubat-al Nasuh* (Delhi: Maktaba Jamia, 2001), 190.
- xxv Nazir Ahmad, *Fasana-e Mubtala* (Delhi: Shamsi Press, n.d.), 13.
- xxvi Shan Muhammad, ed. *The Aligarh Movement: Basic Documents: 1864-1898* (New Delhi: Meenakshi Prakashan, 1978), 15.
- xxvii Charu Gupta, *Sexuality, Obscenity, Community: Women, Muslim, and the Hindu Public in Colonial India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2005), 244.
- xxviii Avril A. Powell, *Scottish Orientalists and India: the Muir Brothers, Religion, Education and Empire* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2010), 229.
- xxix Hafeez Malik, ed. *Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's Educational Philosophy: A Documentary Record* (Islamabad: National Institute of Historical Research, 1989), 84.
- xxx *Taubat-un Nasuh*, 189.
- xxxi Mohammad Mujeeb, *Education, Literature and Islam* Ed. Akhtarul Wasey and Farhat Ehsas (Delhi: Shipra Publications, 2008), 57.
- xxxii Daniel Defoe (1715), *The Family Instructor*, ISBN-33433070250216, 79.
- xxxiii *Taubat-al Nasuh*, 194.
- xxxiv Altaf Husain Hali, *Muqaddima-e Sher-o Shairi* (Aligarh: Educational Book House, 2010), 162-164.
- xxxv *Muqaddima-e Sher-o Shairi*, 184.
- xxxvi *Ibid*, 185. Syed Ameer Ali in "The Mystical and Idealistic Spirit in the Islamic Expression" wrote about the history of this persecution:
 "The desire to enforce conformity and repress 'heresy' has been the curse of every religious system where ecclesiastics and legists have usurped authority in the church. Islam has not escaped from it, though it has been less harsh to 'unbelievers' than to its own 'innovators', whom orthodoxy designated as *ahl-ul-bida*. Men suffering from spiritual exaltation, or whose minds had become unhinged by excessive self-mortification, along with rationalists and reformers, became the victims of persecution. The story of Mansur al-Hallaj is one of the most pitiful in the annals of mysticism." Syed Ameer Ali, *The Sufi Mystery*. Ed. N.Archer (London: Octagon Press, 1980), 204-205.
- xxxvii *Muqaddima-e Sher-o Shairi*, 185. References to the praise of wine in classical Persian literature were a means to express the intoxicated state of the poet's selflessness in the contemplation of the beauty of the beloved.
- xxxviii Mirza Hadi Ruswa, *Sharifzada* (Delhi: Maktaba Jamia, 1989), 32.

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