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The West in the Nineteenth-Century Imagination: Some Reflections on the Transition from a Persianate Knowledge System To the Template of Urdu and English

> The aim of the [Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental] college was "to form a class of persons, Muhammadan in religion, Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, and in intellect.
>
> —Sir Syed Ahmad Khan[1]

> This colonialism colonises minds in addition to bodies and it releases forces within colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once and for all. … Particularly, once the British rulers and the exposed sections of Indians internalized the colonial role definitions … the battle for the minds of men was to a great extent won by the Raj.
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> —Ashis Nandy[2]

> The ideas that invaded Urdu literature from the West were not only modern and novel, they were culturally alien. And they introduced disruptive elements into our literary thought. For all their philosophical soundness, these ideas inaugurated a long period of disequilibrium. There are no signs even today

[1] As quoted in David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 207. The statement is a rephrasing of the famous statement contained in Macaulay's Minute on Education, 1835.

[2] *The Intimate Enemy* (1983; Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. xi, 6–7.

> that the old equilibrium will soon be restored, or that a new equilibrium is about to be achieved.
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> —Shamsur Rahman Faruqi[3]

I

This paper proposes to deal with the impact of the West on the Persianate[4] knowledge system as it obtained in India, and some of the underlying assumptions regarding the creation of literature and its functions. Persian enjoyed the pride of place in India for several centuries preceding British rule, not only as the language of administration but also as the language of knowledge and cultural exchange. It was cultivated and spoken in India from the thirteenth to the nineteenth centuries,[5] acquired a distinctly Indian flavor and came to be known as *sabak-e hindī*. It was also the mediating language through which many Indian classical texts were translated.[6] Many Mughal emperors, princes and princesses wrote belles

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[3]"Modern Urdu Literature," in *Modern Indian Literature: An Anthology*, Vol. I, ed. K.M. George (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1992), p. 422.

[4]For a concise view of the Persianate knowledge system as it obtained in India during the Mughal period and how it later facilitated the growth of an Oriental discourse, see Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, "Orientalism's Genesis Amnesia" in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and The Middle East*, Vol. XVI, No. 1 (1996).

[5]G.N. Devy, *After Amnesia: Tradition and Change in Indian Literary Criticism* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1995), p. 6. Devy, as indeed other literary historians in India such as Sisir Kumar Das, credits Persian and other Islamic languages with facilitating the rise of indigenous languages. He says, "The emergence of *bhasha* literatures coincided with, even if it was not entirely caused by, a succession of Islamic rules in India. The Islamic rulers—Arab, Turks, Mughals—brought with them new cultural concerns to India, and provided these currents legitimacy through liberal political patronage. The languages—Arabic and Persian, mainly, and Urdu which developed indigenously under their influence—brought new modes of writing poetry and music. This intimate contact with Islamic cultures created for the *bhasha* literatures new possibilities of continuous development" (p. 9).

[6]To promote harmony among different religions and communities, Emperor Akbar (r.1556–1605) sponsored debates among religious scholars of different persuasions. He also facilitated the translation of Sanskrit and Arabic texts into Persian. Persian translations from Sanskrit included *The Ramayana, The Mahabharata, Bhagavat Purana, Atharva Veda* and *Yug Bashisht*. Dara Shikoh's

lettres and discursive compositions in Persian. The Hindu Kayasth community collectively cultivated Persian to consolidate their position in the Mughal administration.[7] The language continued to hold its prominent position even when the Mughal powers declined. The British administrators had to learn it to communicate with the Mughal court and for other purposes. Men of letters, knowledge and sophistication, cutting across religion and locales, considered knowledge of Persian important for gaining insight into the great Indo-Muslim civilizational encounter. We know that Ghālib prided himself on his Persian compositions in preference to his Urdu verses. Some of the nineteenth-century Renaissance Indians, Raja Ram Mohan Roy being one of them, were great men of learning in Persian and Arabic. Swami Vivekananda had a good knowledge of Persian. Many of the famed Indologists like William Jones,[8] John

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(1615–59) interest in comparative religion led to the Persian translation of the *Upanishads*. He not only wrote *Majma'u 'l-Baḥrain* (Mingling of Oceans) to highlight the commonality between Sufi and Hindu thoughts, but caused many other Sanskrit works to be translated into Persian.

[7]"A politically influential and intellectual community in pre-colonial India, with a tradition of occupying administrative posts under both Hindu and Muslim rulers, they were fluent in Persian, Urdu, their mother tongues and frequently in Sanskrit as well. This command over more than one language, and especially over more than one script, including a rumored secret script, was a major source of their power and prosperity. It enabled Kayastha men to dominate bureaucracies in pre-colonial India, from the highest to the lowest levels, to shape policy and law, and also to acquire land." Ruth Vanita, "Gandhi's Tiger: Multilingual Elites, the Battle for Minds, and English Romantic Literature in Colonial India," in *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2002), p. 99.

[8]Jones is famed to have learned twelve languages. His knowledge of Persian language and literature was extensive. He not only wrote *A Grammar of Persian Language* (1771) but also studied and commented on almost all notable poets of post-Islamic Persia with a degree of catholicity and openness that was rare among Orientalists. The eclecticism of his taste is evident from the fact that he was almost equally enthusiastic about Sa'dī (d.1290), Ḥāfiẓ (d.1392) and Niẓāmī (1141–1211). His connection to Persianate scholars predated his arrival in India in 1783. For a precise account of his translation and appreciation of Persian poetry, see the chapter "Jones and Persian Poetry," in R.K. Kaul, *Studies in William Jones: An Interpreter of Oriental Literature* (Shimala: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1995).

Gilchrist[9] and others considered Persian essential for understanding Indian culture and literature, and acquired it to an appreciable degree. However, all this began to change imperceptibly by the middle of the nineteenth century.[10] There were compelling reasons for this change.

II

The cataclysmic events of 1857 marked the end of the court and signaled, as Percival Spear put it, a profound "break with the cultural as well as political tradition."[11] They were inevitably followed by shock, reflections and the realignment of forces within Indian society, particularly in northern India. One thing was certain—the status of Persian as the privileged language of administration, thoughts, and ideas was irrevocably lost. What we would see in the next couple of decades was the gradual flowering of vernaculars and English. I intend to investigate some aspects of this transformation which, in some cases, resulted in what Chris A. Bayly calls "epistemological balkanization" in his book *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870*.[12]

"The shift from embodied to institutional knowledge," says Bayly "was very clear in the domain of political intelligence where, by the 1830s, office memory had largely displaced the virtuosity of the munshi and the vakil."[13] Language had always remained a crippling problem with East India Company officials since they had to translate English documents into Persian and vice versa, which they could hardly do without the

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[9]For Gilchrist's pioneering work in Persian and Hindustani, see 'Atīq Ṣiddīqī, *Gilčriṣṭ aur Us kā 'Ahd* (Gillchrist and His Age) (Aligarh: Anjuman Taraqqī-e Urdū Hind, 1960).

[10]It must be pointed out, however, that despite the withdrawal of official patronage, Persian showed its considerable resilience for the following century. "It was common until the nineteen twenties, if not even later, for Persian poetry to be recited at Urdu mushairahs without the audience and the poet feeling any incongruity. Until the nineteen fifties, individual Urdu poets' collections often contained a bit of Persian poetry too." Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, *Early Urdu Literary Culture and History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 150.

[11]Percival Spear, *Twilight of the Mughuls* (1951; Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 83.

[12]Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

[13]*Ibid.*, p. 144.

mediation of Indians. It was not a happy situation from the point of view of the British rulers. William Jones voiced the frustration of the British administrators who did not know sufficient Persian to read letters and documents that often contained metaphors and poetic verses. It was highly dangerous, said Jones, "to employ the natives as interpreters upon whose fidelity they could not depend."[14] Further, beyond the question of fidelity and betrayal, translation from Persian into English often presented problems of a complex nature. As Neil Edmonstone, an influential figure in the formation of the Foreign and Political Department of India, pointed out, the rhetorical forms of Persian could not accommodate the "refined terms" and accuracy of English expression.[15] Impatience with Persian as the mediating language had been growing in the administration in the early decades of the nineteenth century and, in 1837, the Company decided to expand the use of English and Hindustani in official business.

III

The process had been set in motion with the resolution of 7 March 1835 which stipulated that funds provided should "be henceforth employed in imparting to the Native population knowledge of English literature and science through the medium of the English language."[16] Persian lost its patronage at a single stroke. Many memorialists have recorded how madrasas that taught Persian were reduced to ordinary *maktabs* or grammar schools, and attendance in them dwindled after the proclamation as there would be no new positions requiring Persian-knowing professionals like *qāẓīs*, munshis, and so on. It also resulted in the gradual loss in the status of the munshi, that hallowed and mediating figure of colonial knowledge. Though Persian would still continue to be learned and cherished by the elite for several decades, it was certainly on its way out. Sisir Kumar Das puts the entire situation in perspective when he observes:

> Twentieth century saw the final withering away of Persian after its glorious existence in Indian society for nearly six centuries. Iqbal was the last

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[14]William Jones, Preface to *A Grammar of the Persian Language*, 8th ed. (London: W. Nicol, 1823), p. 7.

[15]Edmonstone to his father, 18 April 1798, quoted in Bayly, p. 95.

[16]As quoted in Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism and the Colonial Context* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1995), p. 29.

> Indian poet to use it with mastery. Persian, however, remained a popular language among scholars, was studied in schools and colleges but no longer was it a language of literary expression in India. Being the vehicle of a great literature it continued to have an aura of respectability and remained a source of myths and legends and metaphors and imagery….[17]

Though the erosion of status enjoyed by Persian had started earlier, the upheaval of 1857 precipitated it with serious implications, particularly to the Persian-knowing and Urdu speaking Muslim elite. Members of this elite were now clearly divided into two distinct groups. One group, designated as the "traditionalists" remained obdurately hostile to the British. They realized that British power was here to stay and was not to be challenged for many years to come. Their strategy was one of withdrawing from the political contest and cultivating the traditional knowledge system that largely, though not exclusively, concentrated on religion. One great center of Muslims of this group was the theological seminary at Deobond, U.P., established in 1869. The other well-known centers were the Nadvatu 'l-'Ulamā' of Lucknow, established in 1894, and Firangī Maḥal, also in Lucknow. It seems somewhat paradoxical that it was this orthodox group that participated actively in the movement for independence, rather than the modernists, many of whom were ambivalent in their attitude towards the British. The modernists, too, believed that the old Mughal order was gone forever, but they argued that they must make their peace with the new order or perish. They embraced the impact of the West in a substantial way and set the tone for changes that were to come in the following century. I would like to examine these changes with reference to three great personalities of the time who, to my mind, best exemplify the kind of churning that was symptomatic of the literary-cultural life of the Muslims in northern India in the second half of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth century. These three are—Syed Ahmad Khan, Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād and Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī. Broadly speaking, they shared sympathies and anxieties that were common. While Syed Ahmad Khan operated mainly in the sphere of educa-

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[17]Sisir Kumar Das, *A History of Indian Literature, 1911–1956* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1995), p. 34. For an insightful study of the impact of Persian on Bengali literature and culture, see his article in Bengali, "Iran Tomar Joto Bulbul," *Desh*, Vol. LXI, No. 9 (26 Feb. 1994), pp. 27–39.

tion, manners and morals, the other two were writers of considerable merit who played a significant role in canon formation in Urdu literature.

The "modernists" have come to be known as champions of the "new light." This phrase which roughly translates as "enlightenment" is significant. In their minds, scientific progress and moral superiority were interconnected. The British were not only the greater political power, they deserved intellectual emulation as well. They were convinced that it was the mastery of modern science and the adoption of modern ways of life that had been the basis of British preeminence. They were greatly impressed by nineteenth century European rationalism, empiricism and dynamism. Syed Ahmad Khan conceived the idea of a special journal *Tehżību 'l-Akhlāq* to disseminate these ideals. As he knew he was addressing an audience largely orthodox in their religious outlook, he broadened his approach by setting down as a basic principle of Quranic exegesis that if a passage could be given a naturalistic explanation, that explanation must be accepted. Even paradise and hell could be interpreted as allegories and metaphors. *The Aligarh Institute Gazette* exhorted Muslims to "distinguish laws and social customs and institutions from religion in its strict sense."[18] It was pragmatism triumphing over obscurantism. *Tehżību 'l-Akhlāq* also rigorously engaged with questions of morals and manners. A major intellectual inspiration was Joseph Addison, the eighteenth-century essayist who advocated "Rational Piety." He was, until recently, a regular part of the curriculum in colleges and universities. The journal exhorting Muslims to reform their worldview had a catalytic effect on society. A small but vocal group of Muslims rose against religious orthodoxy and obscurantist conventions. Threatened by Syed Ahmad Khan's efforts to modernize society, his adversaries in the community aired their indignation by writing extensively in newspapers and periodicals, colonial modernity's most attractive weapon for instantaneous dissemination and publicity. All this facilitated the spread of the vernacular. It has to be admitted, however, that Syed Ahmad Khan often carried his enthusiasm for Western manners and morals to a fine excess for which he was severely criticized. Periodicals like *Avadʰ Pančˇ* (founded by Munshī Sajjād Ḥusain, 1877) thrived by bashing the Aligarh school, and poets like Akbar Ilāhābādī (1846–1921) provided a counterpoint to Syed Ahmad Khan's rather uncritical Anglophilia by making him a target of their barbed satire

[18]Ayesha Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam Since 1850* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 76.

and cutting wit. However, what is of interest to us here is Syed Ahmad Khan's views on language and on how knowledge could be widely disseminated.

IV

The champions of the "new light" also shared what may be called a translated sensibility. Their minds were shaped to a considerable extent by their readings of Western texts in translation and their active participation in the process of translating and editing those texts. Translation into easier and simple Hindustani was started by John Gilchrist with the establishment of Fort William College in Calcutta in 1800. Later, the Delhi College performed a seminal role in making Western knowledge available in simple Hindustani. The onslaught that the Persianate knowledge system faced with the advent of Western ideas and thoughts was stupendous. C. M. Naim puts the issue in perspective when he says,

> The decline of "Oriental" learning, the increasing awareness on the part of literate people of the range of scientific knowledge available in English, and the need to provide school texts in regional vernaculars, led a number of individuals and associations to produce translations as well as original works in Urdu in the realm of what was seen as *ilm* (knowledge; science), as opposed to *shi'r* and *dastan* (poetry and tales). It is interesting to note that just when the teachers and students at the famous Delhi College (for the instruction of the natives) were engaged in translating into Urdu books on analytical geometry, optics, and galvanism, Goldsmith's *History of England*, selections from Plutarch's *Lives*, and Abercrombie's *Mental Philosophy*, the traditional *munshi*s at the equally famous College of Fort William (for the instruction of British officers) were busy putting into simple Urdu the *Gulistān* of Sa'di, the *Tale of the Four Dervishes*, the *Tale of Amir Hamza*, *Singhāsan Battisi*, the *Shakuntala* of Kalidasa, and a selection of stories from the *Arabian Nights*…[19]

[19]C.M. Naim, "Prize-Winning *Adab*: A Study of Five Urdu Books Written in Response to the Allahabad Government Gazette Notification," in *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam*, ed. Barbara Metcalfe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 291.

Slowly, Urdu acquired the status of a mediating language between Persian and regional Indian languages, and the imperial court began to use it for conducting its affairs with the regional powers.

Central to Syed Ahmad Khan's agenda of social reform was the establishment of the Scientific Society[20] at Ghazipur, later shifted to Aligarh. As the name suggests, the society was established to foster a scientific attitude. A key activity of this society was translation of English texts from literature, science, social science, agriculture, philosophy, and so on. To be sure, translation was at the center of the intellectual climate of the time. The colonial administration gave utmost encouragement to the translation of Western texts that would facilitate the process of acculturation. Āzād was actively engaged in Anjuman-e Punjab's key activities, one of which was translation of English texts into Urdu. And Ḥālī's job in the Punjab Government Book Depot consisted of editing and supervising the publication of books translated from English to Urdu. It would be unfair to expect that the translators in that period were sensitive to the various aspects of complex cultural negotiations, and to such concepts as the fact that "translation as a practice shapes, and takes shape within, the asymmetrical relations of power that operate under colonialism."[21] In fact, if one takes a close look at the translated literary texts of that period it will be found that translators were not unduly concerned about loyalty to the original text nor did they agonize much over producing a definitive version or edition of a text. Translations—more specifically, literary translations—were carried out more or less in the "fluent tradition," as Lawrence Venuti defines it in the context of English translation of Latin American texts in North America, where translations often masqueraded as the original.[22] Translators and commentators often freely adapted ideas and texts at second, third or fourth hand.[23] However, this does not

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[20]For a detailed study of the objectives and achievements of the society, see Irfan Habib, "Syed Ahmad Khan and Modernization: The Role of Aligarh Scientific Society in the Mid-Nineteenth Century India," in *Sir Syed Ahmad Khan: A Centenary Tribute*, ed. Asloob Ahmad Ansari (Delhi: Adam Publishers & Distributors, 2001), pp. 214–31.

[21]Niranjana, p. 2.

[22]*The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London: Routledge, 1995).

[23]For instance, Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī in his *Muqaddama* gives quite a bit of space to discuss Milton's concept of poetry as "simple, passionate and sensuous." But the tenor of his discussion leaves one in doubt as to whether he picked up the

detract from the fact that increased translation activity along with the spread of print media were crucial factors in the growth and spread of indigenous languages and the gradual disappearance of Persian.

V

Among the modernists, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817–98) was the towering figure who fiercely advocated reform in Muslim society. He was steeped in history as demonstrated by a whole range of writings, from editing Abu 'l-Faẓl's *Ā'īn-e Akbarī* to writing *Āṣāru 's-Ṣanādīd* (1847), his famed tome on the historical monuments of Delhi. It was only natural that he should engage himself with the historical destiny of the Indian Muslims.[24] He expounded his ideas in a ceaseless stream of books, pamphlets and essays. For our present purpose we will confine ourselves mainly to his views on education and to his advocacy of the Urdu vernacular or English in place of Persian. During his sojourn in England in 1869 he brought out a pamphlet entitled, *Strictures on the Present State of English Education in India*. The argument he made in the book was that the government system of schools had failed to achieve either popular mass education or the stimulation of intellectual creativity. Before the coming of British rule, India had been notable for men of genuine learning and original thought. The sum total of all that had been effected by the English college has been to qualify an insignificant number of people as letter writers, copyists, signal men and railway ticket collectors. He believed that Indians of his, i.e., the older, generation had been better educated, educated to occupy positions of power. Now the equivalent education was confined to Englishmen in England. He suggested a three-tiered education system—and said that such a system could succeed in bringing about genuine cultural change if it was conducted in the vernacular even at the highest level. His advocacy of the vernacular was prompted by his eagerness to reach out to a wider

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terms from Milton's "Tractate of Education," where they originally occurred in the context of children's education, or from Macaulay's essay on Milton, or Coleridge's discussion of them in *Biographia Literaria*, or from some other source. This is an interesting area in Translation Studies waiting to be explored, and likely to reveal interesting, curious, and even comical results.

[24]For a synoptic view of Syed Ahmad Khan's works related to history and archaeology, see the essays by Iqtidar Husain Siddiqui, Nazir Ahmad and Z.U. Malik in Ansari.

public so that knowledge was not confined to men of leisure only. It is worth recalling that in mid-nineteenth-century England, literature had gained a significance which went far beyond any view of it as polite pastime alone. English literature had come to be viewed as embodying the cultural history of the nation, or as Charles Kingsley put it in his inaugural lecture at the Queen's College in London in 1848, literature was nothing less than "the autobiography of the nation." Syed Ahmad Khan thought that if Indians were now to write the autobiography of their nation they had to write it in their own language and not in Persian.

When he established the Aligarh Mohammedan College in 1875, the desirable goal was to be able to conduct higher education in Urdu. And when the Oriental department was opened there in 1876 he made suggestions about Urdu textbooks in sciences and mathematics as well. But in practice, the course followed the lines of the Calcutta University except that Arabic and Persian remained the language of literature, logic and philosophy, and Urdu of history, geography, science and mathematics. English was taught as a second language. But as the courses got going Syed Ahmad Khan saw the effort towards vernacular education in action reaching one stumbling block after another and he was greatly disillusioned. Insistence on teaching through vernacular textbooks inevitably meant a lowering of standards. He was saddened by this painful realization. His earlier assumption that the mother tongue is the best medium for instruction received a severe jolt. He gave voice to this new realization in his testimony before W. W. Hunter's Education Commission in 1882.

Syed Ahmad Khan began his testimony by saying that although he was the original architect of the idea that students should be taught in the "vernacular," his view had undergone a change in light of the actual practice in the university. He now believed that the language of the ruling power must become the language of scholarship. He further pointed out that some of the exact sciences might require only very rudimentary English, since they consisted largely of universal symbols and technical terms. What really concerned him more now were what he called the "uncertain sciences," such as history, logic, philosophy, political economy, and jurisprudence. Here, however, the difficulties that he envisaged were not over technical vocabulary, or keeping up with the literature. The major obstacle was the style of expression communicated in ordinary Urdu. And, here he made a value-loaded statement that would infuriate Edward Said and a lot of others. In Urdu, according to Syed Ahmad Khan, it was virtually impossible to write without exaggeration, to separate metaphor from concrete reality. The remedy for this lay in English education. "As long as

our community does not, by means of English education, become familiar with the exactness of thought and unlearn the looseness of expression, our language cannot be the means of high mental and moral training."[25] Language, according to his way of thinking, was not a passive tool to express one's ideas and experiences but an active agent molding the thought processes of its speakers and practitioners.

In this way, through the quirk of a set of circumstances, quite an easy transition took place from Urdu to English. One major goal of education, then, was gaining a high level of competence in English. Concepts in the arts and in social science subjects, as well as those of the natural sciences were to be taught in English. In other words, whatever was being taught, the primacy of English was firmly established, "not only its vocabulary and grammar, but genres and styles of exposition and expression as they had developed in the historical tradition of English literature. English was no neutral tool; it was to be an intentional instrument of acculturation to Victorian values, and ideas."[26] It was almost like Macaulay's dream come true.

VI

Syed Ahmad Khan's support for the British in political matters and his educational and reformist programs influenced both Āzād and Ḥālī. Ḥālī was, of course, a close follower who totally identified with the Aligarh Movement. Āzād was less enthusiastic though he seemed to be in sympathy with some core issues espoused by Syed Ahmad Khan. The three of them were in touch with one another, drawing strength from each other's intellectual resources for their own pursuits. Syed Ahmad Khan never failed to appreciate the literary achievements of Āzād and Ḥālī. His high praise for Ḥālī's *Musaddas* is part of Urdu's literary history. Similarly, he praised Āzād for his advocacy of new poetic values and what he interpreted as Āzād's advocacy of "natural poetry." In a letter to Āzād written on 29 October 1882, he says:

> I had wanted for a long time to see our poets turn their attention to nature. I received your *masnavi*, *Khwab Aman*, and was happy to note the

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[25]Syed Ahmad Khan's testimony to the Education Commission, in *Aligarh Institute Gazette*, Supplement, 5 August 1882, as quoted in Lelyveld, pp. 206–7.

[26]*Ibid.*, p. 207.

> realistic poetry and the forceful expression in it. There are still many fanciful things there. Bring your poetry closer to nature. The closer it is to nature, the more interesting it will be. Don't heed to people's taunts. It is necessary to borrow ideas from English poets and express them in Urdu….[27]

If Syed Ahmad Khan advocated educational reforms, Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād and Alṯāf Ḥusain Ḥālī raised serious questions about Urdu literature, mainly Urdu poetry. In their efforts to establish new canons of literature, they held up to scrutiny some of the long-standing assumptions about Persian and Urdu poetry and questioned their relevance in the new age.[28]

Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād (1830–1910) who "set the new tradition of literary prose for generations to come"[29] still remains the unrivaled master of Urdu prose. His life is an eventful one, and his literary career, according to the prominent Urdu critic Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, "can be described as a triumph of British techniques of management and control in India."[30] His father, the fiery editor of the periodical *Delhī Urdū*

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[27]Quoted in Shamīm Ḥanfī, "Bāzdīd: Maulānā Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād kē Lekčar 'Naẓm-e Urdū aur Kalām-e Mauzōṅ kē Bāb Mēṅ Khayālāt' par," in *Urdū Adab* (New Delhi) July–Sept. 2001, p. 47 [my translation].

[28]Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, while recognizing the seminal contribution of Āzād and Ḥālī, points to some deleterious effects of their response to the Western thought: "We must therefore remember that before the advent of western ideas, Urdu literature was … a true child of the Indo-Muslim ethos, unaffected (I would almost say "untainted") by the feeling of embarrassment and guilt about poetry that had run like an undercurrent in the literary theories of the western world for two thousand years. Never had Urdu literature been called upon to declare whether it was on the side of truth and reality, or of fiction and imagination. Never had it been required to defend itself against charges of social uselessness and harmfulness…. It had always believed that what was important was what Nayaka had long ago called *vyāpara*, that is, the poet's mode of doing things with words and themes. Now Urdu literature was suddenly in the dock, fighting for its life, charged with the crime of degeneracy and moral bankruptcy." In his "Modern Urdu Literature," p. 424.

[29]Ali Jawad Zaidi, *A History of Urdu Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1993), p. 238.

[30]Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, "Constructing a Literary History, a Canon and a Theory of Poetry," in *Shaping the Canon of Urdu Poetry: Muhammad Husain Azad's Āb-e Hayaat* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 19. For Āzād's biography and a critical perspective on his achievements, see Aslam Farrukhī,

Akhbār, was fiercely anti-British and supported the 1857 uprisings. He was hanged by the British in the most gruesome manner. Āzād had to flee for his life. After several years of wandering he reached Lahore in 1864 and found employment in a minor clerical job in the Department of Public Instruction. He supplemented his income by providing tuitions to Englishmen in Urdu. In 1864–65 he tutored Dr. G. W. Leitner, Principal of Government College in Lahore, who worked all his life for the promotion of the development of Western learning in Indian languages. In 1865 Āzād established Anjuman-e Punjab whose objectives were "revival of ancient learning, the advancement of popular knowledge through vernaculars, [and] the discussion of social, literary, scientific and political questions…."[31] The Anjuman was considered a great success and it is reported that because of this initiative, many cities began to manifest, "a growing interest in vernacular literature impregnated with the spirit of the west."[32] Āzād participated actively in the Anjuman's work and soon became a venerable figure of wide erudition, even though he seemed to have accepted the concept of British superiority and paternalism uncritically.

Āzād's ideas about Urdu poetry and poetics, and his sense of urgency to reform them, were first given public expression in his famous lecture on 9 May 1874, which he delivered under the aegis of the Anjuman-e Punjab. Many of his later ideas are prefigured in this extremely polemical lecture which caused a stir in literary circles. Besides a cross section of Indian scholars, several Englishmen of high official rank attended it. Āzād called for a new poetics, and a new kind of poetry based largely on English models. Taking recourse in a telling anthropomorphic metaphor, he pointed out that Urdu poetry had become old and decrepit because of the overuse of Persian literary devices. He went on to point out that Urdu poets had, in fact, produced all the literary embellishments found in Persian poetry. While Persian had given them the power of expressing through metaphors extremely complex and refined thoughts, it had also

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Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād, Vol. I & II (Karachi: Anjuman Taraqqī-e Urdū, 1965), Muḥammad Ṣādiq, *Āb-e Ḥayāt kī Ḥimāyat Mēṅ aur Dūsrē Maẕāmīn* (Lahore: Majlis-e Taraqqī-e Adab, 1973), Mas'ūd Ḥasan Riẓvī Adīb, *Āb-e Ḥayāt kā Tanqīdī Muṭāli'a* (Lucknow: Kitāb Nagar, 1964), and Frances W. Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and Its Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

[31]Reference not available. —*Editor.*

[32]Muhammad Sadiq, *Muhammad Husain Azad: His Life and Works* (Lahore: West-Pakistan Publishing Co., 1974), p. 24.

made them prone to verbiage, obscure conceit and endless artifices. Moreover, poetry in this rich language was limited to a small number of themes which were fanciful and not realistic. All this could be remedied if Urdu poetry were clothed in "new kinds of jewellery and robes of honour of the current times that are tucked away in the safe boxes of the English."[33] To redress this situation he advanced a scheme of radical reform in the idiom of poetry.

The agenda articulated in the lecture was given a more elaborate form in his book *Āb-e Ḥayāt* (1880), the first history of Urdu literature, or rather Urdu poetry, which was, in any case, almost synonymous with Urdu literature at the time.[34] It is a significant improvement on the earlier *tażkira* tradition—which merely gave impressionistic and often laudatory accounts of poets without any clear chronology, context, or critical perspective—in the sense that "… for the first time it presents Urdu poetry against some sort of historical background and gives critical assessments of the poets in something approaching a modern style."[35] It is a monumental effort in constructing a literary history and a poetics. Āzād divides the history of Urdu poetry into five periods, of unequal length and emphasis, and describes the main characteristics of each period in his own inimitable metaphorical style. There is no scope for a detailed discussion about *Āb-e Ḥayāt* here, but what needs emphasis is Āzād's readiness to write off a segment of Persian heritage in favor of English. The following statements are self-evident.

> There are many thoughts and themes in English that our language cannot express. That is, the enjoyment they produce in the English language can't be fully conveyed in Urdu. Which in reality is a result of the weakness of the language, and this is a cause of the greatest shame for its native speakers.[36]

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[33]Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād, *Naẓm-e Āzād*, ed. Tabassum Kāshmīrī (Lahore: Maktaba-e 'Āliya, 1899), p. 46.

[34]"From early in the eighteenth century until about 1870 Urdu literature and Urdu poetry are virtually synonymous terms. Almost all prose was in highly stylized Persian, and what little Urdu prose there was, imitated this style of writing." Ralph Russell, *Hidden in the Lute: An Anthology of Two Centuries of Urdu Literature* (New Delhi: Viking, 1995), p. 181.

[35]Ralph Russell, *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature: A Select History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 121.

[36]Faruqi, *Shaping the Canon of Urdu Poetry*, p. 91.

> It is an unhappy state of affairs that our poetry has become ensnared in the coils of a few trifling ideas: that is, romantic themes, carefree drinking of wine, creating illusory colours and scents without the rose or the rose garden, bewailing the calamity of separation, delighting in imaginary union, feeling an aversion to the world, and on top of this experiencing the oppression of the heavens. And the outrageous thing is that if we want to speak of some real matter, we express that very idea in metaphors—the result of which is that we can do nothing. My friends! I see that the exhibition hall of sciences and arts is open, and all the peoples have been displaying the handiwork of their literature. Don't you see at what level our language stands? Yes—you can clearly see—she lies there on the doormat![37]

Predictably, the views expressed by Āzād in his Anjuman lecture evoked a storm of protest. He was accused of rank capitulation to the British, of writing a language that was Urdu in external form but was derived from English in its content. He was reminded that Urdu had inherited the Perso-Arabic tradition and had incorporated Indian elements into it in such a way that it had been able to encompass all aspects of life as its *maẓmūn* or subject matter. And finally, he was told, poetry could not sustain itself and give pleasure without using similes and metaphors?[38] Āzād must have been hard put to respond to such questions, but there is no evidence, as the above extracts demonstrate, that he changed his opinion about Urdu poetry and poetics in any significant way. There are a number of such statements in *Āb-e Ḥayāt* that would be sheer delight to critics of Orientalism for showing how deeply the insidious power of Western hegemony ran in dazzling and seducing Eastern minds. However, it would be naïve to believe that a person of Āzād's prescience and insight, steeped in Persian, Arabic and Urdu scholarship was simply blinded by the new knowledge explosion from the West. The answer must be sought not simply in the popular postcolonial paradigm of Caliban-like mimicry, but in a more comprehensive framework of the literary impact-response paradigm. His family's stormy relationship with the British, the changed power equation after 1857, and changes in the nature of literary patronage—all these seem to have played their roles in influencing his views. But it appears quite reasonable to argue that his

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[37] *Ibid.*, p. 103.

[38] *Farrukhī*, pp. 48–51.

overzealousness sprang from a genuine concern to purge Urdu poetry of what he thought were undesirable elements that had crept into it over a period of time, and to anchor it firmly in Indian soil. This also will explain his clear, though not elaborately worked out, nativist agenda in *Āb-e Ḥayāt*.

VII

Ḥālī (1837-1914), the first practitioner of theoretical criticism in Urdu, was a junior contemporary of Āzād. After spending his formative years in Delhi as a disciple of Ghālib, he went to Lahore where he worked in the Government Book Depot from 1870 to 1874. Ḥālī's responsibility there was to edit and amend textbooks which had been translated from English into Urdu. As a result, he became acquainted with a variety of works of English literature and literary criticism and of European philosophy and science. Ḥālī describes how, through this, he developed a relationship with English literature, and the prestige of Eastern literature, especially Persian literature, declined in his heart.[39] Elsewhere Ḥālī mentions how translation from English into Urdu, especially under the aegis of the Aligarh Scientific Institute and *Tahżību 'l-Akhlāq*, transformed literary taste, with the result that the status of Persian literature fell considerably, and "the spirit of western imagining" was blown into Urdu literature.[40] It is only reasonable to assume that all these impressions and influences had gone into the making of his poetic and critical sensibility. His *Muqaddama She'r-o-Shā'erī*, which roughly translates as "Introduction to Poetry and Poetics," is a long essay that appeared in 1893 as a preface to his collection of poems. This long essay that later took the form of a book has remained, over the last century, the most influential work of literary criticism in Urdu. Though Ḥālī's thoughts in the *Muqaddama* are largely derivative, they have been put across with a force and conviction all his own, so much so that his considerable reputation as a poet seems to have been eclipsed by his stature as a critic and as the writer of the *Muqad-*

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[39]"Ḥālī," in *Nuqūsh: Āp-Bītī Nambar*, ed. Muḥammad Ṭufail (Lahore: Idāra-e Farōgh-e Urdū, 1964), p. 284.

[40]Ḥālī, *Majmū'a-e Naẓm-e Ḥālī* (Delhi: Matba'e Murtazai, 1890), p. 2., as quoted in *Hali's Musaddas: The Flow and Ebb of Islam*, trans. with a critical introduction by Christopher Shackle and Javed Majeed (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 6.

dama.[41] The *Muqaddama* is divided into three sections. In the first section Ḥālī discusses the role of poetry in earlier societies. Societies, he says, have their own effect on poetry. The evils of a society and the faults of a period may vitiate poetry, leading to the corruption of national morality. In a republic a poet can make great progress if he is not too popular. For the reform of poetry, however, it is necessary that only the highest and the most excellent examples of poetry be put before the public. In the second section Ḥālī presents the ideas he derived from Milton. Poetry should have simplicity (*ṣādgī*), should spring from emotion (*jōsh*) and should be based on truth (*aṣlīyat*).[42] However, as he begins to explain these concepts he entraps himself in what seems, from today's vantage point, a welter of contradictions, unexamined half-truths and ill-conceived formulations. The unqualified acceptance of certain notions of poetry prevalent in the Romantic and early Victorian period leads him to devalue aspects of the Urdu-Persian literary tradition. He finds fault with the ghazal for being artificial and obtuse, the *maṣnavī* for a lack of coherent plot and character development, the *qaṣīda* for being full of hyperbole, and with *marṣiya* for a lack of verisimilitude. He reprimands Urdu poets for merely imitating ancient poets and he exhorts them to desist from using lies and exaggerations in their poetry because these may have a profoundly negative impact on the people. In the third section he deals with the concept of natural poetry. Natural poetry, according to him, means poetry written in accordance with nature in both words and meaning. The words should be those of common speech and the meaning should be concerned with things of this world. He gives his illustrations of natural and unnatural poetry.

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[41]For a detailed discussion of *Muqaddama*, see Laurel Steele, "Hali's *Muqaddamah*: The Creation of a Literary Attitude in Nineteenth Century India" in *Annual of Urdu Studies*, No. 1 (1981), pp. 1–45.

[42]Steele summarizes this section of the *Muqaddama* as follows: "Simplicity means that in both words and thoughts there should be simplicity. The thought should not be so refined and abstruse that it could not be understood by common people. The basis of poetry should be known things.... Poetry should inspire emotion (*josh*) in the hearts of its listeners. The poet, when he is reciting, should keep the thoughts of his listeners in mind, and his own natural emotions should be made apparent through his poetry. That poetry should be based on reality (*asliyat*) means its subject or the idea in it should be something that is present in actuality, and not made-up or imaginary. The similes and allegories should also be true—that is, not fictional." *Ibid.,* p. 30.

It is curious that Ḥālī does not mention Persian in a single one of his 83 chapter headings. Behind all his exhortations and advice there runs one underlying theme: the old world is gone and with that some of the old literary conventions have lost their relevance. In his view, poetry, as a reflection of society, must also change in response to the new forces let loose in India. That is why he calls for poetry that is true and natural. However, he failed to realize that the yardstick for evaluating Urdu literature must be its own, and that the concerns of Western literary theorists were not, necessarily, relevant to it. As one Urdu critic puts it, "Hali was so profoundly influenced by Syed Ahmad Khan and so overawed by the West's intellectual onslaught that even those points that he could have illustrated quite easily by reference to Eastern literature have been explained by him through the works of the authors from the West."[43]

The question of Ḥālī's English sources, as hinted at earlier, is an interesting one. Vaḥīd Qurēshī[44] and Mumtāz Ḥusain[45] have dealt specifically with this subject to demonstrate that Ḥālī's borrowings and his readings of English sources leave much to be desired. It is still a matter of speculation whether Ḥālī was acquainted with Wordsworth's "Preface" to *The Lyrical Ballads*. The *Muqaddama* has a close resemblance to it. Like Wordsworth's "Preface," the *Muqaddama* was written as an introduction to Ḥālī's collection of ghazals. Moreover, Ḥālī's ideas about the use of everyday themes and of the language of common speech have a close affinity with Wordsworth's. It is difficult to believe that all this is a matter of sheer coincidence. In the final analysis it seems reasonable to conclude as Frances Pritchett does: "We cannot say how well Ḥālī controlled his English sources, and how much he was at the mercy of translators. But certainly he knew what he wanted to say, and went looking for English writers who would help him say it."[46]

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[43]Saiyid Muḥammad 'Aqīl, "Mashriqī Ḥālī par Maghrib kā Nau-Adabiyātī Dabā'ō," in *Ghālibnāma* (New Delhi), Vol. 23, No. 2 (July 2002), p. 187 [my translation].

[44]Vaḥīd Qurēshī, ed., *Muqaddama She'r-o-Shā'erī* (Aligarh: Educational Book House, 1977).

[45]Mumtāz Ḥusain, *Ḥālī kē She'rī Naẓariyāt: Ēk Tanqīdī Muṭāli'a* (Karachi: Sanad Publications, 1988).

[46]Pritchett, p. 151.

VIII

Thus, by the early decades of the twentieth century the Persian language and the knowledge system that emanated from it had both been slowly and gradually replaced by English and other indigenous languages, Urdu being one of them. These languages came to fill the literary-discursive space occupied earlier by Persian. Just one and a half centuries earlier, as Bayly observes, "… large numbers of Muslim, Kayastha and Khattri boys entered open educational institutions in the great Indo-Muslim cities to learn basic Persian…."[47] Now the hunger was for learning English to meet the current needs. Charles Trevelyan depicts this hunger most graphically in his treatise *On the Education of the People of India* (1838).[48] Syed Ahmad Khan, Āzād and Ḥālī were able to discern that they were living in an age of transition and that vast changes were going to take place. They were men of great learning in Arabic, Persian and Urdu, but found the world radically changed after 1857. It effectively shook their confidence in their own culture and literary aesthetics. The earlier confidence of the poet and the writer which sprang from knowing their society and their place in it, was lost forever. It was replaced by an anxious relationship between the poet, his elusive patron(s) and readers. These three men tried to shore up some core elements of their culture and literature and to find some relevance for them in the changed environment, even while shedding what they thought were those elements that were merely decorative or even decadent. This was a huge task and they committed mistakes in their judgments, as men in an age of transition tend to do. But their mistakes do not take away from their singular achievements. The issues they grappled with have not yet lost their relevance. Their views are still discussed and debated vigorously in classrooms. They have

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[47]Bayly, p. 5.

[48]"The passion for English knowledge has penetrated the most obscure, and extended to the most remote parts of India. The steam boats, passing up and down the Ganges, are boarded by native boys, begging, not for money, but for books…. Some gentlemen coming to Calcutta were astonished at the eagerness with which they were pressed for books by a troop of boys, who boarded the steamer from an obscure place called Comercolly [*sic*]. A Plato was lying on the table, and one of the party asked a boy whether that would serve his purpose. 'Oh Yes,' he exclaimed, 'give me any book; all I want is a book.' The gentleman at last hit upon the expedient of cutting up an old *Quarterly Review*, and distributing the articles among them." As quoted in Niranjana, p. 1.

not yet been supplanted by any radical rethinking in matters of the education system, literary historiography, and poetics and literary criticism in Urdu. ❐