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Remembering and Re-telling 1857 and late Mughal rule in early 20th century Urdu literature

By

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THESIS

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Sarmad, without whom this project would not have come to completion, without a doubt. Thank you for mothering me patiently through this journey.

And lastly, myself. I have withheld compassion from my own self at every stage of life rather cruelly, and that must change.

Abstract

1857 remains a central watershed in the North Indian history, marking an end to the Mughal rule and permanently altering the material and social landscape of North India. This research analyzes the accounts of 1857 and the late Mughal rule by North Indian Urdu authors written in the early 20th century. These texts revisit and reimagine the pre-1857 Mughal rule in explicit contestation with the British hegemonic accounts dominating the narratives around 1857. The authors use highly politically coded pre-modern Indo-Persian literary forms to challenge British narratives and stereotypes associated with the Mughal rule. The metaphor and ornate prose of pre-modern forms emerge as important modes of political critique that employ the subversive charge of emotions, an impulse much censured by both British and Indian reformists. The texts under study perform a vindication of the last Mughal king and retrospectively venerate him as a Sufi-king and patron of intercommunal peace, called the '*ganga-yamuni tehzeeb*' in the texts. Rich myth-making around his figure takes place whilst employing Karbala allegory, historically used for its revolutionary symbolism- affirming divine support for the late Mughal king and reversing the narrative of the British material victory. The *marsiya* genre lends itself to the lament and nostalgia for the lost Mughal rule. Spatial memorialization of places associated with the Mughal rule resonates with the Indo-Persian *shahr ashob* genre, implying the upending of a just rule. This memorialization commemorates the Mughal discourse of sovereignty and its place in the North Indian social imagination, refuting British attempts at its mimicking through colonial re-enactments. This 'counter-memory' constitutes a rich yet neglected archive of re-visiting 1857, important in its exploration of intergenerational lore, social memory, and anecdotal history, and contestations with institutionalized history.

A Note on Translation and Transliteration

I have transliterated Urdu passages the way a native Urdu speaker would read them. I have used apostrophes to guide the reader's pronunciation where necessary. Words that are originally English (e.g. fancy) or have been Anglicized or absorbed in English (e.g. munshi, Yamuna) have been written according to their English spellings.

Delhi has been written as Dilli in all pre-1857 references to the city, a personal fancy of mine.

Most translations have been done by Hamza Naseer, a literature and philosophy student at Forman Christian College Lahore, with the help of his father Anser Naseer, and friend Mariam Rauf. All those translations are denoted by Hamza's initials.

A few translations have been done by Taniya Ihsan Ahmed, literature student at Kinnaird College Lahore. Those are indicated by her initials.

The translations without any initials have been done by me although it has been difficult to convey the Urdu literary sensibility of the time in translation; and I apologize for any errors and shortcomings.

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Introduction

1857 remains a momentous event in Indian history that permanently altered the North Indian space. It is often called a moment of rupture that drove a wedge between the world preceding it and after; an event that arguably had set in motion the very notion of ‘history’ itself for these people¹.

The uprising at the time was limited to a few centers, however the symbolic importance imbued to it has borne the test of time and resulted in its many afterlives. It has at once been used by Muslim reformers to argue for Anglicized reform, colonial apologists to justify British superiority, Indian nationalists to mobilize for the cause of independence, anti-colonialist activists to critique British rule, Sikh diaspora revolutionaries to wage a transnational resistance to colonial rule, and these are only the well-known interpretations. Many more have invoked 1857, each ascribing their own meaning to the uprising.

There is something to be said about this event that gives it the rhetorical force and resonance that makes people turn to it again and again. Multiple discourses, memories and myths have been constructed around 1857; it transcends the bounds of institutional history and

¹ Shamsur Rehman Faruqi talks about the pre-modern synchronic conception of time in Indo-Muslim imaginary. He attributes the lack of literary histories in classical Indo-Muslim languages to the fact that “before the modern age... the present and past cultural production- or literary production certainly- was viewed in those centuries as existing simultaneously: there was no real past; everything was synchronic.” British modernity coupled with print capitalism is said to have introduced a new conception of time different from the pre-modern social time. Print technology and simultaneously rapid social changes impelled the notion of a past that could be lost that had to be then preserved and studied. I have borrowed the concept of social time from Megan Eaton Robb’s usage of it in “Print and the Urdu Public” and the colonial introduction of a linear time from Pernau’s Nostalgia. Shamsur Rahman Faruqi. ‘Constructing a Literary History, a Canon, and a Theory of Poetry: Ab-e Ḥayāt (1880) by Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād (1830-1910)’. *Social Scientist*, 1995, p. 73; Robb, Megan Eaton. *Print and the Urdu Public: Muslims, Newspapers, and Urban Life in Colonial India*. 1st ed., Oxford University Press, 2020. DOI.org (Crossref), doi:10.1093/oso/9780190089375.001.0001; M. Pernau. ‘Nostalgia: Tears of Blood for a Lost World’. *South Asia Graduate Research Journal (SAGAR)*.

remembrance. As the Ghadar movement of Sikh revolutionaries in California (1913) suggests, it also surpasses physical geography.

North Indian landscape was irreversibly altered in the wake of 1857; it brought an end to the enervated Mughal political rule, permanently changed the cityscape and also radically affected the city demography by casualties, migrations and displacements. This is one of the reasons 1857 remains an especially potent symbol in the North Indian imagination. To give an idea of the multiple ways North Indian peoples have imagined this event, I will mention two examples. Ethnographic research conducted immediately after independence in North India found that a tomb in a small village near Deoband is believed by the villagers to belong to a saint who protected the village from British attack during 1857. Any threat to the tomb is seen as an existential threat to the village itself². There also exists rich Dalit storytelling around 1857 that the community has memorialized, and that has symbolically served as a sense of belonging not just to the uprising but the broader cause of Indian independence and Dalit contribution to it³. According to this alternative historiography, the revolt of 1857 itself was initiated by an untouchable chamar Matadin Bhangi whose taunt to Mangal Pandey regarding the loss of caste from biting animal grease cartridges initiated the rebellion⁴.

Stories like this illuminate the generative cultural discourse and rich and diverse social memory built around 1857. Carol Henderson writes that ‘the memorialization of 1857 renders not

² Carol Henderson. ‘Spatial Memorialising of War in 1857’. *Mutiny at the Margins*, ed. Crispin Bates. Vol. 1, Sage Publications, 2003, pp. 217-237.

³ Crispin Bates, ed. *Mutiny at the Margins: Muslim, Dalit and Subaltern Narratives*. Vol. 5, Sage Publications, 2004. Jhalkari Bai, Umadevi and Avantibai are famous Dalit figures associated with 1857.

⁴ Badri Narayan Tiwari. ‘Reactivating the Past: Dalits and Memories of 1857’. *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 42, no. 19, 2007, pp. 1734–38.

a univocal subalternity, but potential multiple discourses⁵.’ These narratives constitute an archive of popular memories of 1857 but having been pushed to the periphery of lore are only recognized as alternative, “micro”-histories. Instead of concluding here, the conversation must lead to an interrogation of the notion of institutional history itself and what constitutes it. As Soofia Siddique says, “the challenge for micro-narratives remains to be able to negotiate with and potentially unsettle the terms of established ‘Histories’, rather than exist only as parallel discourses⁶”.

This is significant especially because the official discursive space was dominated by British hegemonic accounts of the Mutiny and an entire Anglo-Indian literary industry grew out of the ‘Mutiny.’ That lends a more enigmatic and emphatic aspect to the cultural memories of Indians that did come out of the uprising, circulating and surviving outside of institutional histories. The Indian narratives around 1857 are so little known for lack of institutional accommodation that Dipesh Chakrabarty was led to imply almost none existed⁷. A similarly neglected archive of Urdu books from the early 20th century exists that has long been overlooked in the scholarship around 1857 and the Mughal rule.

These texts are *Begmaat ke Ansu* (1914-1918) by Khwaja Hasan Nizami (1878-1955), *Phoolwalon ki sair* (1927) by Mirza Farhatullah Beg (1883-1947), *Wida e Zafar* (1928) and *Ghadr ki maari Shehzadiyan* (1929-32) by Rashid ul Khairi (1868-1936)⁸. These four books are the primary texts of this research.

⁵ Carol Henderson. *Mutiny at the Margins*. p. 218

⁶ Soofia Siddique. *Remembering the Revolt of 1857*. p.255

⁷ Dipesh Chakrabarty. ‘Remembering 1857: An Introductory Note’. *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 42, no. 19, 2007, pp. 1692–95.

⁸ Khwaja Hasan Nizami was a prolific writer and social reformer of his time associated with the Sufi shrine of Nizamuddin Auliya. Mirza Farhatullah Beg was a writer hailing from a Dilli family who spent most of his adult life in Hyderabad. His most famous writing is ‘Dilli ki Akhri Shama’, nostalgic account of a *mushaira* in pre-1857 Dilli. Rashid ul Khairi was a relative of Nazir Ahmed and a prolific, best-selling Urdu author of his time, also known for

These books, even though published by different writers and with a gap of many years, and so in no way a homogeneous category or a collective intervention, were an anomaly for the time when they were written. This was at least more than six decades after the fact, a time period in which there was a notable absence of literature produced about either the erstwhile royal family, or the uprising of 1857, with an 1863 anthology of Urdu poetry *Fughan e Delhi* being the pronounced exception. Also, these texts cannot be termed as ‘novels’ and in fact, visibly conform to pre-modern literary forms; this lends them a unique character as they were published at the height of Urdu’s modern reform movement during which pre-modern literary aesthetic was forcefully denounced.

It is significant that an 1857 ‘novel’ in its real sense does not exist in Urdu⁹. The literature that did emerge from North India about 1857 rather invariably adheres to pre-modern forms, like the *qissa*, *ghazal*, *marsiya* or the *shahr ashob*. Vasudha Dalmia, while tracing the historical linkage of the novel and modernity in North India writes that, “there is a strange historical amnesia: 1857 is nowhere mentioned in our novels”. This apparent lapse of memory can be interpreted as a more conscious function affirming the latent premise of the opposition of colonial modernity with pre-modern forms, and 1857 inevitably harking back to a pre-modern past. Thus, there exists a tangible friction of the Indian trauma with the modern novelistic form which suggests that only certain narrative forms could lend themselves to the expression of the cultural rupture and communal

founding the popular women’s journal *Ismat*. He was called *mussawir-e-gham* (the painter of grief) for his evocative prose that was said to drive readers to tears. 9 editions of *Wida e Zafar* were published from its initial publication till 1964 attesting to the popularity of both the author and the text. Maryam Wasif writes that “Khairi took the scale of what constituted ‘best-selling’ to unprecedented highs, with some novels being reprinted every year during the early decades of the twentieth century”. Maryam Wasif Khan. *Who Is a Muslim?: Orientalism and Literary Populisms*. 1st ed., Fordham University Press, 2021. *JSTOR*, doi:10.2307/j.ctv11990dx. p. 134

⁹ Machwe, P. ‘1857 and Indian Literature’. *Indian Literature*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1957, pp. 53–59. Two plays exist, Maheshwar Dayal’s *1857 ki Dilli* (1957) and Niaz Fatehpuri’s *Jhansi ki Rani* (1946).

wound experienced in 1857. Healing, in these circumstances, required a voice speaking in narrative forms that were built around orality that the people were well-versed in, and whose very language evoked and re-created what had been lost. This was a language that through nostalgic imagination re-built a community that was not accessible to the colonial outsider by design. The metaphor, the rich classical imagery, emotional excess- all almost act as ramparts to colonial surveillance by safely guising these texts and their political form in a classical jargon specifically the local community was fluent in¹⁰.

Begmaat ke Ansu (The Princesses' Tears) is a compilation of personal narratives collected by Nizami from the surviving women of the Mughal family. Originally serialized from 1914 to 1918, owing to overwhelming popularity, they were compiled and came to be published as the first volume in a 12 part series called "*Ghadr e Dilli ke Afsane*". Categorized as "*tareekhi qisse*" (historical *qissas*) by Nizami's biographer and elsewhere as non-institutionalized history¹¹, these narratives in *Begmaat ke Ansu* are located at the intersection of literature and history and present a grim yet fascinating picture into a lost world through female voices.

Ghadr ki maari shehzadiyan (The Afflicted Princesses of the Mutiny), alternately titled *Bela mai mela* (The Festival in Bela), is the author's semi-fictional narration of a *mehfil* (gathering) of female Mughal survivors of 1857 that he attended as a child. Khairi recounts listening to their personal stories, the tribulations they faced during life-threatening escape from the city and the grueling survival after. These stories are narrated by the royal women in a three-day *mehfil* during

¹⁰ Another reason for the absence of the 1857 Urdu novel can be that a novel requires an act of imaginative removal and fictionalization that was not possible for the immediate survivors and even their descendants for whom the anguish was still very real. Muhammad Husain Azad said of a friend that whenever the subject of 1857 came up, "all these talks ended in tears". Frances, P. *Nets of Awareness*, p. 26

¹¹ Maritta Schleyer. 'Ghadr-e Delhi Ke Afsane'. 2012, vol. Annual of Urdu Studies, no. 27, pp. 34–56.

the Basant festival¹² in Bela, a suburb near the river Yamuna. This *mehfil* ends with a *chaleeswan*¹³ held for the ‘martyrs’ of 1857. Both *Begmaat* and *Ghadr* have their origin in orality, popular memory, and inter-generational lore. Orality as a feature of pre-literate societies, this blending of oral storytelling with the textual form makes for a fascinating format which comes close to the “*qissa*” and “*dastan*” in Urdu literature¹⁴.

Phoolwalon ki Sair (The Festival of Flower-sellers) is a fictional re-creation of the annual flower-sellers’ procession to Mehrauli in monsoon during Bahadur Shah Zafar’s rule¹⁵. This narrative is both an exercise in collective memory and nostalgic imagination, as the festival halted for many years after 1857 and the author also spent his adult life in Hyderabad instead of Delhi. The socio-literary value of oral lore passed down generations is manifest here. Beg admits as much when he writes that “ye buddhon ki wadeeyat thi jo maine aap tak puhuncha di”¹⁶ [This was what my elders were endowed with, which I have delivered to you.] H.N.

Wida-e-Zafar (Farewell to Zafar) is a semi-fictional narrative of the life of the last Mughal king, his rule, and final days in Dilli. Alternately titled *Naubat e Panj Roza* (The Tragedy in Five Parts), the text reads like a farewell to the memory of the erstwhile king, a farewell which he was

¹² This basant is celebrated during spring by the devotees of Bholu Shah, an 18th century Sufi saint of the Qadri order, at his shrine in Delhi.

¹³ A *chaleeswan* is an Islamic Barelvi ritual of holding a collective prayer for the forgiveness of a deceased soul on the 40th day of demise, but may also happen later.

¹⁴ Eve Tignol notes that since these writings were spurred by the anxiety of preserving oral narratives threatened by colonial modernity, they are stylistically rooted in the local storytelling tradition. “The Muslims of Northern India and the Trauma of the Loss of Power c. 1857-1930s.” P.hD., *Royal Holloway, University of London*, 2016, pp.194-201

¹⁵ This procession was an annual event that began with the exile of the Mughal prince Mirza Jehangir in Akbar Shah II’s time. Mirza Jehangir’s mother prayed that if the prince returned safely, she would lay a floral tribute at Khwaja Bakhtiyar Kaki’s shrine in gratitude every year, which later became the *Phoolwalon ki sair*.

¹⁶ Mirza Farhatullah Beg. *Phoolwalon ki sair*. Kutab khana ilm-o-adab, Delhi, 1943, p. 52

not allowed at the time of exile. Thus, beyond delving into a nostalgic imagination, this text also reads like a corrective of historical wrongs, being actualized by being lodged in popular memory via literature. This gives an idea as to the capacity and, possibly, ambition of such a literary project.

The former two texts situate themselves in a post-1857 British Delhi, beset with gloom and mourning around the destruction of the city, while the latter two engage in a fantastical re-imagining of the cultural vibrance at the heyday of pre-1857 Mughal Dilli. There are other texts written about the pre-1857 Delhi culture as well, notable among them Arsh Taimuri's *Lal Qilay ki Jhalkiyan* (The Glimpses of Red Fort) 1937, Munshi Faizuddin's *Bazm-e-Akhir* (The Last Assembly) 1885, and Wazir Dehlvi's *Dilli ka Akhri Deedar* (The Last Gaze at Dilli) 1934. However, those texts function more so as cultural histories of a lost urban milieu, called by some as urban chronicles of Delhi's past or semi-anthropological accounts possibly inspired by British mode of knowledge production¹⁷. In this category of texts, the Mughal rule remains a curious omission¹⁸.

The reason I have chosen these other texts instead for the present study is that they pivot their narratives around the figure of the Mughal king, if not as sovereign presence, then through his palpable, defining, haunting absence. The loss of political authority is an important language through which communal grief is described and processed. Since the body politic of the city was coupled with the body of the ruler in Indo-Muslim discourse, this broader cultural loss of a ruined city cannot be bifurcated and channeled as apolitical mourning. Ghalib says in one of his letters to

¹⁷ Margrit Pernau. *Emotions and Modernity in Colonial India: From Balance to Fervor*. Oxford University Press, 2019. p. 208

¹⁸ An example of the totality of this omission is that in 1889, Mirza Hairat Dehlvi also wrote a book titled *Phoolwalon ki Sair*, however centering it around Muhammad Shah with his portrait on the title page even though Mehrauli was just a Mughal retreat in his time. Dehlvi even locates the festival's origin to Muhammad Shah's rule, even though it began with his descendant Akbar Shah II. Dehlvi notably avoided any mention of both Akbar Shah and Bahadur Shah in whose time the festival reached its pinnacle.

a friend, “All these things lasted so long as the king reigned¹⁹.” The king, even with constraints in authority, was the nucleus of all these cultural practices, literally as well as symbolically.

Before this, scholars have studied some of these texts under the framework of loss, nostalgia and collective memory²⁰. They have analyzed them as nostalgic laments for a lost past; mourning that builds the notion of an ‘emotional community of sufferers’²¹. I want to go further from that and analyze the various literary forms used in these texts and their collective political function. I contend that the primary texts under analysis are not only important as a socio-cultural archive for which they have been read so far, but in significant ways depart from the literary modernism of the time in ways too specific and intricate to be a coincidence. I argue that in a curious continuity with the pre 1857 tradition, these texts reflect the pre-modern Indo-Persian sensibility. I use the word sensibility to evoke the entirety of its connotations, to imply not just the cultural and literary, but also the social and the political. Very specifically, I study the various kinds of literary aesthetic and Indo-Persianate traditions that come together in these texts to create a rich political meaning that poses a discursive challenge to the British rule.

In the first chapter, I trace the trajectory of Urdu reform and modernization, projects initiated and institutionalized by the British and later taken up by Indian reformers. This modernization project desired to make the pre-modern Indo-Persian literary aesthetic obsolete, and so the latter was criticized for being unrealistic, exaggerated and contrived. I demonstrate how by using elaborate Persianate language, classical poetry metaphors, images, and the *marsiya* genre,

¹⁹ F. Pritchett. *Nets of Awareness*. p. 21

²⁰ Maritta Schleyer. ‘Ghadr-e Delhi Ke Afsane’. 2012, vol. Annual of Urdu Studies, no.27, p. 34-56; E. Tignol. “The Muslims of Northern India and the Trauma of the Loss of Power c. 1857-1930s.” P.hD., *Royal Holloway, University of London*, 2016; S. Siddique. *Remembering the Revolt of 1857: Contrapuntal Formations in Indian Literature and History*. SOAS, University of London, 2012

²¹ M. Pernau. ‘Nostalgia: Tears of Blood for a Lost World’. *South Asia Graduate Research Journal (SAGAR)*. 2015, pp. 75-109.

these primary texts in many ways defy the modernization project. Moreover, by using expressions of emotional excess, they challenge the emotional disciplining inherent to modernization and invoke the political strength of emotions. By using an Indic register in many sections of the texts, the authors refer to the memory of a pre-1857 interfaith past that they eulogize as '*ganga yamuni tehzeeb*'. This is a distinct way through which the literary form/usage bolsters the thematic context.

In the second chapter, I analyse the symbolism of Karbala as has been employed in these texts with relation to 1857. I discuss the image of female survivors to narrate visceral accounts of trauma and suffering and Bahadur Shah's veneration as an *imam* that happens through these texts. I trace a process of myth-making around Bahadur Shah that happens in Urdu texts over time, and see it as an archive constituting a 'counter-memory'. Bahadur Shah is bemoaned as an innocent king and retrospectively vindicated and eulogized by these authors. This assumes the shape of textual corrective of historical wrongs and a contestation of British hegemony over 1857 narratives. I argue that by using this Karbala allegory, the authors reverse the idea of victory and defeat; by doing so, they celebrate the Indian defeat as nonetheless a transcendental moral victory which signals caution to oppressors for their wrongdoing.

In the third chapter, I show that these authors engage in a textual memorialization of spaces and monuments of Dilli as the only form of spatial commemoration available to them after the 1857 destruction of Dilli and the construction of the new colonial capital. This textual memorialization appears as contesting the colonial phenomenon of the 'Mutiny Pilgrimage.' The writers use the Indo-Persian literary form of *shahr ashob* to lament the social upheaval wrought in the aftermath of 1857. *Shahr ashob* being linked to the idea of rightful rule, these laments emerge as highly politically coded implying an unjust British takeover. Moreover, the spaces being invoked explicitly coded as Mughal, their invocation and remembrance re-affirms the lost Mughal

authority and king as the center of this social universe. The writers evoke an Indo-Persian discourse of sovereignty and divinely mandated kingship that appears as a forceful rejection of British rule and its emulation and appropriation of Mughal authority.

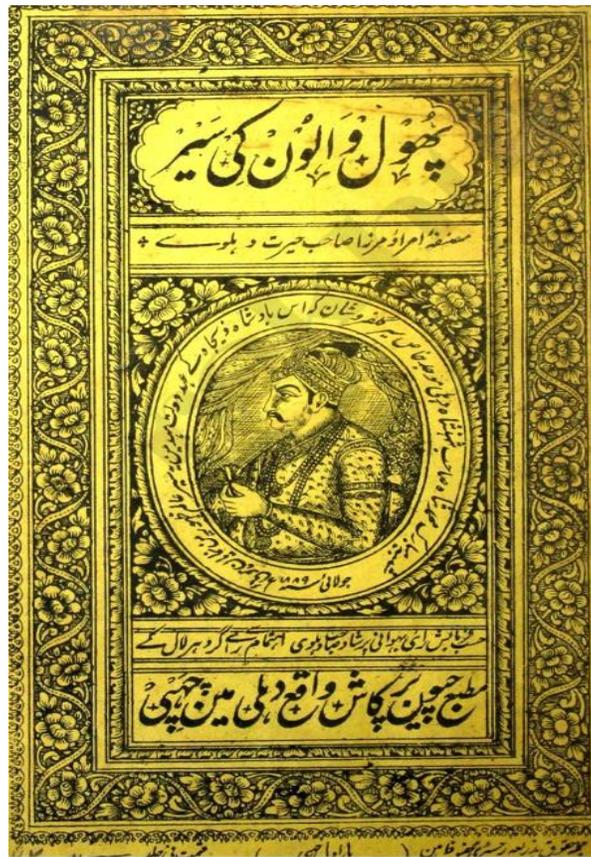


Figure i.i Muhammad Shah on the cover of Hairat Dehlvi’s *Phoolwalon ki sair*, *Illustration on the cover of Phoolwalon ki sair*. 1883, Matba Chyawan Prakash, Delhi. Refer to Footnote 18 of chapter. Image can be accessed at: <https://www.rekhta.org/ebooks/phool-walon-ki-sair-meerza-hairat-dehlavi-ebooks>

Ch 1: Modernization of Urdu literature

In terms of the political and social changes wrought by the British victory of 1857, apart from decisively spelling the end for *sharif* aristocracy and the Muslim ‘moral city’²², there was wanton destruction of the city of Delhi and takeover of symbolically important buildings signifying the defeated Mughal authority²³. This brought in its wake a rapid socio-cultural change that swept over the North Indian space transforming even literature, that has been retrospectively seen as a decisive rupture from the (now-termed as) pre-modern Indo-Persian sensibility. According to Ralph Russell, noted historian and critic of Urdu literature, “the impact of British rule and of British Victorian values was so great that the whole character of Urdu literature was changed by it²⁴”.

The British censure regarding this Indo-Persian sensibility predates 1857 and encompassed an ambivalence where the pre-modern literature especially poetry was condemned for being sensuous, corrupting and decadent on the one hand but also, an oddity, the ‘White Mughals’, existed on the other²⁵. The ‘reform’ of Urdu literature by the British had begun early on as an institutional endeavor that can at least be traced to the establishment of Fort William College when Urdu literature was subjected to standardization and disciplining experimentation, much like a laboratory. This literary experimentation was made possible with the help of native munshis who worked with British orientalist scholars. This collaboration, if it can generously be called that, proved immensely influential in impacting later writers of the Urdu-Hindi register²⁶. Most

²² Faisal Devji. ‘India in the Muslim Imagination: Cartography and Landscape in 19th Century Urdu Literature’. *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, no. 10, Dec. 2014.

²³ Frances W. Pritchett. *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and Its Critics*. University of California Press, 1994, p. 20

²⁴ Ralph Russell. *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature: A Select History*. Zed Books, 1992, p. 77

²⁵ Margrit Pernau. *Ashraf into Middle Classes: Muslims in Nineteenth-Century Delhi*. 2013.

²⁶ Shamsurrahman Faruqi. *Early Urdu Literary Culture and History*. Oxford University Press, 2001; Aamir Mufti. *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures*. Harvard University Press, 2016; Maryam Wasif

scholars have focused on the artificial schism between Urdu and Hindi that originated and was institutionalized here, but lesser known is the standardization of a new kind of Urdu linguistic register and prose that was engineered²⁷.

Recent scholarship on the works produced at Fort William has shown how these texts adhered to Oriental tropes, drawn by and sometimes directly translated from the ‘English Oriental tale’²⁸ that was a metropolitan creation exported to the colony as both imperial pedagogy and paradoxically bestowed as a new native literature.²⁹ These texts visibly distanced themselves from the ornate Persianate courtly prose that populated the North Indian literary landscape and instead created almost a new ‘vernacular’ prose that was unembellished, avoided the use of metaphors, expunged the fantastical and supernatural (elements inherent to the dastan especially), reduced Perso-Arabic usage, advocated for British-influenced realism and embedded didacticism as one of the goals of literature that had hitherto been alien to it.

These texts also disseminated the idea of the exiled Muslim subject estranged from the native Islamicate homeland, affirming the colonial binary of the ‘foreign Muslim invader’ and ‘native Hindu subject’. This idea of the Muslim lost in search for his original homeland was later

Khan. *Translated Orientalisms: The Eighteenth-Century Oriental Tale, Colonial Pedagogies, and Muslim Reform*. UCLA, 2013; Jennifer Dubrow. *Cosmopolitan Dreams: The Making of Modern Urdu Literary Culture in Colonial South Asia*. University of Hawai‘i Press, 2018.

²⁷ Maryam Wasif K. *Translated Orientalisms: The Eighteenth-Century Oriental Tale, Colonial Pedagogies, and Muslim Reform*. UCLA, 2013.

²⁸ Maryam Wasif describes the Oriental tale as ‘a cultural formation that attains maturity in 18th century England and France, inspired by the discovery and import of manuscripts from modern day Iran and Syria.’ Ibid, pp.14-18. Frances Sheridan’s *History of Nourjahad* (1767), Voltaire’s *Mahomet* (1741) and Elizabeth Inchbald’s *A Mogul Tale* (1784) are examples of this variety of texts. She argues, “literary tropes that persistently associate Islam with the transient structure of empire, and the Muslim ruler or caliph with a despotism exercised through fictions and performance first arise in the 18th century English Oriental tale” Ibid, p.21.

²⁹ Ibid, p.10. Nazir Ahmed’s *Taubat un Nasuh* is known to be directly inspired from The Family Instructor.

adopted by prominent Muslim writers like Nazir Ahmed, Altaf Hussain Hali, Abdul Halim Sharar, and reinforced through their works³⁰. Maryam Wasif writes in her book:

Patronized by colonial administrators whose goal was now to rid vernacular literatures of what they deemed fantasy and religious superstition, writers such as [Nazir] Ahmad and Hali offered a rational, colonially compliant Muslim to their readers. Situating themselves as reformers of the Muslim community as well as of the cultural and linguistic aspects of Urdu, these writers are historical examples of how the Mahometan chronotype of the English and vernacular oriental tale is internalized and revitalized with new religio-political meaning in the high colony... these writers consciously abandon what we can tentatively think of as pre-modern, Indo-Persian knowledge systems and aesthetic practices³¹.

Thus, it has been argued that despite being an unwitting heir to an imperial literary legacy, the ‘Oriental tale’ came to be institutionalized but more importantly rewritten as classic literature in the North Indian literary terrain, which is one important aspect of the debate that argues the artificiality of the Urdu canon³².

Postcolonial scholars, notably Roe Ballaster and Srinivas Aravamudan, have in the recent years offered different, redemptive readings of the metropolitan oriental tale. Aravamudan’s *Enlightenment Orientalism* makes a convincing argument for the “universalist and cosmopolitan aspirations”³³ of the oriental tale and its resistance to the novelistic form, its attendant domesticity and nascent nationalism. Aravamudan’s *Enlightenment Orientalism*, however, focusses on the

³⁰ F. Devji. ‘India in the Muslim Imagination: Cartography and Landscape in 19th Century Urdu Literature’. *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, no. 10, Dec. 2014; Eve Tignol. “The Muslims of Northern India and the Trauma of the Loss of Power c. 1857-1930s.” P.hD., *Royal Holloway, University of London*, 2016, pp.194-201; Maryam Wasif K. *Translated Orientalisms: The Eighteenth-Century Oriental Tale, Colonial Pedagogies, and Muslim Reform*. UCLA, 2013. Nasir Abbas Nayyar. *Coloniality, Modernity and Urdu Literature*. Sang-e-meel Publications, 2020.

³¹ Maryam Wasif Khan. *Who Is a Muslim?: Orientalism and Literary Populisms*. 1st ed., Fordham University Press, 2021. *JSTOR*, doi:10.2307/j.ctv11990dx. p. 90-91

³² Maryam Wasif K. *Translated Orientalisms*, pp. 125-135. She has termed this process “canonization by translation” Ibid, p.126.

³³ S. Aravamudan. *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel*. The University of Chicago Press, 2012, p. 14.

century prior to the reinvention of the oriental tale in the colony and his study remains focused on the European audience of the oriental tale and its reception within the metropole. My argument here deals with the impact of the oriental tale's resurrection in the colony in the nineteenth century, its galvanizing of the novelistic, prose form and a religious recasting of Urdu that ironically paved the way for later Muslim nationalism- a very contrary role from the metropole³⁴.

The important moments of the trajectory of the modernist project of Urdu are summarized in the Appendix. The culmination of it was reached with the two enduring stalwarts of the movement, Muhammad Husain Azad and Altaf Hussain Hali. Themselves caught between two

³⁴ In his book *Enlightenment Orientalism*, Aravamudan seeks to analyse and bring to light the eighteenth century beginnings of the Oriental tale in France and England as the “transcultural fiction that interrogated settled assumptions,... [sought to] understand civilizational differences” and resisted the novelistic form and its accompanying domesticity and divisive nationalism. S. Aravamudan. *Enlightenment Orientalism: Resisting the Rise of the Novel*. The University of Chicago Press, 2012, pp. 4-5. He analyzes a large set of oriental tales from the time period as texts that represent for him an “experimental antifoundationalism [that] allowed multiple epistemologies and metanarratives” and opposed the strictures on fiction later imposed by the novel. *Ibid.*, p.8. However, Aravamudan's study is restricted to the eighteenth oriental tale within Europe, mainly France and England. The impact of oriental tale I mention is of its reincarnation in the colony, specifically North India in the nineteenth century, when Orientalism as a corporate institution had very much been systematized and put in place. Aravamudan's thesis rests on the time period where he argues there existed different possibilities and goals to the European Enlightenment project. Even within *Enlightenment Orientalism* though, the relation Aravamudan describes of the oriental tale to the Orient remains that of desire, speculation and dreaming- it is never an encounter with the Orient in the flesh. The exotic descriptions of characters like that of the Mahometan traveler that incite well-meaning curiosity in the eighteenth century French reader are cemented as stereotypes of dislocation and masquerade within Urdu literature of the nineteenth century, an enduring “chronotype of the Mahometan”, as Maryam Wasif Khan calls it. M. Wasif Khan. *Who is a Muslim?* pp. 21-52. This chronotype rewrites the Muslim presence in India as oppositional to the indigenous, that of “itinerant, dislocated potentates... devoid of civilizational, racial, or even linguistic origins”. *Ibid.*, pp. 19. 26. Moreover, India/Indic Orient is literarily recreated as a space hostile to Muslims, a trope later taken up and popularized by famous Urdu poets of the twentieth century in the *dunya ashob* literature, notably Altaf Hussain Hali and Allama Muhammad Iqbal. Maryam Wasif's study details this creation of the vernacular oriental tale and how it recasts Urdu into a “religiously aligned formation” which endures to this day. *Ibid.*, p.55. The other important thing I want to note here is that the oriental tale can be seen functioning clearly in opposition to the novel in the metropole in Aravamudan's study, however its recreation in the colony is explicitly interlinked with the arrival of the novelistic, prose form in North India. The vernacular oriental tale paves way for the novel by castigating earlier Indo-Persian fictional forms including the *dastan* and *ghazal* poetry. The excessive, the supernatural and the fantastical is therefore expunged from North Indian literature with the arrival of the oriental tale, a reversal of its role in the metropole.

distinct cultural eras ruptured by 1857³⁵, they both became flag-bearers for the Anglicist influence on Urdu literature, especially poetry³⁶.

A modernist literary society by the name of Anjuman-e-Punjab (1865) was made through British government initiative of which Azad became an active member³⁷. In 1874, Azad gave the iconic lecture at the annual meeting of the society which became a defining moment for Urdu poetry. He declared a wholesale rejection of classical Urdu poetry by calling for reform modelled on English poetics. He denounced “dark, obscure tangles of poetic verbiage” and instead called for a “naturalist” style of poetry³⁸. Moral instruction was to be central to this new style of poetry. High-ranking British officials made up the audience of the gathering, and the speech was printed in all local newspapers.

³⁵ Ironically, both these men were only exposed to British literature after 1857 and were themselves brought up in the Indo-Persian classical learning tradition. Azad, despite having studied at the leading institution of his day, the Delhi College, had limited his education to the Oriental section, much like most of the Muslim students of the time. Hali, had run away from his home in Panipat to come to Delhi on foot, half starved and languishing, only to fulfil his dream of getting higher education in Persian and Arabic. He took admission in a madrassah, and it was in Dilli that he formed acquaintances with leading literary figures and made a lasting friendship with Mirza Ghalib. It all changed with 1857. Both the Delhi College and Madrassah Hussain Baksh, where Hali had studied, closed. The government jobs with British departments that both found after 1857 were as further from Perso-Arabic education as could be imagined. They involved active engagement with British and European literature, including editing, translation and proof-reading; Azad worked with the Department of Public Instruction and Hali found a job at Punjab Govt. Book Depot. During his job, Hali read translations of innumerable English books which became the foundation for his lasting admiration for British literature. Meanwhile, Azad, during his time at this clerical job, wrote textbooks for young girls hoping to get government patronage.

It was here that both developed their lifelong fascination for British and European literature. F. Pritchett. *Nets of Awareness*, p.33

³⁶ The extent of the influence of Urdu modernization can be gauged by the fact that Sayyid Ahmad, Nazir Ahmed, Shibli Nomani, Muhammad Hussain Azad and Altaf Hussain Hali are taught as “*arkaan e khamisa*” (five pillars of Urdu) in Urdu textbooks in Pakistani schools even today.

³⁷ F. Pritchett. *Nets of Awareness*. p. 32. Its goals were “the revival of ancient oriental learning, the advancement of popular knowledge through vernaculars, the discussion of social, literary, scientific, and political questions of interest, and the association of the learned and influential classes with the officers of the government.”

³⁸ The contempt for metaphor and classical Urdu poetry and uncritical glorification of naturalism influenced by British literature is summed up in this excerpt from Azad’s lecture, translated by Frances Pritchett who has also translated Azad’s magnum opus, *Ab-e-Hayat*. “Oh gardeners of the Garden of Eloquence! Eloquence is not something that flies along on the wings of exaggeration and high flying fancy, or races off on the wings of rhyme, or climbs to the heavens by the force of verbal ingenuity, or sinks beneath a dense layer of metaphors.” Qtd. in F. Pritchett. *Nets of Awareness*. pp. 34-35

Azad proposed changing the long-standing classical tradition of composing ghazals on a pattern line (*misra e tarha*) to instead composing poetry on a single subject matter, such as the seasons of the year³⁹. This was an effective slaughter of the Urdu *ghazal* to make way for the modern poem (*nazam*). The ghazal was a fluid genre, with each couplet conventionally expressing a different thought unbound to the next. This very quality of the ghazal was later criticized by 20th century modern critics for being “barbaric”. “A barbarian lacks the ability to focus on one theme for long,” one 20th century literary critic said⁴⁰. Nazir Ahmed, author of arguably the first modern Urdu novel (*Mirat-ul-Uroos*), also heavily criticized the classical Urdu ghazal⁴¹.

Traditional Urdu poets directed a heavy onslaught of critique at Azad for “trying to remake Urdu poetry in the English style”⁴². His proposed style was criticized for being “outwardly Urdu and inwardly English”, in an ironic reference to Macaulay’s infamous Minute on Indian Education⁴³.

The Anjuman, inspired by Azad’s lecture, began a *mushaira* series to institutionalize this new style of Urdu poetry⁴⁴. The Aligarh reformers, already critical of the “subversive sentiment of

³⁹ F. Pritchett. *Nets of Awareness*. p. 35. To understand the magnitude of this change, one needs to look back at the history of Urdu poetry to see that the single subject matter poem, the *nazam*, was at the time alien to Urdu poetry. The dynamism, creativity and uniqueness of the *ghazal* was constituted by its freedom from subject constraints. The traditional Urdu *ghazal* to this day is composed on the rhythm and metre of a pattern line, and subject conformity is intrinsically irreconcilable to the *ghazal*.

⁴⁰ N. A. Nayyar. *Coloniality, Modernity and Urdu Literature*. Sang-e-meel Publications, 2020.

⁴¹ R. Russell. *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature: A Select History*. Zed Books, 1992, p. 119. In *Taubat un nasuh*, Nasuh as a mouthpiece for Nazir Ahmed says to his wife, “Poetry is not in itself bad... but it has become the general rule to use that mastery as a vehicle for evil and indecent ideas; and that is why wise people regard it as a vice and a sin.” Ibid, p. 124

⁴² F. Pritchett. *Nets of Awareness*. p. 36

⁴³ F. Pritchett. *Nets of Awareness*. p. 36

⁴⁴ The first *mushaira* was organized on the topic of rainy season. *Mushairas* were arranged on topics like “Patriotism”, “Peace”, “Justice”, “Civilization” and covered in local newspapers notwithstanding the scandal and controversy they caused in traditional literary circles. Satire (*hajn*) and *rekhti* were not allowed in these new *mushairas*.

ghazal”, enthusiastically supported this movement⁴⁵. Altaf Hussain Hali not only endorsed this movement, but also actively took part in the new *mushaira* series and composed poems for many of them. Hali envisioned this new poetics with the lens that “Asian poetry, which has become entirely the domain of love and exaggeration, might be broadened as much as possible, and that its foundation might be laid on realities and events⁴⁶”.

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, reviled at the time as “*nechari jogi*”⁴⁷ outside Aligarh circles not only supported this new “natural poetry”, but influenced people like Hali to write in this style to disseminate and complement the broader naturalist ideology that Sayyid Ahmad was advocating. He also condemned classical poetry as decadent and removed from reality⁴⁸.

⁴⁵ R. Russell. *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature: A Select History*. Zed Books, 1992, p. 79

⁴⁶ F. Pritchett. *Nets of Awareness*. p. 36

⁴⁷ David Lelyveld writes, “Sayyid Ahmad identifies ‘true religion’ with the ‘law of nature’ (*qanun-i-qudrat*)”. According to Sayyid Ahmad, nature and Islam are identical and “God does not deviate from the unified regularity of nature”. *Nechari* is a derisive term for those who prioritized the study of nature over religion. Termed as “*millat-e-naicariya*”, Sayyid Ahmad’s ideas regarding nature brought a lot of ridicule and criticism for both him and the Aligarh College. Famous pan-Islamic activist, Jamaluddin al Afghani attacked Sayyid Ahmad by printing a Persian text “portraying the mazhab-e-naicari as atheistic, materialist, and Satanic.” David Lelyveld. ‘Naicari Nature: Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and the Reconciliation of Science, Technology, and Religion’. *The Cambridge Companion to Sayyid Ahmad Khan*, 2019, pp. 69-81.

⁴⁸ F. Pritchett. *Nets of Awareness*. p. 38. An educational committee led by Sayyid Ahmed Khan decried classical Indo-Persian literature with the charge that they “teach men to veil their meaning, to embellish their speech with fine words, to describe things wrongly and in irrelevant terms, to flatter with false praise... to speak with exaggeration, to leave the history of the past uncertain, and to relate facts like tales and stories” Ibid, p.187. In an unironic sequence, the college that Sir Sayyid established in 1875, sought to create “a class of persons Muhammedan in religion, Indian in blood, and color, but English in tastes, opinions and intellect” Ibid, p.153



Figure 1.1 *Naicari Jogi*, *Oudh Punch*, 4 August 1884. Available at <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/digbooks/digpager.html?BOOKID=NC1718.08&object=43> (accessed on 21 September 2018).

In 1880, Azad wrote his most influential work, *Ab-e-Hayat*, a history of Urdu poetry which remains canonical and definitive in the development of Urdu literature to this day⁴⁹. It cemented the idea of a modern poetics for Urdu by calling for an Anglicized reform inspired by Victorian literature. It expressly stated preference for qualities like simplicity, realism and avoidance of elaborate metaphor: the hallmarks of modern poetry that was being promoted. The work sounded

⁴⁹ *Ab e Hayat* has been called “the most often reprinted, and most widely read, Urdu book of the past century”. It marked the end of *tazkirah* tradition in Urdu. *Tazkirahs* were pre-modern poetry anthologies, mostly in the form of manuscripts that were compiled by fellow poets. *Ab-e-Hayat* was the first comprehensive history of Urdu poetry, and included anecdotes, biographies and introductions. Azad expressly wrote it to preserve the rapidly dying knowledge that had hitherto circulated orally within families, a socio-cultural milieu that had been ruptured by the upheaval of 1857. He says, “how could they [ancestors] know that the page of history would be turned- the old families destroyed, their offspring so ignorant that they would no longer know their own family traditions. And if anyone would tell them something of these matters, they’d demand proof! In short, these thoughts made it incumbent upon me to collect all that I knew about the elders or had found mentioned in various *tazkirahs* and write it down in one place.” The tension between orality, textuality and historicity brought on by modernization is glimpsed here. F. Pritchett. *Nets of Awareness*. p. 46-47.

the death-knell for classical poetry by claiming that it was being stifled under the weight of poetic verbiage and metaphor, and that a reform was needed for it to resurrect itself⁵⁰. In a sense, *Ab-e-Hayat* was a eulogy for classical Urdu poetry, simultaneously canonizing it but by formalizing its demise⁵¹. Shamsur Rehman Faruqi, noted Urdu critic and literary historian, calls Azad's success "a triumph of British techniques of management and control in India"⁵².

Ab-e-Hayat was complemented by the first but to date most enduring work of Urdu literary criticism, Hali's *Muqadimmah Shair o Shairi* (1893)⁵³. Together, both these texts marked the culmination of the Urdu reform movement and some sections can almost be read as manifestoes for it⁵⁴. Hali, much like Azad, denounced the "artificialness of language" of classical literature and presented the criteria of "truth, simplicity and fervor" in its stead⁵⁵. It is important to note that realism was a falsely imposed criterion as truth and objectivity had never been elements of Indo-Persian literary aesthetic and craft, especially of poetry. Frances Pritchett says, "with its radical completeness and self-referentiality, the ghazal universe metaphorically generates the physical

⁵⁰ Azad says, "It is an unhappy thing to note that our poetry became ensnared in the nets of... romantic *mazmuns*, intoxicated drinking of wine, creating imaginary colors and scents without the rose and garden, lamenting the pain of separation, delighting in imaginary union, feeling alienated from the world. And the amazing thing is that if we want to speak of some real matter, we express this idea in metaphors... The result [is that] even things that are spontaneous and apparent to the feelings become enveloped in coil after coil of our similes and metaphors, and they too enter into the world of our imagination." Qtd. in F. Pritchett. *Nets of Awareness*. p.156-57

⁵¹ Shamsur Rahman Faruqi. 'Constructing a Literary History, a Canon, and a Theory of Poetry: Ab-e Hayāt (1880) by Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād (1830-1910)'. *Social Scientist*, 1995, pp. 90-91. Shamsur Rehman Faruqi says that Azad did not include any poet in *Ab-e-Hayat* who was alive at the time "for that would falsify the dominant note of his threnody: classical Urdu poetry was dead."

⁵² *Ibid*, p.70

⁵³ Hali worked on this essay for almost 11 years.

⁵⁴ Hali liberally borrowed from British writers to bolster his argument, mentioning some by name and many without. To give an idea of the range and variety of influences, Hali names Plato, Byron, Shakespeare, Macaulay, Homer, Dante, Milton, Virgil, Sir Walter Scott among others. Some parts of his arguments have been analyzed by literary critics to be directly taken from Macaulay. Hali's *Muqadimmah* is so visibly colored by European influence that it has been called "an Urdu counterpart to Wordsworth's Preface." Frances Pritchett says that, "Azad and Hali's whole relationship with their own heritage is haunted by the invisible presence of Wordsworth and his poetics—or 'prosaics', as they might more correctly be called". F. Pritchett. *Nets of Awareness*. p.166-7

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p.138

universe⁵⁶” and therefore classical poetry was unbound to the external world and free from expectations of fidelity to nature. Shamsur Rehman Faruqi says that classical poetry therefore “need not be put on trial”⁵⁷.

Hali’s magnum opus, *Musaddas e Madd o Jazar e Islam* (The Rise and Ebb of Islam’s Tide-1879) is the quintessential example of this literary reform, and all modernists unanimously cited it as paradigmatic of this new movement⁵⁸. In the preface, Hali writes:

That foul collection of verses and odes, which stinks worse than a cesspool and which has an impact in the world no less than an earthquake, and which makes the angels in heaven feel shame at it, has been the ruin of learning and religion... if there is any punishment for the composing of depraved verse, if the telling of vain lies is impermissible, then that court in which God is judge, and it which retribution of good and bad deeds is decreed will release all other sinners and fill hell with our poets.⁵⁹

Musaddas also affirmed the trope of the Muslim exile severed from his Islamic homeland much like other Muslim nationalist literature of the time. Hali had written this poem at the behest of Sayyid Ahmad Khan. Sayyid Ahmad was so taken by it when he read it that he called *Musaddas* his intercession in the divine court. He wrote a letter to Hali in praise of the literary value of *Musaddas* that reads as:

It will be quite appropriate to say that with this book starts a new era in our poetry. The clarity, the beauty and the flow that characterize it cannot be over-appreciated. It is surprising to find a subject treated with such a regard for facts and with such absence of exaggeration or far-fetched similes, which are the stock-in-trade of Urdu poesy⁶⁰.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p.104

⁵⁷ S. R. Faruqi. ‘Constructing a Literary History, a Canon, and a Theory of Poetry’, p.75. In fact, of the two modes of statements recognized in Indo-Persian grammar at the time, *inshaiya* (non-factual and non-falsifiable) and *khabariyah* (informative/factual, and therefore falsifiable), *inshaiyah* was valued in poetics. Ibid, p.77.

⁵⁸ It was a long epic on the social decline, loss of political power and sovereignty for Muslims, traced from an imagined illustrious past located in the early days of Islam. This was also part of the exclusionary nationalist literature written at the time to solidify the idea of a distinct Muslim nationhood in tandem with growing communalism in North India.

⁵⁹ Qtd. in R. Russell. *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature: A Select History*. Zed Books, 1992, p. 125

⁶⁰ Shaista Suhrawardy. ‘A Critical Survey of the Development of the Urdu Novel and Short Story.’ Ph.D. Dissertation, University of London, 1945, p. 137

Thus, any distance from reality, literary invention, fantasy, or even an act of imagination was suspect according to the new poetics. The feeling evoked by art was subjected to a disciplining process here, seen as suspect for its rousing and generative potential. As it has been said, “reading is linked to desire, and there is a strident denunciation of the temptations reading induces⁶¹”. The metaphor was seen as an element of subversive excess that necessarily had to be brought in the sphere of moderation and control; doubly interesting because moderation and balance were the prime virtues valorized by the modern Indian social reformers, recommended for everything ranging from personal conduct to literary consumption. Emotional discipline coupled with ‘rationality’ was the hallmark of the modern colonial subject, and aspiration to it was a colonial prerequisite to claiming civilization and personhood in the Western rights discourse⁶². The insertion of didacticism and utilitarianism in art can be seen as an intuitive way of initiating this control. Moderation was especially a cornerstone of the project of female social reform in colonial North India that was underway.

It is important to situate the primary texts of this research within this context of the modern project that was dominating the social and literary space of North India at the time these texts were published to appreciate the ways in which these texts resist that impulse. In this next section, I discuss how the very aspects of pre-modern poetics under condemnation from British and the Indian reformists alike- excessive use of metaphor, dense poetic language, exaggeration, the fantastical, to name a few- are consciously and heavily employed in these primary texts, which happen to be published decades after the Urdu modernization movement was in full swing. This

⁶¹ Qtd. in Vasudha Dalmia. *Fiction as History: The Novel and the City in Modern North India*. State University of New York Press, 2019, p. 6

⁶² M. Pernau, et al. *Civilizing Emotions: Concepts in Nineteenth Century Asia and Europe*. First edition, Oxford University Press, 2015.

departure does not merely constitute an act of aesthetic defiance but has overt political implications that are analyzed in this chapter.

Pre-modern literary aesthetic reappearing at the height of modern reform

Azad and Hali died in 1910 and 1914 respectively, by the time the movement for Urdu reform was in full swing. *Umrao Jaan Ada*, arguably the first fully modern novel in Urdu, was published in 1899. Therefore, when the primary texts of this study were published, the project of Urdu literature's modernization-that had begun with Fort William- had concluded.

Despite the modern reform movement instituting realism, objectivity and affective restraint as hallmarks of literary merit, the primary texts of my study freely and subversively engage in myth-making bordering on the fantastical at times. Emotional excess, the use of metaphor, ornate Persianate prose, *begamati zubaan*- the Indic dialect condemned by reformers for being crude and uncivilized- all are present within these primary texts.

In this section, I contend that the texts under study consciously use elements of the pre-modern literary style, and thus due to their different logic cannot be glossed as part of the 'artificial canon' of Urdu discussed so far. I analyse the post-1857 accounts, *Ghadr ki maari shehzadiyan* and *Begmaat ke Ansu*, as borrowing from the *marsiya* literary form. I argue that the Urdu *marsiya*, being remarkably suited to the expression of unrestrained emotion in the form of laments, houses the political force of emotions in defiance of the colonial project of emotional disciplining. As the *marsiya* lament has an affinity with the Urdu *ghazal*, the *ghazal* imagery creates a dense verbal foliage which insulates the text from colonial surveillance, ironically lending substance to the colonial paranoia around the Urdu *ghazal* and its use of metaphor.

Ghazal, marsiya and the political charge of emotions

Maritta Schleyer writes that “after the events of 1857, the *marsiya* gained contemporary relevance, expressing the personal pain and loss experienced by many at that time”⁶³. Both the post-1857 texts (*Ghadr ki maari shehzadiyan, Begmaat ke Ansu*) play on the symbology of Karbala, the battle where the grandson of prophet Muhammad and his companions were martyred by the forces of Yazid the caliph. Husain’s severed head was sent to Damascus and only the spared female survivors kept the tale alive. The story of Karbala assumed mythic proportions and it represents the archetypal battle between good and evil within the Muslim tradition. The Shiite sect regularly commemorates the event of Karbala; the re-telling of Karbala is so central to the Shiite tradition that several oral literary genres originated around this ritual lament and mourning.

These include *ziker* (prose narratives of Karbala), *soz* (poetry of grief and mourning), *salam* (lyrical elegy), *nauha* (lament), *marsiya* (narrative poem about Karbala) and *mojiza kahani*⁶⁴. The *marsiya*⁶⁵ and *mojiza kahani* are especially relevant for the present study and elements of these pre-modern, predominantly oral genres are seen in the primary texts under consideration. Because the *marsiya* is steeped in affective evocation and immediacy of raw emotion, it rarely indulges in theological vocabulary or doctrine; an outsider uninitiated to the Shii tradition can approach it as storytelling and still find it semantically rich, layered and aesthetically accomplished.

⁶³ Maritta Schleyer. ‘Ghadr-e Delhi Ke Afsane’. 2012, vol. Annual of Urdu Studies, no.27, p. 49

⁶⁴ Syed Akbar Hyder. *Reliving Karbala. Martyrdom in South Asian Memory*. Oxford University Press, 2006.

⁶⁵ The *marsiya* is a long poem resembling an epic, usually narrating an incident from Karbala, that is usually set in a six-line stanza form called the *musaddas*. Narrative continuity is considered essential to the *marsiya* form. The *marsiya* reached the apex of its literary development and formalization as a genre during the rule of Shia nawabs of Awadh.

Ghadr ki maari shehzadiyan, one of the primary texts, is the writer’s recollection of a gathering decades past when the surviving females of Mughal royal family came together to narrate their stories of 1857. I will focus on that text in this section.

Scholars have written about the connections between *marsiya* and the *shahr ashob* poetry that immediately emerged in the aftermath of 1857⁶⁶, notably *Fughan e Delhi* (1863)⁶⁷. However, the *marsiya* in relation to the 1857 prose remains understudied⁶⁸. The *marsiya* situates the commemoration of tragedy in Muslim communities in a much-longer tradition going back to the early centuries of Islam; the surviving female relatives of Hussain kept alive the memory of Karbala through narration after all the men were killed by the forces of Yazid. Maryam Moazzen

⁶⁶ S. Siddique. *Remembering the Revolt of 1857: Contrapuntal Formations in Indian Literature and History*. SOAS, University of London, 2012; E. Tignol. “The Muslims of Northern India and the Trauma of the Loss of Power c. 1857-1930s.” P.h.D., *Royal Holloway, University of London*, 2016.

⁶⁷ Tafazzul Husain Khan Kaukab. *Fughan-e-Dilhi*. Edited by Muhammad Ikram Chughtai. Sang-e-mil, Lahore, 2007, p.44. A *musaddas* by Bahadur Shah Zafar in the *Fughan e Delhi* anthology strikingly reads like a *marsiya*. Most poetry in *Fughan e Delhi* can be categorized under *shahr ashob*, but the *musaddas* was an unusual format for a *shahr ashob* and traditionally the format of *marsiyas*.

Baad e saba urati chaman mai hai sar pe khaak
Malte hain sar ba kaf e afsos barg e taak
Gunche hain dil garifta, gulon ke jigar hain chaak
Karti hain bulbulain yehi faryaad dard naak
Jo agaya hai is mahal e tera rang mai
Qaid e hayat se hai wo qaid e firang mai

[The morning wind blows in the garden throwing dust over our heads

The awaiting trees rub their heads together in grief

Buds are heart-broken and rent are the garments of roses

The nightingales are making this plaintive cry

Whoever enters this palace of darkness

From the prison of life is now in the prison of the foreigner] T.I.A.

It may very well have been a *marsiya* for Bahadur Shah Zafar’s own proclivity towards Shiism was well-known, to the extent that his “secret conversion” to Shiism was a matter of huge public controversy whence the orthodox Sunni clergy stopped praying at the mosques under the king’s patronage, such as Dilli’s Jamia Masjid and Moti Masjid. Aslam Parvez and Bahadur Shah. *The Life & Poetry of Bahadur Shah Zafar*. Translated by Aṭhar Fārūqī, Hay House India, 2017, p.66

⁶⁸ Maritta schleyer’s essay is the only exception, but her study is restricted to *Begmaat k Ansu*. M. Schleyer. ‘Ghadre Delhi Ke Afsane’. 2012, vol. Annual of Urdu Studies, no.27, pp.34-56

writes, “history and its mythic aftermath are ubiquitous and integral aspects of Shia societies. To ensure that Shia past does not die over time, history was transmuted into tradition and commemorative rituals⁶⁹”.

The genre of *marsiya* beautifully combines history, lament, storytelling, and myth, and lends aesthetic, performative and literary elements to the texts memorializing the tragedy and urban ruins of 1857. The *soz* and *marsiya* in Urdu borrow structural and literary elements from the *ghazal*, and therefore the *mazameen* (subject and imagery) and *istaa’ra* (metaphors) overlap in both⁷⁰. In fact, according to Akbar Hyder, the Urdu *marsiya* writers are successors to the Indo-Persian literary culture⁷¹. An example of a *marsiya* composition by one of the greatest *marsiya* writers, Mir Anis⁷², is given below”:

*The thread of love is extremely delicate
So why do those who realize this drag me into it?
The rose that the nightingale once protected even from the wind
Now endures the cruelty of autumn*

According to Akbar Hyder, this piece could pass for a *ghazal* “in its notions of love and the playful language through which the lover complains of being pulled into the fragile bonds of the beloved’s affections⁷³”. This amenability and proclivity to intertextuality makes the genres of Shii lament so popular, enduring and well-suited to the expression of loss and mourning in literature.

⁶⁹ Maryam Moazzen. ‘Rituals of Commemoration, Rituals of Self-Invention: Safavid Religious Colleges and the Collective Memory of the Shi’a’. *Iranian Studies*, vol. 49, no. 4, July 2016, p.555.

⁷⁰ S. Akbar Hyder. *Reliving Karbala*. p. 25

⁷¹ S. Akbar Hyder. *Reliving Karbala*. p. 36

⁷² Nineteenth century *marsiya khwan* from Lucknow who along with Mirza Dabeer is known as one of the greatest *marsiya khwans* in history.

⁷³ S. Akbar Hyder. *Reliving Karbala*. p. 25

Note the opening passage of *Ghadr ki Maari shehzadiyan*:

kal raat ko jab haseena arzi chadar mahtaab mai lipti bekhobar pari soti thi, dil e wahshi rang laya, chand ki roshan shua'yain teer ki tarha ankhone mai ghusin, dimagh ne rahat o sakoon k bajaye yaad e raftagaan par ruju kiya aur ankhein zinda dunya mai bichri hui suraton ki talaash karne lageen⁷⁴.

[Last night when the beautiful maiden Earth lay covered by the white sheet of moonlight, sleeping soundly without a care, the wild heart got agitated as beams of moonlight pierced the eyes like arrows; and the mind instead of bringing peace and comfort set one upon a path of old memories and the eyes scoured the living world seeking those who'd departed long ago.] H.N.

It at once reads like a *ghazal* in prose and a *marsiya* lament wherein the writer wakes up from a restless sleep to go searching for what has been lost in a tragedy, like a lover pining in *firaq* (separation) albeit one that is permanent. *Bulbul*, *falak*, *shama* and *chand* (nightingale, sky, flame, moon) among other *ghazal* metaphors, much reviled by the modernists, are as freely present here as in early nineteenth century Urdu poetry. The close interconnection of the *ghazal* and the Urdu *marsiya* is important while analysing the pre-modern aesthetic of these texts because of the modernist condemnation of the *ghazal* which extends itself to the *marsiya*. By writing these texts with the literary forms of *marsiya* and using *ghazal* imagery, the authors are going against the modernist impulse of the time.

The Mughal ruler himself appears in the classical poetic metaphors of the *bulbul* (nightingale), the *baghban* (the gardener) and the *shama* (flame), among others. Birjees Dulhan, one of the princesses, says in her narrative, “dilli walon Badshah kahan! Bulbul urr gayi, khali pinjre ko peet lo”⁷⁵. Dilli is like a bereaved cage whose songbird, the guarantor of love, is no longer there. These metaphors couched in the language of female lament, usually seen as passive, contain

⁷⁴ R. Khairi. *Ghadr ki maari shehzadiyan ya Bela mai mela*. Kutab khana Nazeeria, Delhi. p. 3

⁷⁵ R. Khairi. *Ghadr ki maari shehzadiyan*. p. 67

great political charge. However, by virtue of being metaphors, they create a layer of impunity for the text from colonial scrutiny.

It is not surprising therefore that the famous Urdu critic-historian, Muhammad Sadiq, known for his scathing critique of the Urdu *ghazal*⁷⁶, reproves the *marsiya* as well on the standard modernist charge of using “unrealistic, unfair and contrived language” and the emotional excess inherent to the lament. The Urdu *marsiya*, along with the Urdu *ghazal*, was one of the targets of colonial critique⁷⁷.

It is significant that despite the modernist tradition holding sway over critical opinion and directing the nascent Urdu canon, these texts invoke pre-modern literary culture and form while also being written by the leading Urdu writers of the day.

These narratives are replete with pain, emotional charge, and unrestrained grief, aspects of borrowing from the *marsiya* genre that makes it particularly suited for the narration of these texts. Christina Osterheld says that “outside the *marsiya* universe they [women] may be criticized for their excessive grief, but within the *marsiya* context their laments are fully justified⁷⁸”.

⁷⁶ F. Pritchett. *Nets of Awareness*. 1992.

⁷⁷ N. Abbas Nayyar. *Coloniality, Modernity and Urdu Literature*. Sang-e-meel Publications, 2020. Similarly, Urdu scholar Nizami Badayuni, in 1915, supported the call for reform in the classical *marsiya* by writing, “lambi lambi tamheedain, razm o bazm par taba’a aazmaiyan wagaira wagaira iss zamane ke taleem yafta garoh mai, jo doosri zubanon k ilm adab se waqif hain dil pasand nahin ho sakteen”. [Long narrative descriptions, literary exchanges in a literary atmosphere, etc. etc. can no longer be preferred in the well-educated community of today that is aware of the diverse literatures that exist.] H.N. Qtd. in Altaf Hussain Hali. *Marsiya Mirza Ghalib*. Nizami Press, Badayun, 1915.

⁷⁸ Qtd. in Francesca Orsini, editor. *Before the Divide: Hindi and Urdu Literary Culture*. Orient BlackSwan, 2010, p.218. To elaborate how this unrestrained emotionality would be considered out-of-place or even condemned in other spaces, *Bihishti Zewar* (1905), a canonical reformist text of this time, can serve as an example. Thanwi, the author, portrayed women as always ‘on the verge of moving out of control, of displaying excess, of spilling over’ for which they had to constantly engage in emotional self-discipline in an emulation of Victorian womanhood to become good wives and mothers to the post-1857 Muslim community. Barbara Metcalf and Ashraf Thanwi. *Perfecting Women*. University of California Press, 1990, p. 14.

The *marsiya* as a genre is marked by emotional excess and mourning, aspects that were considered particularly antagonistic and harmful to the modernist project. A central part of the modernist and reformist education from the late nineteenth century onwards was the disciplining and civilizing of emotions. According to this, only certain emotions were desirable, and those too in moderation; excess was said to impair one's rationality. This was not only a disciplining of emotions, but also their individualization (each person being responsible for cultivating their own emotions) and by extension, depoliticization.

This was a departure from the Persianate and Indo-Muslim *akhlaq* tradition of 'emotion-virtues'. The Indo-Persian creed had held that the ruler's character and moral state of his community were mutually influenced and interlinked that lent a collective character to the emotional development of society⁷⁹. The body of the just ruler embodying ideals of *adal* (justice), *daulat* (prosperity) and *faiz* (abundance) was believed to be the guarantor of order and peace, which in turn was considered the precondition of collective virtuosity. Emotions thus not only had a social and collective aspect to them, but by being linked to the body of the ruler, they were also inherently political.

⁷⁹ Emotions and virtues were linked under the rubric of *akhlaq* in the classical Perso-Arabic education. The ethical state of the subjects was seen to stem directly from the body of the ruler as he was supposed to be both the embodiment and guarantor of collective morality. After the end of Mughal rule, the modernist reformers took the same classical vocabulary of *akhlaq* and *Tehzeeb* to transpose Victorian ideas of emotional restraint, civility and progress in its stead, and especially cultivate the depoliticization of emotions. This emphasis on cultivating individual virtue and emotional restraint was a major part of the reformist education for Muslim women. After the loss of the ruler and political sovereignty in 1857, women were now supposed to secure the moral legacy of the Muslim community in the absence of temporal power.

Faisal Fatehali Devji. 'Gender and the Politics of Space: The Movement for Women's Reform in Muslim India, 1857–1900'. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, June 1991, pp. 141–53; M. Pernau, et al. *Civilizing Emotions: Concepts in Nineteenth Century Asia and Europe*. First edition, Oxford University Press, 2015; C.M. Naim *Urdu Texts and Contexts: The Selected Essays of C.M. Naim*. Permanent Black ; Distributed by Orient Longman, 2004; Barbara Daly Metcalf and Joint Committee on South Asia, editors. *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam*. University of California Press, 1984.

The loss of political autonomy after 1857, interpreted by Faisal Devji as the loss of the Muslim moral city⁸⁰, ceded space to Victorian reformist ideas of the regulation and depoliticization of emotions in the creation of desired disciplined subjects. This has also been studied as the ‘privatization’ of emotions and the origin of public/political and private/domestic divide in North India⁸¹. The temporal power that Muslims had lost was now placed in the domestic sphere and was to be substituted with individual morality and ‘civilized’ conduct according to this modernist thought.

The Indian nationalist politicians and independence movement leaders of the time were heavily critical of the modernist reformers and their ideas which uncritically equated British education with progress and presented it as a substitute for political autonomy⁸². Adoption of individual ‘civilized’ conduct according to British notions was supposed to be an end in itself.

Abul Kalam Azad, eminent political leader of the time, denounced the Aligarh movement for these very reasons and argued that instead of an overemphasis on modern education, what was needed was to “excite the very passions that had been deemed dangerous and in need of rationality’s control...[for which he drew on] Indo-Persian poetry and its exhortation to follow the path of love⁸³”. This nuances the argument regarding the colonial project of emotional discipline and the British censure of classical poetry that glorified emotions of love (*ishq*), passion (*junoon*) and madness (*deewangi*). *Kaifiyat* (feeling) and *shorish* (tumult/passion) in fact are primary aesthetic

⁸⁰ Faisal Fatehali Devji. ‘Gender and the Politics of Space: The Movement for Women’s Reform in Muslim India, 1857–1900’. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, June 1991, pp. 141–53.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² It is pertinent that Sayyid Ahmad Khan, the most influential North Indian Muslim reformer, expressly forbade Muslims from joining the Indian National Congress in 1885, exhorting them to focus on attaining British education instead.

⁸³ M. Pernau, et al. *Civilizing Emotions: Concepts in Nineteenth Century Asia and Europe*. First edition, Oxford University Press, 2015, p.181

elements of a classical ghazal⁸⁴. This is an elaboration of the idea of the political capacity of emotions, and the natural affinity of the *marsiya* and *ghazal* to accommodate it. British condemnation of emotional immoderation and these literary genres can be explained thus. As emotional excess was related to insubordination, defiance and breaking traditional boundaries, it is understandable why the British would be wary of literary genres that dealt in these very emotions.

To illustrate this political bent, I am quoting the following line from the text that describes the audience's reaction when one of the princesses mentions Bahadur Shah Zafar's name, to reflect the potency of this classical trope of love.

Birjees Dulhan ki zubaan se idhar huzoor ka naam nikla udhar ankh se ansoo nikle aur unke sath hi majmay par rikhat taari hogayi, aurtain aur mard sab apne Badshah ki yaad mai ro rahe the⁸⁵”.

huzoor ka naam zubaan par ate hi dilli wale tarap uthe aur “haye Badshah” k naare chaaro taraf se buland hue. Adh ghanta se zyada ye kuhram machta raha⁸⁶.

[His name did but escape Birjees Dulhan's lips that her eyes welled up with tears and the crowd gathered by her was swayed over with emotion, men and women wept in remembrance of their King. The moment the name of Huzoor came upon the tongue, the residents of Delhi writhed in torment and cries of “O our King!” rose from all four corners. For more than half an hour this wailing continued.] H.N.

This is a textual recreation of an emotional spectacle that the British were trying to regulate publicly on a massive scale through their policies and education system, which included denunciation of classical *ghazal*. In that light, the subversive bent of this expression of passionate love and powerful grief, especially in relation to the former ruler cannot be overstated. This ties

⁸⁴ Frances Pritchett. *Nets of Awareness*. pp.116-119. Pritchett defines *shorish* as a “powerful, emotion-charged expression” of the poet that invites the reader to share in the feeling, and *kaifiyat* as “a mood evoked by the verse as a whole” that is primarily located in the reader.

⁸⁵ R. Khairi. *Ghadr ki maari shehzadiyan*. p. 55

⁸⁶ R. Khairi. *Ghadr ki maari shehzadiyan*. p. 22

back to the initial part of the chapter and the description of Urdu modernization project begun by the British.

In the next section, I argue that by using a rubric of ‘*ganga-yamuni*’ *tehzeeb*, these texts evoke a social memory of interfaith past in opposition to contemporary communalist activism and religious nationalism; they re-affirm Muslims as Indian natives and not wanderers after an Islamicate homeland, defying both colonial scholarship and nascent Muslim nationalism of the time. The language of the princesses, *begamati zubaan*, also under fire from the reformers at the time, becomes an embodiment of this *ganga-yamuni tehzeeb* in a convergence of form and content.

Begamati zubaan and the Ganga-yamuni tehzeeb

In all these texts, a vibrant ethos of a glorious interfaith past is evoked and remembered by the name of “*ganga-yamuni tehzeeb*” (the culture of Ganga and Yamuna). Far from being a peripheral element, it is the central element of all primary texts under study. This culture is constructed through narrations of rituals, festivals, and lore. Bahadur Shah calling Hindus and Muslims his two eyes, the origin of Salono festival with a Hindu woman guarding the corpse of Alamgir II through the night⁸⁷, Bahadur Shah consuming only *ganga-jal*, are some of the numerous moments of this *tehzeeb* coming alive in these texts⁸⁸. This *tehzeeb* emerges in opposition to the

⁸⁷ Alamgir II was murdered in 1759 at Kotla as part of conspiracy by the nobility. According to urban legend, his corpse was found and guarded by a woman named Ram Kaur who Shah Alam II made his sworn sister and the annual rakhi-tying ritual between the siblings began to be celebrated as Salono.

⁸⁸ While describing the origin of *Phoolwalon ki sair*, the author says, “badshah ko ye mela bohot pasand aya. Dilli walo se kaha k agar har saal bhadon k shuru mai ye mela hua kare to kaisa? Musalman dargah sharif par pankha charhayen aur Hindu jogmaya ji par charhayen. Musalmanon ke pankhe mai hindu aur hindu’on ke pankhe mai musalman shareek hon. Mele ka mela ho aur dono qoumon mai mail jol barhe.” Mirza Farhatullah Beg. *Phoolwalon ki sair*. p.8. In *Wida e Zafar*, Khairi says that, “pehla hukam jo Badshah ki khud mukhtar badshahi ka tha wo ye tha k ainda se gaye zibah nahi hogi.” R. Khairi. *Naubat Panj Roza yani Wida e Zafar*. p.129; Narayani Gupta says in Delhi between two empires, “There was in those years a camaraderie between Hindus and Muslims, at the Court and at Delhi college, at the gatherings in Chandni Chowk and Sa’dullah Chowk, around the dastan-gos, at festivals, especially Basant and the Phulwalon ki sair, during weddings and musha’iras. Weekly musha’iras were held at

communal policies, antagonism and emerging Muslim separatism at the time. This *tehzeeb* is complemented by the form and linguistic register of these texts, like the *begamati zubaan* which had a predominantly Indic register, and the *marsiya* which held popularity across religions.

There is free and uncensored usage of *begamati zubaan* in the speech of the princesses⁸⁹, a dialect that was reviled by most social reformers at the time for being crude, primitive and unrefined. Reformist texts for women that were published during this time in early 20th century used *begamati zubaan* only negatively and for didactic purposes- while depicting images of uncivilized, crude women in need of modern education⁹⁰. In a stark contrast, Khairi uses this language not unfavorably, but as the popular language spoken by women at the time. While the authorial voice of Khairi is replete with ornate Persian words and poetic metaphors, the language of the women is very Indic and is markedly distant from the Persianate Urdu. I argue that this choice of form consciously complements the themes of the text.

As the Indic style is close to what is now identified as the Hindi linguistic register, this dialect was the one most naturally suited to the local re-imagining of Karbala. This not only explains the popularity of these tales across religions, but also functions as a literary complement to the ‘*ganga-yamuni*’ culture and values espoused in these texts. Published during a time of increasing communalization, these texts invoke a local culture of inter-religious harmony that roots it within North Indian tradition. In my study of other texts too that are urban histories of pre-1857 Dilli, the term ‘*ganga-yamuni tehzeeb*’ during Mughal rule appears ubiquitously in almost all texts.

Ghaziuddin Madrassa (Delhi College) and on those nights Ajmeri Gate was kept open late into the night.” Narayani Gupta. *Delhi between Two Empires*. p.5

⁸⁹ Gail Minault. *Secluded Scholars: Women’s Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India*. Univ. Press, 1999.

⁹⁰ F. Devji. ‘Gender and the Politics of Space: The Movement for Women’s Reform in Muslim India, 1857–1900’. *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, vol. 14, no. 1, June 1991, pp. 141–53; B. Metcalf, translator. *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanwi’s Bihishti Zewar*. University of California Press, 1990.

This *Tehzeeb* is semantically vast to be confined to or understood through theoretical constructs of syncretism or cosmopolitanism. *Begamati zubaan* at this time was one of the last linkages to a cosmopolitan, harmonious past as Urdu and Hindi were being severed during these years.

Not only is it a unique complementarity of form and content, but also is another way these texts differ from the mainstream Urdu literature of the time. By invoking Hindustan as equally a homeland for Muslims as other religions, these texts perform another anomaly. During this time, most Urdu literature in its nascent Muslim separatism was forging the idea of a lost Islamicate homeland for Muslims, locating it in the Arab couched in a pan-Islamic rhetoric⁹¹. The idea of the displaced Muslim in search of his original homeland was gaining currency with famous writers of the time ascribing to this re-imagining of the past and rejecting their Hindustani identity⁹². Eve Tignol writes that “*Shikwa-e-Hind* was clearly a political tool in the anti-Congress campaign that made of nostalgia and memory an effective argument for propaganda⁹³”. Maulvi Zakaullah and some other scholars of the time denounced this burgeoning Muslim dissociation from their heritage. He said, “I cannot bear to hear Indian Musalmans speaking without reverence and

⁹¹ According to Nayyar, Hali and Nazir Ahmed “pioneered” in (re)imagining Hijaz as the most authentic site of Muslim national identity (in *Shikwa-e-Hind* and *Musaddas*.)” *Shikwa-e-Hind* according to Nayyar cements the fledgling Muslim nationalism in Urdu poetry by protesting to the land of Hind how its climate has corrupted and emasculated the Muslim who originally belongs to the land of Arab. Allama Iqbal, arguably the most famous Urdu poet of 20th century pre-independence India, affirms this idea of the displaced Muslim longing for his first home, the Hijaz, in his own poetry for example in the poem *Shikwah*. Eve Tignol writes that, “Hindu contributors [to Avadh Punch] show that Hindu contributors criticized Hali’s tone in the *Musaddas* and *Shikwa e Hind* and highlighted the growing communal tensions that such representations of Indo-Muslim history encouraged. In many words, the nostalgia displayed in Hali’s poems and in other Aligarh scholars’ writings led to social fragmentation.” E. Tignol. “The Muslims of Northern India and the Trauma of the Loss of Power.” p.70.

The poet’s responsibility to reform or lead the ‘nation’ was also a modern notion as the nation as an “imagined community” was interlinked with print capitalism and colonial modernity. Nasir Abbas Nayyar. *Coloniality, Modernity and Urdu Literature*. Sang-e-meel Publications, 2020.

⁹² It is fascinating that even Khairi and Nizami in all their other writings indulge in Muslim nationalism and reform, and these primary texts are unique even within their own corpus of writings in not being concerned with a Muslim identity.

⁹³ E. Tignol. “The Muslims of Northern India and the Trauma of the Loss of Power.” p.100

affection for India. It is a new fashion, unfortunately springing up, which did not exist in my younger days⁹⁴”.

Written in the backdrop of communal policies, the texts under study however firmly assert the indigeneity of Muslims to Hindustan. They at once reject an exclusionary nationalism and constitute a resistance to colonial scholarship’s binary of “foreign Muslim invader” and “local Hindu subject” that I mentioned in the first chapter. In this way, I argue that the nostalgia in these texts is fulfilling a different function than the *dunya ashob* Muslim literature prevalent at the time⁹⁵. This is a nostalgia for a lost cosmopolitan past remembered in collective festivity, celebration and shared grief. Compared to the “propagandic nostalgia” that selectively re-imagines an exclusionary past tying the Muslim identity to an Arab legacy⁹⁶, these texts mourn for a ruined city and culture that knew no such divisions, and that only Hindustani clime untainted by colonial divisions could sustain and nurture.



Figure 1.2 Two religions sharing a *pankha*

⁹⁴ E. Tignol. “The Muslims of Northern India and the Trauma of the Loss of Power.” p.105

⁹⁵ *Dunya ashob* literally meaning ‘disturbance in the world’ which has the displaced Muslim subject in search of a stable homeland. Ibid., 80-100

⁹⁶ Ibid., pp. 93-99

Khanna, Sanchit. 'Phoolwalon ki Sair'. *Scroll*, 2017,
<https://scroll.in/magazine/855992/once-a-secular-symbol-mehraulis-phoolwalon-ki-sair-festival-is-now-a-bureaucratic-circus>

In the next chapter, I analyze the Karbala symbology employed in these texts, and the political implications thereof. I trace the discursive myth-making around the figure of Bahadur Shah from the first to the third-generation texts, in what appears as a retrospective vindication and eulogization of his person. This becomes an archive of 'counter-memory' challenging the British discursive control over the 'Mutiny'. I argue that the allegory of Karbala is consciously used by the authors to invert the terms of loss and victory, and put forward a notion of Indian triumph even in material defeat affirming the justness of their cause.

Ch 2: Afterlives of Karbala

Introduction: Female survivors as storytellers

The Shii sect is centered around the memorialization and ritual remembrance of the tragic events of Karbala where the Prophet Muhammad's grandson Hussain was beheaded by the forces of Yazid for refusing to submit to his tyrannical rule. In Muslim communities, whenever a chilling atrocity of the kind takes place, the literary motif of Karbala is invoked to stress the magnitude of the moral wrong and cosmic resonance with instances of inhumane persecution throughout history. Karbala has also come to signify the paradigmatic battle of good and evil where a minority is overpowered by an atrocious majority in the pursuit of justice. This single event which attained the standing of an "archetypal tragedy" has been commemorated, mourned, narrated, unceasingly told and retold within the Shii and broader Muslim tradition⁹⁷.

In *Ghadr ki maari shehzadiyan* which is a semi-fictional narrative, the sleepless writer is wandering in the moonlit haunts and ruins of the old Shahjahanabad when he remembers a fateful night many decades ago which he then relates. Khairi continues that many decades ago, he chanced to visit the now-desolate Bela suburbs near Yamuna with Deputy Nazir Ahmed and Maulvi Zakaullah⁹⁸ during Bholu Shah's Basant. The writer narrates that in this festival, there was a gathering of female royals from the Mughal family, the ones who had survived the life-endangering escape from Dilli during 1858 and found their way back after public amnesty⁹⁹. These

⁹⁷ S. Akbar Hyder. *Reliving Karbala: Martyrdom in South Asian Memory*. Oxford University Press, 2006; C.M. Naim. 'The Art of Urdu Marsiya.' *Urdu Texts and Contexts: The Selected Essays of C.M. Naim*. Permanent Black ; Distributed by Orient Longman, 2004.

⁹⁸ North Indian scholar, mathematician, author, translator and historian (1832-1910). One of the luminaries of Delhi College and famous for writing a 10 volume history of India in Urdu language by the title *Tarikh e Hindustan*. He wrote around 157 books amounting to 70,000 pages. M. Pernau, and Muḥammad Ikrām Cughṭā'ī, editors. *The Delhi College: Traditional Elites, the Colonial State, and Education before 1857*. Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 263-265

⁹⁹ This could not have been before January 1859 when Muslims were allowed to enter the city.

women had gathered to share the tremendous suffering and trauma, loss of family members and destitution that they had been through. This was to be a voicing of communal trauma by honoring the tragedy and loss people of Dilli had undergone, and an effort to keep the memory of 1857 alive.

The women narrate their experiences in order, with a candle (*shama*) passed to the next to identify the speaker, much in the form of a classical *mushaira*. The very context of female survivors of a tragedy gathered to narrate their experiences has the resonance of Karbala with it. In the actual episode, it was the surviving female relatives accompanying Husain, left alive by Yazid but later humiliated in the bazaars of Damascus, who narrated the events of Karbala whence the ritual remembrance began. Of the approximately 200 men who accompanied Husain to Karbala, all were killed with not even the six month old Ali Asghar¹⁰⁰, Husain's son, spared. It is not coincidental then or merely an aesthetic choice that Khairi does not include any male survivor or speaker from the Mughal family. The idea is to make the same point: no able-bodied men had been spared the brutality of the sword. It was up to the women now to mourn the tragedy and reclaim in memory what had been physically lost.

jumairaat ka din tha, dilli nai nai taraaj thi. Magar dilli wale aathwein din peer ghaib par jama ho kar ujri hui dilli ki fateha parh lete the¹⁰¹.

[It was Thursday, Delhi's destruction was yet recent. But the residents of Delhi used to gather at *Pir-e-Ghaib** on every eighth day to offer funeral prayers for wrecked Dilli. *The name of a monument in Delhi built by Sultan Firuz Shah Tughlaq of the Delhi Sultanate in the 14th century.] H.N.

Festivals and rituals function here as remnants and memorabilia of the old urban city. The narrator upon seeing the gathering of female royals in the Basant festival says:

¹⁰⁰ The baby Ali Asghar was dying of thirst when Husain took him in his arms and went to the enemy side to plead for water as they had control over the Euphrates river. He was refused the water, and while in negotiation an arrow pierced the baby's neck resulting in his death.

¹⁰¹ R. Khairi. *Ghadr ki maari shehzadiyan*. p. 6

aaj kuhram hai, ye saamne wala tanbu dekha shehzadiyon ka hai. Badshah ki bhateji Gohar Ara begum ayi hain aur saheliyon ko jama kiya hai, sab apni apni ghadar ki dastaanein sunayein gi¹⁰².

[It's a tumult today, look at this tent before you, it belongs to the princesses. The king's niece, Gohar Ara Begum, has come and gathered her friends, all will share their tales (dastaanein) of Ghadar.] H.N.

The trope of female survivors as custodians of the tragic narrative forms a continuity with Karbala. Also, there is a poignant affect to the image of the sheltered, unworldly women of the royalty roaming the Dilli streets for survival.

Amy Bard writes:

Certain dimensions of the Karbala narrative, its rituals, and beliefs about its origins lend women's mourning assemblies a particular and powerful sense of continuity. After Husain's death, the Imam's enemies cruelly unveiled his female relatives, led them on a forced march to Damascus, and imprisoned them, but these heroines of the *marsiya* kept alive the memory of Husain's sacrifice¹⁰³.

The dishonor of female relatives of the king and subsequent loss of *purdah* are repeatedly bemoaned as a refrain in both *Begmaat ke Ansu* and *Ghadr ki maari shehzadiyan* and can be interpreted as a broad comment on the decline of Dilli's culture and Indo-Muslim prestige. The direct contact of these former princesses with Dilli's old residents unmediated by a screen reflects the overall loss of Indo-Muslim sovereignty which constitutes part of the present tragedy.

raat ka tareek hissa bajaye deeba o hareer ke in mehzaat ke nazuk jism ki parda poshi kar raha tha jo qila mualla se nikal kar iss waqt bele ki mehmaan theen¹⁰⁴.

[Instead of fine silks and brocade, only the night's darkness was covering these delicate women who had been turned out of the Palace and were in Bela today.] H.N.

¹⁰² R. Khairi. *Ghadr ki maari shehzadiyan*. p. 9

¹⁰³ Amy Bard. 'Value and Vitality in a Literary Tradition: Female Poets and the Urdu Marsiya'. *Annual of Urdu Studies*, 2000, p.324

¹⁰⁴ R. Khairi. *Ghadr ki maari shehzadiyan*. p. 11

The author assumes an impassioned tone around the loss of *purdah* and *namoos* (dignity/honor) of these women, presenting the moon as a pitiful participant of the tragedy trying to cover their bodies and preserving their modesty¹⁰⁵.

us waqt raat k teen baj chuke the aur chaand khawateen e mughliya ki barbadi namoos par matam karta hua basaat falak se lipat lipat kar wida ho raha tha¹⁰⁶.

[It was striking three in the night and the moon was beating itself over the ruin that had come upon the ladies of the Mughal sultanate as it wrapped itself in the folds of the sky and began to depart.] H.N.

This can also be read as euphemistically substituting for something far more sinister. Ghalib in one of his letters famously describes the destitute state of royal family members such, “The male descendants of the deposed king- such as survived the sword- draw allowances of five rupees a month. The female descendants, if old, are bawds; if young, are prostitutes... had you been here, you would have seen the ladies of the Fort moving about the city, their faces as fair as the moon and their clothes dirty, their pajama legs torn, and their slippers falling to pieces...”¹⁰⁷.

¹⁰⁵ In *Wida e Zafar*, Khairi says, “raat ke sannatey mai jab maamta ki maari maa’ on ka na’ala buland hota jinke phularwa se laal unki goadain hamesha ko kahlai kar gaye aur un badbakht dulhaon ka bain hota jinki mehndi abhi maili nahi hui aur suhaag ujar gaya tou Shahjahanabad ke aasman o zameen unke saath rote. Ye wo waqt tha ke kunwari bachi ko baap ki dehleez laangni haram thi. Khatola nikalta tha mar kar, ya palki nikalti thi Dulhan ban ker. Ghadar ne unki ye matti paleet ki ke na-mehramon k saamne khari hon.. Baap bhai aankhon k saamne qatal hon. Aur burqe parde waliyan be-waris ban kar jungle bayabanon mai raatein guzarein”.

[In the dead silence of night, when the cries of mothers would arise whose sons had been killed, or grieving for those wretched brides would be heard who with hands still red with henna had been widowed, then the skies and gardens of Shahjahanabad would shed tears with them. This was the time when it was unimaginable for an unmarried girl to step out of her father’s house (the *purdah* was so strict). Either their corpse would be taken away after death or palanquin would be carried out after marriage. *Ghadar* dishonored them such that they had to reveal themselves before *na-mehrams*, their fathers and brothers were butchered before their very eyes and *purdah*-observing women had to spend nights in the wilderness, unsheltered and orphaned.]

R. Khairi. *Naubat Panj Roza yani Wida e Zafar*. p.134

¹⁰⁶ R. Khairi. *Ghadr ki maari shehzadiyan*. p. 61

¹⁰⁷ Qtd from William Dalrymple. *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi, 1857*. Paperback ed, Bloomsbury, 2009, pp.633-634

Recent scholarship on the events of 1857 suggests that rapes of the women of Dilli, including royal women may have taken place at the hands of British soldiers¹⁰⁸. This implication becomes much more explicit in *Wida e Zafar*¹⁰⁹ and the value of reading these texts against the grain cannot be overstated.

Like the plaintive cry of the bereaved mother, orphaned daughter and widowed wife of the *marsiya* narratives, Khairi's text also features women recounting chilling, visceral trauma over the loss of close filial connections to ruthless and indiscriminate murder and brutalization. Qaiser Jahan Begum narrates her story thus:

Niyaz Ali mukhbar ... mere shohar Mirza Sikander ki phansi ka hukam mujhko dopahar hi ko suna chuka tha. Us namuraad kafir ne jo sitam tore hain firoun aur namrood ne bhi na tore honge. Maloom hua k shaam ko phaanch baje darya par baar mari jayegi. Yahan se udhar gaye tou sainkron badnaseebain khari aur baithi kalejon par ghonse maar rahi theen. Takrain maar maar shaam pakri asar k baad beqasuron ka taand aya. Mirza ko dekh kar amma jaan ne aik cheekh maari aur charon taraf kohram mach gaya. Aik firangi ne a kar sab ko qitaar mai khara kiya aur sipahiyon ne bandoqain chor deen. Bechare allah mare tarap tarap kar chalte hue aur jahan panah ka farmana saheeh ho gaya "na kafan mila na

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p.633. "At the same time as Saunders' inquiry completely exonerated the rebels of any single instance of rape [of British women], another inquiry found that perhaps as many as three hundred begums of the royal household had been 'taken away by our troops after the fall of Delhi'."

¹⁰⁹ R. Khairi. *Naubat Panj Roza ya Wida e Zafar*. pp.134-135. "Jinka aanchal tak ghair mard ne na dekha. Jab un bad-bakhton ke sar se waali waris uth chuke aur unko poora yakeen hogaya k unke ismat ke muhafiz phansiyon par latak gaye, tou unho ne faisla kiya k... jin ankhon ne paimaan e wafa kiya tha wo band hogayin tou ab jeena be-sood hai. Ye ginti ki das bees aurtein na theen. Shahjahanabad ka har muhalla ismat ki in deviyan aur qudrat ke un khazanon se pita para tha. Ye wo waqt hai ke dilli ki baaz kanwari aur raand aurtein fouji afsaron se nikah kar ke khouf o hiraas ko aag laga chuki theen aur itmi'naan ne zindagi basar kar rahi theen aur doosron k waaste namoona ho sakti theen. Lekin dilli in bahu baitiyon se khaali na thi jin par sheher ab bhi fakhar karta hai. Ye paak daaman allah waaliyan aadhi raat ke waqt jab sarkon aur galiyon mai sannata hota namaaz parh kar khudawand kareem ke hazoor mai sar basajood hoteen. Doodh peete bachon ko pait se baandhteen aur kun'won mai gir kar apni ismat par qurban ho jateen. Sheher ke tamaan kun'wein iffat ki in deviyan se khacha khach bhar gaye aur koi kunwan aisa na bacha jo in laashon se labraiz na ho."

[Women who had not even appeared before a stranger with a veil before- when their fathers and brothers got hanged, the guardians of their honor were gone...they decided that since the eyes that had pledged fidelity had closed forever, their lives too no longer had meaning. They weren't a handful of women, every neighbourhood of Shahjahanabad was full of these goddesses of virtue. This was the time when many women of Dilli had prudently chosen to marry British soldiers and were living rather peacefully. They could have been examples for other women but the wives and daughters of Dilli had the dignity that even now is a matter of pride for *dilliwallas*. These women would get up in the silence of the night, prostrate before God for the last time, tie their toddlers to their chests and jump in the wells to protect their chastity. All the wells of Dilli got filled with the corpses of these deities of honor.]

wo dafan hue na hai fateha na mizaar hai”. Amma jaan mirza k girte hi lapkeen, wo thande ho chuke the. Goli kanpatti mai lagi thi aur khoon beh raha tha. Unho ne sar utha kar god mai liya aur pyar karne lageen k usi murde Niyazu ne laash cheen li aur dhakka de kar kaha “burhiya aage barh.” Laashein bhangiyon aur chamaron ne utha kar darya mai phaink deen aur hum sab jidhar jiska moo utha rote peet’te chale gaye¹¹⁰.

[Niyaz Ali Mukhbar (informant) . . . had already told me about the hanging of my husband, Mirza Sikander, in the evening. The tortures that the rotten infidel has wrought upon us not even Firaun or Nimrod have! We were informed that at five in the evening they would be assembled to be shot. We went and saw hundreds of ill-starred women beating their chests. Beloved Mother, glancing upon Mirza, let out a scream and then havoc arose from all four directions. A British soldier (*firangi*) came, gathered them all in a line, and then the soldiers fired their guns. The helpless souls, cursed by God, died writhing and the declaration of our King, “No coffin was given, no burial performed, no prayers recited nor any shrines built.” came true. The moment Mirza fell, Mother reached for him, but he had already gone cold. The bullet had him in the side of the head and blood was pouring. She took his head and put it upon her lap and showered him with love but that heartless Niyazu took the corpse and pushed her away saying, “Old woman, move ahead!” The corpses were gathered by scavengers (*bhangi*) and *chamars* and thrust into the sea and we all left crying and weeping wherever the direction took us.] H.N.

The trope of the female survivor from the Karbala symbology aptly fits here in the narration of visceral accounts of loss and suffering in the aftermath of 1857 which also pose a challenge to the idea of British justice. Also, as female laments were usually perceived as passive, this form and symbolism provides a cover to the otherwise chilling insinuations the authors make.

Bahadur Shah as a mythic *imam*

The story of Karbala is that of a just resistance against an atrocious oppressor in the face of certain defeat; a divinely sanctioned cause that is forcefully opposed by the temporal powers of the time in cowardly opportunism; a resistance to end despotic rule that ends with the martyrdom of Hussain’s whole family and companions; an archetypal battle of good and evil and a symbol of hope and justice for the downtrodden till the Day of Judgement. The good prevails on evil even in death and material defeat. Islamic discourse has the terms *dunyavi* and *ukhravi* to describe the

¹¹⁰ R. Khairi. *Ghadr ki maari shehzadiyan*. p. 50

matters of the world and those of hereafter. Within this doctrine, *dunyavi* is like a moral trial, associated with the temporal and therefore inconsequential, while the *ukhravi* is meant to connote the eternal, the enduring and the Real.

The message is that worldly victory does not matter: it is the perseverance in a just cause whilst deserted by the powers-that-be and without consideration for material outcome that gives Karbala its symbolic moral force. It is precisely the fact of resisting despite the certainty of defeat that makes Karbala Karbala. As C.M. Naim says, “They [Husain and his companions] already exist in an eternal time, while their enemies’ fate will remain a transitory glory”¹¹¹.

It is then fascinating to see the narrative tropes of Karbala and *Husainiyat* employed to commemorate Bahadur Shah Zafar and memorialize the uprising of 1857 in these texts. The archetypal plot described in the texts evokes the same rhetorical associations: an innocent Sufi-king (“darwesh-sift Badshah”) fighting for the liberation of his people against a powerful enemy; the massacre of innocents and martyrdom of the king’s family; an eventual defeat suffered, and a ruthless vengeance waged by the oppressor. Amy Bard says that:

The Karbala tragedy, with its basic opposition of good and evil, has a broad explanatory power that extends beyond the actual ritual space. A righteous, doomed hero can be associated with Husain, a heartless tyrant with Yazid, and the more intimate one’s knowledge of their encounter, the more potent and textured the Karbala symbology¹¹².

A central aspect in these texts is the idea of Bahadur Shah’s innocence which can be directly read against the actual humiliating trial that took place in 1858 and charged him as guilty and sent him into a lifelong punitive exile. “*Masoomiyat*” (innocence from guilt) and

¹¹¹ C.M. *Urdu Texts and Contexts*. p.8

¹¹² Amy Bard. “Turning Karbala Inside Out: Humour and Ritual Critique in South Asian Muharram Rites”, in *Sacred Play: Ritual Levity and Humor in South Asian Religions*, ed. Selva Raj and Corinne Dempsey. Albany, State University of New York, 2010, p.170

“*mazlumiyaat*” (having been wronged) are two important traits attributed to Shii *imams* essential to the Karbala narrative.

hazaron beqasoor phansiyon pe charh gaye aur gor o kafan tak naseeb na hua. Qayamat barpa kardi. Raha sahib e alam (Bahadur Shah) ka maamla, wo sheher ka bacha bacha janta hai k aise bhole bhale aise seedhe saadhe Badshah... par bagli ghonson ne waar kiya aur jis k namak se pait bhar rahe the usko ghar se nikaal kar apne ghar mai ghee k chiragh jalaye¹¹³.

[Thousands of innocents were hanged and did not even receive a grave or a burial cloth (*kafan*). It was as if the Day of Judgement had been upon us. Bahadur Shah’s disposition, every child knew of his sincerity, such an innocent King . . . he was ruthlessly betrayed and those who ate their fill from his salt kicked him out of their homes and lit lamps of ghee.] H.N.

Below is a passage from *Begmaat ke Ansu* where Kalsoom Zamani Begum¹¹⁴, daughter of Bahadur Shah, narrates the heart-wrenching final farewell with her father, him weeping on the prayer mat before his departure to Nizamuddin (from where he was taken captive). This has resonances of the parts of *marsiya* called *majara* and *rukhsat* (departure) where Husain bids farewell to the women of the family amid their harrowing cries at the final parting¹¹⁵. In this scene, Bahadur Shah while on the prayer mat with tears in his eyes and frail, trembling hands raised in prayer, utters these words:

“Kulsoom lo ab tumko khuda ko sonpa. khudawand ye be-waris bache tere hawale harta hoon. Ye mehlon k rehne wale jangal weeranon mai jaate hain. Dunya mai inka koi madad-gaar nahi raha. Taimur ke naam ki izzat rakhiyo aur in be-kas aurton ki abroo bachaiyo.

¹¹³ R. Khairi. *Ghadr ki maari shehzadiyan*. p. 72

¹¹⁵ In *Wida e Zafar*, Khairi describes the capture of Bahadur Shah at Nizamuddin and his final farewell thus, “ye wo dard-angez manzar tha jiska khayal badan kapkapa deta hai. Ghareeb shehzadiyan jinhon ne gore ki surat tak na dekhi thi thar thar kaanpne lageen. Masoom bache konon mai ghus gaye, Badshah ne ro ro kar biwi ko aur lipta lipta kar bachon ko khuda ke sapurd kiya.”

[This was such a heart-rending scene that even its thought makes one tremble. Princesses who had never revealed their faces to a Britisher were miserably shivering with fear. Children hid in the corners of walls. The king tearfully bid farewell to his wife and children leaving them unto God’s protection.] R. Khairi. *Naubat Panj Roza yani Wida e Zafar*. p.142

Parvardigaar yehi nahi balke Hindustan ke sab hindu musalman meri aulaad hain. Mere aamaal ki shamat se unko ruswa na kar aur sab ko pareshaniyon se nijaat de¹¹⁶”.

[Kulsoom, we now entrust you to God. Oh Lord, I leave these orphans unto You. Accustomed to palace walls, they are now resigned to the wild, menacing jungle. No one is left in the world to care for them. Keep the honor of Taimur’s name and protect the modesty of these defenseless women. Oh my Maker, not just them but every Hindu and Muslim in Hindustan is my progeny! Do not make them suffer the consequences of my actions and relieve them of their torment.] H.N.

Now note this *marsiya* describing the final words of Husain to his daughter Sakina while parting:

In the event that I do not return at eventide

It is because I have had to go far away

If you love me, do not cry little one

Tonight you will experience the first moments of separation from

Your father

Lay your head meekly on mother’s breast and go to sleep

The days of contentment have passed

How the season has changed!

Now you will have to live as an orphan

Thirsty, her tiny hands folded, she asked

“Tell me, what is an orphan?”

Weeping tears of blood, the Imam said

By evening you will know all about this pain and sorrow¹¹⁷

There are unmistakable parallels to be drawn here. Khairi and Nizami were no strangers to the Shii commemorative traditions, both had even published books on the subject, *Uroos e Karbala* and *Yazeed nama* respectively.

¹¹⁶ Khwaja Hasan Nizami. *Begamat ke Ansu*. Matbu’a Aleemi Press, 13th ed., Delhi, 1944, p.4

¹¹⁷ Qtd. from S. Akbar Hyder. *Reliving Karbala*. p. 26

The reason I call this veneration of Bahadur Shah a process of myth-making is because this depiction and lore first appear in the 20th century texts and differ radically from the first-generation texts on 1857¹¹⁸ like that of Ghalib and Sayyid Ahmad Khan. In *Asbab e Baghawat e Hind*, Sayyid Ahmad while broadly vindicating the whole North Indian Muslim community from involvement in the Mutiny, implicates Bahadur Shah rather harshly for someone who had just been ousted from rule:

dilli ke Badshah mazool ka Iran ko farmaan likhna hum kuch ta'jub nahi samajhte. Dilli ke mazool Badshah ka ye haal tha k agar us se kaha jata k paristan mai jinnon ka Badshah aap ka tabi'adar hai tou wo usko sach samajhta aur aik chor das farmaan likh deta¹¹⁹.

[It does not surprise me that Delhi's ousted King would write to the King of Iran (for succor). Delhi's ousted King was of such a mind that if he were told that the King of Djinn in Fairy Land (*paristan*) was awaiting him with a welcome, he would have believed it and immediately sent ten missives.] H.N.

Ghalib makes similar implications of royal guilt in *Dastanbu* by writing, "these faithless slaves who had escaped their masters came to kiss the royal threshold and demand fertile lands for themselves. No one has told me, and I am at a loss to understand, how all who sought audience were allowed to go before the emperor; how every seeker after shelter was, by the royal authorities, given shelter. *This can only be considered as part of the strangeness of the times*¹²⁰".

In the first generation texts, the Mughal king is shown as a powerless, incompetent ruler who, if he was complicit in the uprising, was complicit by virtue of helplessness and not by

¹¹⁸ M. Pernau. 'Nostalgia: Tears of Blood for a Lost World'. *South Asia Graduate Research Journal (SAGAR)*, pp. 86-88.

¹¹⁹ Sayyid Ahmad Khan. *Asbab-e-baghawat-e-hind*. Matbua Mustafa-e-press, Lahore, pp.4-5

¹²⁰ Ghalib. *Dastanbu*. Translated and edited by Khwaja Ahmad Faruqi. Delhi University Press, 1970, pp.35-36

strategy. Those texts show him as an inept king whose rule was marked by instability and who fell short even in the managerial affairs of his own extended family¹²¹.

In the second generation texts like *Phoolwalon ki sair* and *Wida e Zafar*, a narrative halo comes to surround his persona wherein all material problems of his rule recede from the narrative, instead exalting his rule as one of exemplary justice, peace, festivities and inter-communal harmony. They describe a just rule upended by the defeat of 1857 giving rise to ruin, destruction, and widespread injustice under formal British rule. This is in marked contrast to the first-generation texts which make the opposite case: a decadent, ineffectual Mughal rule overcome by the British to establish justice and order.

It makes for interesting historical fact that the grave of Bahadur Shah was also discovered in the early 20th century, and he physically lay forgotten and un-mourned for decades after his death in Rangoon¹²². This memorialization can be historically traced as his grave was then turned into a shrine which is visited by seekers of spiritual beneficence to date. This goes to complicate the idea of these texts being entrenched in historical and popular memory, and the relationship of both to literature. Soofia Siddique analyses it as the “imbrication of historical memory with cultural forms” in her research employing the theoretical lens of Walter Benjamin¹²³. This very fact, of the grave’s discovery and publication of these texts happening around the same time, goes to the heart of the productive theoretical tension and mystique informing this project; what relation does history bear to popular memory that people create? Arguably, popular memory itself functions as history since it informs reality almost as much as material events by re-configuring it in the minds

¹²¹ Bahadur Shah was known to be in heavy debts, both of the British and the money-lenders of Dilli. The texts written around that time and later biographies affirm this image.

¹²² M. Pernau. ‘Nostalgia: Tears of Blood for a Lost World’. *South Asia Graduate Research Journal (SAGAR)*.

¹²³ S. Siddique. *Remembering the Revolt of 1857*. p.71

of people. This renders the question of what precedes the other futile in trying to understand the nature of popular lore and the functions it serves.



Figure 2.1 Bahadur Shah’s shrine in Yangon, present-day Myanmar
Photographer unidentified. ‘Bahadur Shah’s shrine.’ 2018,
https://www.tripadvisor.com/Attraction_Review-g294191-d447054-Reviews-Tomb_of_Bahadur_Shah_Zafar-Yangon_Rangoon_Yangon_Region.html#/media-atf/447054/361598217:p/?albumid=-160&type=0&category=-160

Re-casting popular memory as a counter-memory

In these early 20th century texts, veneration of Bahadur Shah’s personage takes place and significant narrative shifts happen, memorializing him as the innocent and just Sufi-king who lost his rule in a struggle to liberate his people. This can almost be seen as offering a textual corrective, albeit in the form of popular lore, against the tide of events of 1857 and the British monopolization of official narrative. Even in terms of popular narrative, the Anglo-Indian Mutiny novel had come to be its own genre by that point for its prolific appearance, whereas a collection of lament poetry *Fughan e Delhi* (1863) was the sole literary product of 1857 by the Indians for a very long time.

In *Ghadr ki maari shehzadiyan*, a *chaleeswan* of the “martyrs” of 1857 is arranged by the audience and a collective *fateha* prayer is recited to send blessings on the late Mughal king. On

the third night when the *chaleeswan* takes place, public mourning happens with recitals of *ghazals* written by the late king, almost constituting a counter-memory to the official archive and British narratives¹²⁴. The narratives by female survivors especially appear vying for a discursive space hitherto dominated by innumerable British texts that had fetishized the plight of the British woman in 1857, often with provocative implications of sexual transgressions¹²⁵.

This contestation becomes more explicit and charged at places, like in *Wida e Zafar* where Khairi tries to refute the author of “History of India”¹²⁶ while defending Bahadur Shah. The ‘trial’ of Bahadur Shah is in fact revisited in *Wida e Zafar* and denounced as sham in what becomes a retrospective vindication of the late king¹²⁷. At various points, the narrators explicitly claim to be filling in the (deliberate) lapses of official memory and present themselves as counter-narratives-repositories of harrowing oral stories that have passed *seena dar seena* (popular Urdu expression literally meaning chest to chest/passed orally across generations) and not made it to the official narratives. While describing the *pankha* ceremony in *Phoolwalon ki Sair*, Beg includes a “youth platoon” (*bacchra paltan*) in the procession and writes in the footnote:

¹²⁴ Around 70 British novels since 1859 have been written so far about the ‘Mutiny’. The Mutiny novel was employed to advance notions of British supremacy and justify rule over the Indian subcontinent. Gautam Chakravarty writes that, “Anglo-Indian literary culture was intimately responsive to the British project in India...[in the Mutiny novel], the rebellion turns into a site of heroic imperial adventure, and an occasion for conspicuous demonstrations of racial superiority”. Gautam Chakravarty. *The Indian Mutiny and the British Imagination*. 1st ed., Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp.6-9

¹²⁵ Cawnpore massacre, in particular, became a lasting source of controversy in British newspapers as well as in British India, with rumours of British women having been raped fueling British anger and violence against the Indians. Violation of British womanhood rhetorically became one of the justifications of a brutal reprisal against natives, including inhumane murders and torture. Margrit Pernau writes that “stories about white women being murdered and raped were collected, embellished and handed down with particular meticulousness. As cautionary tales, as calls for vigilance, they remained the backdrop of British policy until well after the First World War.” Margrit Pernau. *Ashraf into Middle Classes: Muslims in Nineteenth-Century Delhi*. 2013, p.236

¹²⁶ R. Khairi. *Naubat Panj Roza yani Wida e Zafar*. p.101

¹²⁷ Almost all texts instead accuse the king’s close officials of betraying him for political opportunism, especially the prime minister Hakim Ahsanullah Khan, cousin Mirza Ilahi Baksh and wife Zeenat Mahal. Hakim Ahsanullah Khan was especially reviled for formally testifying against the king in the British-held trial.

ye fouz badshah ne khud banayi thi. The tou larke magar ghadr mai baavte (British military front during 1857) ke neeche sab kat kar dhair hogaye. Inn ke qisse dilli ki buddhe bayaan karte the aur rote the. Tareekh mai inn k karnamon ka koi zikar nahin hai. Khuda maloom kya baat hai. Hari hui fouz thi shayd isliye inka zikr bezaroorat samjha gaya¹²⁸”.

[The king had prepared this army himself. They were merely boys, but were cut to pieces at the British military camp during Ghadar. Old nans and grandfathers of Dilli would tell their tales and weep. There is no mention (zikr) of their achievements in history. Perhaps mentioning them was considered unnecessary as they were the defeated side...]

The lore around the Mughal king assumes even greater proportions in the third-generation Urdu texts written after independence. In “*Zafar ka Safar*”, a third generation text, Bahadur Shah’s departure from Dilli is memorialized into a procession of public mourning. The Preface from the author reads:

Ae saltanat e mughlia k akhri taajdar zafar, tera marsiya tere aage parhta hoon, khud be-chain hoon aur tujhe beqarar karta hoon¹²⁹.

[O Last Crowned King of the Mughal Empire, I read your *marsiya* before you, I myself am pining (in your memory) and shall make you restless too.] H.N.

The narrative poem by the author literally takes on the form of a *marsiya* while grieving the departure of a beloved king.

*hai amad kis ki jis ke muntazir ba chashm e tar hain sab
Khare hain raaston par apne ghar se be-khabar hain sab
Har aik matam kunan hai khak bar sar basar hain sab
Jo kal the shaad o Khurram aaj ye kyun noha gar hain sab
Garaibaan chaak hain sab ke ye kya maidaan e mehshar hai
Labon par aah o naala chashm pur nam khaak sar par hai
Jo kal tha mulk shadaan aaj kyun barbaad weeran hai
Ye kiske marg par rota hai alam kis par giryaan hai
Ye kis bulbul ki rukhsat hai chaman sara bayabaan hai*

¹²⁸ Mirza Farhatullah Beg. *Phoolwalon ki sair*. p.44

¹²⁹ Zahid Haidri. *Zafar ka Safar*. Azam Asteem Press, Hyderabad, p.1

*dar o deewar par khaak urr rahi hai hu ka maidaan hai*¹³⁰

[With eyes full of tears we await his coming

We are standing upon paths whilst unaware of where our homes lie

Everyone is mournful and lives their life smeared in dust

Why are the ones happy yesterday full of sorrow today?

Their collars are torn as if it were Judgement Day

Lamentations upon the lips, dust-smeared faces and eyes full of tears

The country that was yesterday prosperous, why is it in ruins today?

Upon whose death they cry, for whom does their spirit lament?

Which nightingale has left and made this garden desolate?

Ashes fly upon the walls and apathetic is nature] H.N.

This poetry can be read against this famous illustration from 1865, “Capture of the King of Delhi by Captain Hodson”¹³¹ to juxtapose it with the governing British narrative and construction of official history around the uprising. This picture is regularly cited to describe the debilitation of both the king and the Mughal rule in its last days, and through this contrast I hope to illustrate the notion of these Urdu texts constituting, and even constructing an archive of counter-memory.

¹³⁰ Z. Haidri. *Zafar ka Safar*. pp.1-2

¹³¹ This image’s popularity in informing historical memory can be gauged by the fact that even today it is available as a poster print at the US corporate giant Walmart’s website by the title ‘Capture of the King of Delhi’.



Figure 2.2 Hand-colored steel engraving from Charles Balls ‘The History of the Indian Mutiny’, London Printing and Publishing Company, 1865

Rashid ul Khairi writes in *Wida e Zafar* a heart-wrenching scene of the king’s departure:

chaaron taraf kuhram mach gaye. Aur har ghar se rone peetne ki sada’in buland hui. Jab wo sa’at ayi ke bad-naseeb Badshah jangi pehre mai dilli se wida ho to khalqat andhere mu sarkon par a bethi. Ye wo subha thi jismai ma’on ne apne masoom bachon par khana haram kiya aur jab tak apne Badshah ko ansu’on ke halke mai khuda ke sapurd na kar liya choolhon mai aag na sulgayi!¹³²”

[There was chaos everywhere, sounds of wailing and crying coming from every house. When news reached that the unfortunate king would depart Dilli under armed guard, the people of Dilli came out and sat dark-faced on the streets. This was the morning when mothers declared food sinful for their children. Until their king was entrusted to God in tears, no stove was to be set aflame.] T.I.A.

One of the pivotal aspects of the Karbala lore is the voluntary sacrifice of Hussain to save his community from the persecution of Yazid despite the certainty of death. A similar narrative of a monumental sacrifice by Bahadur Shah for his people is consolidated by the time of the third generation writers. Much like Husain lost his sons in Karbala, three sons of Bahadur Shah (Mirza

¹³² R. Khairi. *Naubat Panj Roza yani Wida e Zafar*. p.156

Mughal, Mirza Khizar Sultan, Mirza Abu Bakr) were shot by William Hodson. Moreover, their dead bodies were hung from the Dilli kotwali as public spectacle¹³³. Poignant evocations of Bahadur Shah as a grieving father are fashioned in these texts.

Khairi writes in *Wida e Zafar* that when Bahadur Shah was informed of his sons' brutal deaths:

kaleja nikal gaya. Safaid daarhi ansu'on se pur hogayi. Jis waqt ye khayal ata tha ke bad-naseeb baap ke phool se bachon ko kafan bhi naseeb na hua tou Zeenat Mahal se bilbila kar kaha 'ae begum! Mere chand se mukhre be-gor o kafan pare jungle mai so rahe hain aur koi Allah ka banda itna nahin ke unka moo dhula kar kapre badal de. Balisht bhar ke lothron ko in hathon mai isi din ko jawan kiya that ke inki mout par koi ansu tak girane wala na ho. Cheel kawwe phularwa se la'alon ko nochain. Kutte unko bhanbhorain. Mai sunoon aur zinda rahoon.¹³⁴

[Heart arose to the mouth and the silver beard got drenched in tears. When the thought occurred that the beloved children of this wretched father were deprived of even a burial cloth, he cried out to his wife in torment "My moon-faced children are asleep in the forest, all alone; not one is there to wash them and cover them with a white cloth. Did we raise these infants only so they would grow up and die ungrieved and unwept? So crows would claw at their flesh and dogs bite into them? And that I would hear this and still live...]

In another third generation text "*Bazm e Firdous mai Youm e Zafar*" (1962), we see a vision of Firdous (heaven) where 19th century Urdu poets gather to celebrate Youm e Zafar (centennial of Bahadur Shah Zafar's birthday) in the form of a *mushaira*. Classical Urdu poets like Mir Taqi Mir, Momin Khan Momin and Mirza Ghalib are all part of the *mushaira* and recite their poetry. However, Bahadur Shah Zafar is the only one who recites a *marsiya*, and that too not his own but written by the author of the book.

Bahadur Shah is introduced in the text thus:

Al-amaan koi hadd hai un alaam o hawadis ki jinho ne aik mazloom ka muhasira kar rakha tha. Koi inteha hai uski sabar azmayi ki, jiska takht o taaj cheen liya gaya ho, jisko us ke hi god ke paley aur karyal jawano ke sar nazar mai paish kiye gaye hon. Jisko dilli k

¹³³ Aslam Parvez and Bahadur Shah. *The Life & Poetry of Bahadur Shah Zafar*. p.118

¹³⁴ R. Khairi. *Naubat Panj Roza yani Wida e Zafar*. pp.145-6

bazon mai tashheer kiya gaya ho, jisko marne par watan e Azeez ki mitti bhi naseeb na hui ho. Balke dilli se hazaron meel door jis ne intehai be-basi aur be-kasi k alam mai airiyen ragar ragar kar jaan di ho¹³⁵.

[Al-Amaan is there a limit to the sorrows that had besieged this innocent king! Is there a limit to the testing of patience of one whose throne was taken from him, who was presented the heads of those he had raised upon his lap? He who was humiliated in the bazaars of Dilli and who died in exile, deprived of his own soil...died a helpless death a thousand miles away in agony...] H.N.

Bahadur Shah Zafar recites this poetry in the *mushaira*:

*Dil par hain naksh abtak yaadein wahi watan ki
Nazr o nameen hain baharain ujre hue chaman ki
Sab kuch luta kar apna dil phir bhi mutma'in tha
Bedaar kar gaye the ghairat ko hum watan ki*¹³⁶

[Upon our hearts are etched still the memories of our homeland
We still see visions of Spring of our now desolate homeland
After losing everything our hearts were content still
Our sacrifice had revived the resolve of the nation] H.N.

The narrative of a heroic, self-effacing sacrifice is cemented with the third generation texts, with many texts venerating Bahadur Shah as a national hero and precursor of Indian independence, crediting him with arousing the spirit of his people. It makes for an interesting contrast with the debates immediately following 1857 of the Mughal king's implication in the 'Mutiny'. Even though most Indian representatives and many writers maintained that the king was 'forced' into assuming charge of the rebels, the British remained certain of and vocal about his guilt. Following a different logic, the later Urdu texts about 1857 converge with the British stance on Bahadur Shah's command of the uprising, the latter pronouncing him guilty of rebellion but the former now breaking away to pronounce him as the predecessor of the Indian freedom struggle.

Mojiza kahani and the lore of 1857

¹³⁵ P. Waqif. *Bazm-e-Firdaus mai yaum-e-Hazrat Bahadur Shah Zafar*. Hali Publishing House, Delhi, 1965, p.6

¹³⁶ P. Waqif. *Bazm-e-Firdaus mai yaum-e-Hazrat Bahadur Shah Zafar*. p.44

While the *marsiya* has a longer history and at least goes back to Safavid Iran as a literary genre, the *mojiza kahani* has successfully resisted institutionalization by remaining a popularly oral genre with obscure origins. Part myth and part legend, *mojiza kahanis* are re-tellings of fantastical lore around the figures of Ali and Hussain and the events of Karbala, listening to which is believed to bring spiritual beneficence and intercession by Ali and Hussain. While the *marsiya* has the Shia majlis as its literary public, the *mojiza kahani* in contrast exists without a formal audience and rather as individual re-tellings in personal settings. The *mojiza kahani* is focused on moral edification through reinforcing faith and invoking divine intercession¹³⁷.

The central feature of *mojiza kahani* is the appearance of the supernatural or the defiance of nature which can then be attributed to the spiritual power of *imams*. What is fascinating about *mojiza kahani* is the unique suitability of its form to the Indic context which contributes to the interfaith popularity of these tales. Formal *mojiza kahanis* explicitly refer to the figures of Husain and his companions, his horse or the events of Karbala, and feature kings, princesses and the like. Informal *mojiza kahanis* however feature everyday characters, but with a fantastical happening that is attributed to the intervention of Husain. The idea behind informal *mojiza kahani* is to make Karbala personal and immediate, “bringing sacred geography home...re-creating Karbala wherever one is¹³⁸”. Amy Bard writes:

The characters in the world of standard *mo'jizats*, a world usually unmarked by earthly geopolitical signposts, resemble more those in folktales or short *qissas* than in the tragedy of Karbala: they are goldsmiths, woodcutters, potters, and their families¹³⁹.

¹³⁷ To read more in detail about the *mojiza kahani*, read Amy Bard. ‘Hearing Mo‘jizat in South Asian Shi‘ism’. *Tellings and Texts : Music, Literature and Performance in North India*, edited by Katherine Butler Schofield and Francesca Orsini, Open Book Publishers, 2016, pp. 137–66.

¹³⁸ A. Bard. ‘Hearing Mo‘jizat in South Asian Shi‘ism’. pp.138,160

¹³⁹ A. Bard. ‘Hearing Mo‘jizat in South Asian Shi‘ism’. pp. 151

The peculiar aspect of *mojiza kahani* is that since it is performative- ritually listening to it is thought to contain spiritual powers and ability to influence events- it is only as true as the listener's faith in it. Deniers of the tales are apparently divinely marked out for an unpleasant punitive episode which usually restores their faith amid abundant repentance.

It is deeply interesting to note that many stories within *Ghadr* and *Begmaat ke Ansu* contain aspects of a *mojiza kahani* and ascribe fantastical happenings and spiritual power to some events of 1857. In *Begmaat*, Nizami narrates "Ghadr mai sabz posh aurat ki larai" (The Green-Clad Rebel of 1857) from stories told by the elders of Dilli who lived through the events of 1857; the most credible source in a still predominantly oral society, especially one where the subject of 'Mutiny' was an endangering topic for an Indian to write on depending on the content. In this tale, numerous sightings of a supernatural being in the form of a female rebel on horseback fighting against the British during 1857 are mentioned. It at once evokes references to Husain on horseback, sightings of whom are a regular content of *mojiza kahanis*, and also Joan of Arc who Nizami himself makes a reference to¹⁴⁰. This is an illustration of 'the mediation of literary model as form of experience, model of perception and elaboration of reality itself¹⁴¹.'

aik burhiya musalman aurat sabz libas pehne hue sheher ke bazaaron mai ati aur buland aur garaj daar awaaz se kehti thi ao chalo khuda ne tumko bahisht mai bulaya hai¹⁴²”.

[An aged Muslim woman in green would come to the markets and in a loud, thundering voice say, 'Come, God has called you to the heavens.] H.N.

¹⁴⁰ Pernau writes in *Ashraf into Middle Classes*, "Rumours, miraculous signs, and dreams were frequent items in the newspapers during the rebellion also, for example, the recurrent reporting of mysterious troops of horsemen dressed in red or green who had clearly been sent by God to support the beleaguered insurgents in battle—a reference to the historical battle of Badr." M. Pernau. *Ashraf into Middle Classes*. p.220

¹⁴¹ Conte qtd. in Vasudha Dalmia. *Fiction as History: The Novel and the City in Modern North India*. p.6

¹⁴² H. Nizami. *Begamat ke Ansu*. p.79

It is again important to not lose sight of the political function such a tale would serve: that God Himself sanctioned the uprising and fighting against the British was no less than a jihad. I also mention this in relation to the broader idea of myth-making regarding 1857, which did not originate with these texts but was already prevalent in the oral register and rumor as hushed whispers in the narrow streets of a defeated Shahjahanabad.

Nizami also narrates many miraculous tales of long-lost brothers meeting in prison, a mother finding her lost son after decades, Dara Bakht's daughter dying in the Chiragh e Dilli shrine after seeing a vision of her dead father calling out to her, among others. Just like a *mojiza kahani*, Nizami highlights the intent of moral edification and cleansing of soul through these tales¹⁴³.

ye wo qissa hai jisme aqalmand aadmi k liye ibrat ka bohot bara zakheera hai aur jiske sun'ne se insaan apne gharoor o takabbur ko bhool jata hai¹⁴⁴.

[This is a tale in which there is admonition (*ibrat*) for every discerning man, and those who hear it forget their vanity and arrogance.]

This assumes an extraordinary mythic proportion in *Ghadr ki maari shehzadiyan* where towards the end of the *chaleeswan* of 'martyrs', a repentant *mukhbar* (informant/collaborator) shows up and is derisively driven out by the people only to hear of his death in supernatural circumstances the next day.

This is a potent moment of cosmic justice and the intervention of divine hand, as Khairi the narrator claims witness to it. The figure of the native *mukhbar* is rampant in both texts of post-1857 recollections in a curious contrast to the sparse mention of the British. The death of the *mukhbar* can be interpreted more subversively as a broad metaphor for the accursed "*zalim*", the

¹⁴³ Nizami describes the purpose of his tales such, "inn sacche qisson se apni zindagi k aaj aur kal ko samjhe aur nata'ij nikaal kar ibrat hasil kare." [..that the discerning man should have *ibrat* on reading these true tales]. H. Nizami. *Begamat ke Ansu*. p.130

¹⁴⁴ H. Nizami. *Begamat ke Ansu*. p.90

British. This is a shrewd literary move and has precedent in earlier works written at the height of British retribution like *Fughan e Delhi* (1863) where colonial critique is “diffused[d] by the use of the passive voice, or by its substitution with a material symbol (like the gibbet)...which underline[s] the very relations of power that they seemingly efface”¹⁴⁵. The ‘*mukhbar*’ here seems to provide that metaphorical function and can be interpreted as the colonial machinery overseeing death and destruction in 1857. This “immunity of metaphor” harks back to the modernist disapproval of it and seemingly justifies the colonial paranoia around it¹⁴⁶. It is relevant to note that any overt critique of the British carried real threat, and Khwaja Hasan Nizami had to face censorship from the British authorities while publishing the 10th Volume of *Ghadr e Dilli ke Afsane* as late as 1930. The ‘controversial’ title “*Ghadr ki Phansiyan*” (Hangings of the Mutiny) had to be changed to “*Ghadr ka Natija*” (The Aftermath of Mutiny)¹⁴⁷.

Reversing the Script

The image of British as dispensers of justice created by first generation writers like Sir Sayyid and Ghalib is reversed in early 20th century texts to paint the British as brutal and unjust, guilty of toppling an innocent king’s harmonious rule. Bahadur Shah’s empty grave in Mehrauli is invoked as a powerful reminder and enduring symbol of the injustice that took place, signifier of a loss transcending mere corporeality. It eerily functions as a physical artefact of a sacred space eternally deprived of its expected occupant and in wait for him. Farhatullah Beg writes in *Phoolwalon ki sair*:

¹⁴⁵ S. Siddique. *Remembering the Revolt of 1857*. p.68

¹⁴⁶ S. Siddique. *Remembering the Revolt of 1857*. p.69

¹⁴⁷ M. Schleyer. ‘Ghadr-e Delhi Ke Afsane’. 2012, vol. Annual of Urdu Studies, p.38

ye kya maloom tha k wahan qabar bane gi jahan baap dada ka pehlu to kuja koi fateha parhne wala bhi na hoga¹⁴⁸”.

[Alas, could he (Bahadur Shah) have ever thought that he would be buried where let alone the proximity of ancestors, he would not have a single person to mourn over his grave?] H.N.

In *Ghadr ki maari shehzadiyan*, near the end of the *mehfil*, the princesses close off their narrative by praying for the endurance of these tales, thereby also making it a sacred obligation for the audience to keep the memory of these events alive. They situate the injustice inflicted during the uprising in a broader cosmic order which would self-suture its rupture and thus is a caution to those who have wronged, and which exists to reinforce *ibrat* (admonition) for generations to come.

This brings me to a discussion on the political force of the literary form. Here, I differ from previous scholars on the subject in that I move away from their focus on the negative character of the lament- a mourning of what was lost- to suggest a crucial positive function these texts are achieving. I suggest that by borrowing from a highly political conventional form, these texts are not just re-visiting the past for narrative contestation, but also making a political claim. Here, I do not want to delve into the explicit critique of the British; rather, I want to frame this argument more subtly with relation to the motif of Karbala and how it invokes a distinctly Indo-Muslim semantic register of victory and resistance which is not only unaffected by the material fact of British victory, but also diminishes it by reversing the script of victory and defeat altogether.

The timeless resonance of Karbala and its memory partly owe themselves to the generative quality of this metaphor, and how effortlessly it lends itself to different times and contexts which makes all re-tellings and re-imaginings potent, poignant and moving. It was equally apt for Safavid Iran as it was for Deccan or the North Indian context. The mourning for martyrs in this tradition

¹⁴⁸ M. F. Beg. *Phoolwalon ki sair*. Kutab khana ilm-o-adab, Delhi, 1943, p.49

re-affirms the legitimacy of their cause and aligns the mourners' sympathy and support with them. Akbar Hyder writes that, "Shii majlises [are] explicitly political, because they affirm the claims of Ali's progeny to the legitimate leadership of the community", which is why they were banned by the Abbasid Caliph in the 9th century along with the demolition of Husain's shrine¹⁴⁹. It is not coincidental that Karbala symbology was also invoked by the South Asian anti-colonialists against the British.

According to a renowned Urdu critic Nasir Abbas Nayyar, "[Karbala] is also a 'spatial thought' that provides multiple ways to challenge the authorities tainted by illegitimacy"¹⁵⁰, a legacy that was forged into a powerful anti-colonial tradition in the 20th century. This motivation is reaffirmed by the princesses of Khairi's narrative who say:

begunahon ko phansiyan dilwa kar jese jese ghar ujarwaye hain uska badla hum apni ankh se dekhenge ge. Masoomon ka khoon upar hi upar na jaye ga¹⁵¹.

[We will witness divine reckoning on behalf of those whose homes were wrecked by the killings of innocents. Blood of the sinless will not go waste.] H.N.

The blood of innocents causes instability in the cosmic order that has to re-position itself by setting in motion a divine reckoning. That hope sounds the ending note of these texts, but till then a rigorous commitment to the commemoration and memorial sustenance of these events is resoundingly pledged as a spectral haunting for those with blood on their hands.

hum khatam hojayenge magar hamari dastaanein khatam na hongy, jabtak dunya zinda hai us waqt tak hamara tazkara zinda rahega. Us waqt tak hamare rone wale bhi na rahenge. Hum par jo Qayamat tooti hai ye aisi nahi hai k admi bhool jaye, hamari bipta doosron k dil dehlaye gi¹⁵².

[We shall perish but our stories never shall; as long as this world remains we shall be remembered (*tazkara*) and our stories (*dastaanein*) recounted, to the day no one will remain

¹⁴⁹ S. Akbar Hyder. *Reliving Karbala*. p. 20

¹⁵⁰ Nasir Abbas Nayyar. *Coloniality, Modernity and Urdu Literature*. Sang-e-meel Publications, 2020.

¹⁵¹ R. Khairi. *Ghadr ki maari shehzadiyan*. p. 79

¹⁵² R. Khairi. *Ghadr ki maari shehzadiyan*. p. 79

to grieve for us. The Qayamat that descended on us is not the kind that you can forget; our suffering will jolt the hearts of listeners.] H.N.

In the next chapter, I will look at the spatial memorialization that happens in these texts in the absence of material access to buildings and spaces taken over by the British after 1857. Spaces being distinctly evocative of the lost Mughal authority, I will explore the politics around these spaces in these texts as harking back to a lost Mughal rule. I will also analyze the *shahr ashob* form and its relation to the idea of rightful rule that implies an unjust British rule as the cause of social devastation and discuss how these authors evoke a distinctly Indo-Mughal discourse of sovereignty that constitutes a challenge to the legitimacy of British rule.

Chapter 3: Space, memory and sovereignty

Introduction: Narrative memorialization as alternative spatial commemoration

The heart is not stone or steel but will be moved. The eyes are not lifeless cracks in a wall but will shed tears at the panorama of death and Hindustan's destruction. The city of Dilli...[was left] as if it were a garden without a gardener, and full of fruitless trees¹⁵³.

The immediate British vengeance that was unleashed on Delhi in the wake of 1857 was in the form of indiscriminate hangings of residents and the city's physical depredation. The former was undertaken by setting up gallows in all parts of the city and blanket shooting of suspects, with dozens killed each day. The latter took longer, as it did not just end at a takeover but was rechanneled to materially stamp British punitive imprint on the city. After the British reconquered Delhi, they took over all buildings symbolizing former Mughal power. Deliberate desecration of key buildings was done and almost all mosques were either occupied by troops or sold to Hindu merchants. Troops were stationed in the Red Fort, Divan e Am was turned into a military canteen and Jama Masjid was taken over by the soldiers. Even educational institutions, like the Delhi College and Madrassah Hussain Baksh were shut down, and in the case of Madrassah Rahimiyah, razed to the ground¹⁵⁴. The people of Dilli "had been taught to know their masters¹⁵⁵". The citizenry was subjected to a mass exodus where many perished for want and disease. Masses that survived and fled the city remained huddled around the suburbs and were allowed to re-enter in late 1858, even then with written proof of innocence. Delhi's demography radically altered because of the retribution exacted; not only had there been a mass slaughter of men, many who survived fled never to return. The city lines were later re-drawn with the inhabitants now occupying only

¹⁵³ Ghalib. *Dastanbu*. Translated and edited by Khwaja Ahmad Faruqi. Delhi University Press, 1970, p.33

¹⁵⁴ Delhi College remained closed till 1864 and Madrassah Hussain Baksh for 18 years.

¹⁵⁵ F. Pritchett. *Nets of Awareness*, p. 20

two thirds of the walled city¹⁵⁶. Ghalib, who staying in Delhi witnessed the unceasing tragedy, laments the death of Shahjahanabad thus:

“Between the Jamia Masjid and the Rajghat Gate, there is nothing but a vast wasteland, dreary and desolate...so how can Urdu survive? I swear to God, Dihli is a town no more. You might call it a military encampment, but the Fort and the city are no more. The Bazar and the lovely canal are no more¹⁵⁷.”

The demography of the city changed radically after the ‘amnesty’ allowed people back, with more Hindus than Muslims, and a confiscation of homes predominantly of Muslims who could not provide documented proof of their non-complicity. Not content thus, the British started a long-drawn project of inscribing symbols of British imperial power in places that carried the imprint of Mughal authority. This was arguably the only consideration behind not destroying Delhi altogether which was seriously debated for a while among senior British officials¹⁵⁸. There was unwarranted destruction of buildings within the Red Fort however, and an area of 500 yard radius was cleared in front of the Fort by demolishing buildings. Vasudha Dalmia writes:

In the years following, these [Mughal] structures were replaced by staid Victorian architecture. A massive Town hall was built over 1860-5 and adorned with a statue of Queen Victoria at its entrance. A Clock Tower now graced the centre of the square, a fountain would be added later; Begum Bagh, the garden at the back of the Sarai, was renamed Company Bagh. The passing of the old order was being concretely marked... A large number of houses were demolished in order to build the cantonment and the railway line. The East-West alignment of the railway line broke the concentric pattern of Shahjahanabad, cutting the city into two vertical slices and destroying a part of the city wall in the process. The hundred feet wide Queen’s Road and Hamilton Road, driven through the town to facilitate troop movement over the densely populated regions of the

¹⁵⁶ N. Gupta. *Delhi between Two Empires, 1803-1931: Society, Government and Urban Growth*. Oxford University Press, 1998; Margrit Pernau. *Ashraf into Middle Classes: Muslims in Nineteenth-Century Delhi*. 2013; F. Pritchett. *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and Its Critics*. University of California Press, 1994; M. Pernau. ‘Nostalgia: Tears of Blood for a Lost World’. *South Asia Graduate Research Journal (SAGAR)*;

¹⁵⁷ Qtd in Santhi Kavuri-Bauer. *Monumental Matters: The Power, Subjectivity, and Space of India’s Mughal Architecture*. Duke University Press, 2011, p.101

¹⁵⁸ Narayani Gupta writes that “only in May [1858] did the Secretary of State decide to agree with Lawrence ‘that the political objects to be gained by destroying the Palace will be gained by occupying it.’” N. Gupta. *Delhi between Two Empires*. p.26

city, displaced many hundreds. The new roads were consciously designed to symbolize an order forcibly established¹⁵⁹.

All sites of battle and conflict associated with the uprising were monumentalized by the British and made part of an organized 'Mutiny pilgrimage' which became an essential itinerary item for all British visiting India as homage to the imperial victory. The British memory of the 'Mutiny' thus came to be re-written over the North Indian landscape. As Santhi Kavuri-Bauer says, "power actualized itself at the monument[s]...[which became] spaces to live out the fantasies and contradictions of empire ¹⁶⁰". Buildings hitherto symbols of Mughal kingship came to be reconfigured as monuments telling a story of imperial conquest and triumph¹⁶¹. The message was not lost on the Delhi populace¹⁶².

In 1911, a new capital in the place of Shahjahanabad was announced by George V at the Delhi Durbar; an imperial ceremony which consciously borrowed and reconfigured Mughal symbols of power and sovereignty in asserting the legitimacy of its domination over India¹⁶³. Even

¹⁵⁹ Qtd. in Vasudha Dalmia. *Fiction as History: The Novel and the City in Modern North India*. pp.23-25

¹⁶⁰ S. Kavuri-Bauer. *Monumental Matters*. p.78

¹⁶¹ Santhi Kavuri-Bauer writes in *Monumental Matters*, "The British governments before and after Curzon sought a more circumscribed approach to the ordering of Delhi's Red Fort, which was still known to many people as the site of the Great Mughal's last stand and the symbolic center of the Uprising of 1857. When the fort was allowed to come alive and appeal to the reader's or visitor's imagination, it was only through the official story of the Sepoy Mutiny. In spatial terms the Red Fort was fitted into what was known as the Mutiny tour... through the prism of the Mutiny tour, all pre-British history in Shahjahan's Delhi and palace was suppressed. It was no longer seen as the seat of the Great Mughal but as the spot where the British Empire was inaugurated. The essential stop on the Mutiny tour was Delhi's Red Fort... Following the directions of the Handbook, tourists entered the fort through the Lahore Gate, identified as the spot where the commissioner of the division was murdered on 11 May 1857. The rooms above the gate were described as the scene of the murders of the collector and the commandant, as well as of the chaplain and of two British ladies. In 1909, the story of the Uprising was incorporated directly into the tourist's walk through the Red Fort... The tour of the Red Fort is completed with the Delhi Gate where, tourists are informed, Bahadur Shah II was held by British authorities in September 1857: the story of the Uprising thus ends at a space of Mughal imprisonment." S. Kavuri-Bauer. *Monumental Matters*. p.87

¹⁶² Akhter Qambar writes in his introduction to "*Dilli ki Akhri Shama*" that "the ghosts of the Timurid kings, princes and *salatin* must shrink in horror at the uses to which most of the Red Fort has been put since the 1857 uprising." Mirza Farhatullah Baig Dehalvi and Akhtar Qamber. *The Last Musha'irah of Dehli*. 1. paperback ed, Orient Blackswan, 2010, p.13

¹⁶³ Bernard Cohn. 'Representing Authority in Victorian India'. *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

the restoration projects of historical buildings undertaken by Curzon so far were arguably to “affirm the subject as a subject of imperial rule¹⁶⁴” and re-write them as a script of colonial rule and its benevolence. Thus, when the construction of a new capital was announced, it renewed the native anxiety of preserving what they believed were symbols of an illustrious, formidable past, representing an order of sovereignty that was still alive in the collective imagination¹⁶⁵. The new city seemed to be a delayed materialization of the imperial desire expressed in 1858 to make the “Delhi people pay for a new capital city which would symbolize ‘the living, active, Anglo-Saxon power’”¹⁶⁶.

As the residents were still embattling the trauma of Dilli’s 1857 devastation, this proclamation initiated local activism around the conservation of old urban structures while using the language of religious memory which has been retrospectively called the “Muslim politics of monuments”¹⁶⁷. I somewhat disagree with that interpretation, especially with reference to these texts. I instead read this mobilization with reference to Abhishek Kaicker’s idea that from 17th century onwards in the Mughal empire, Islam served as a “language of popular politics” and should be understood primarily as a discourse of sovereignty, one with a long history of invocation by the Delhi populace¹⁶⁸.

¹⁶⁴ S. Kavuri-Bauer. *Monumental Matters*. p.78

¹⁶⁵ Eve Tignol has talked about the mobilization and activism of North Indian Muslims around the conservation of Mughal buildings in detail in her dissertation “The Muslims of Northern India and the Trauma of the Loss of Power c. 1857-1930s.” P.h.D., *Royal Holloway, University of London*, 2016.

¹⁶⁶ Gupta, Narayani. *Delhi between Two Empires*. p.26. This was published as a suggestion in *The Friend of India* in March 1858.

¹⁶⁷ E. Tignol. “The Muslims of Northern India and the Trauma of the Loss of Power.” p. 160

¹⁶⁸ Abhishek Kaicker in his book “The King and the People” conducts a detailed study of the city of Shahjahanabad from its inception till 1739 and argues that the residents of Delhi used Islamic discourse and practices for mass mobilization and politics to hold the king accountable to notions of justice and order which were believed to be the basis of imperial sovereignty. Kaicker writes about 18th century Delhi populace, “by casting their actions as demands for “justice” in the face of “oppression”, or as the “defense of Islam” against overweening “infidels”...urbanites invoked the theoretical privileges of the ‘Community of Muslims’ to force the king and his agents to act according to the terms of the imperial discourse of sovereignty.” A. Kaicker. *The King and the People: Sovereignty and Popular Politics in Mughal Delhi*. Oxford University Press, 2020, p.229

I argue that these texts should be read as a textual complement and extension of the contemporary activism around the conservation of Mughal material past, and against Shahjahanabad's erasure to replace it with a colonial city cleansed of Mughal symbols of power. I explain how these texts engage in a nostalgic memorialization of Dilli's urban landscape, having been deprived of all material symbols associated with 1857 that had been re-inscribed instead as British trophies¹⁶⁹. Moreover, I posit that these texts invoke a script of sovereignty that was distinctly Mughal, and in doing so construct an alternative discourse of power at the height of British rule.

The textual memorialization takes on two forms; a post-1857 lament on spaces deserted and ruined by the ravaging of the uprising, and a pre-1857 fantastical re-imagining of the pomp and glory of urban Dilli and its culture at its pinnacle¹⁷⁰. All these accounts have detailed mention of Dilli's urban layout in what appears to be the authorial desire for readers to recreate and momentarily inhabit in imagination spaces that had been erased. Khairi describes the setting of his account, the suburbs of Bela thus:

dargah [Shah Abdul Aziz's grave] mai dakhil hua tou shikasta asaar aur kaali kaloti deewarain musalmanon ke ehसाas ki tafseer kar rahi theen. Dargah se bahir nikla to kacchi pakki qabrain tooti phooti deewarain ulte seedhe taweez musalmanon ki haalat ka ai'na the. Unki suratein dekhta hua bahir nikla, phirta phirata uss jaga puhoncha jo Bela Road kehlaati hai¹⁷¹."

[Upon entering the tomb, the broken and blackened walls reflected the way Muslims felt. After leaving the tomb, makeshift graves, more broken walls and talismans lying hither and thither mirrored the state of Muslims. I exited whilst gazing upon these scenes, and wandering here and there ended up at what is known as Bela Road.] H.N.

¹⁶⁹ M. Pernau. 'Nostalgia: Tears of Blood for a Lost World'. *South Asia Graduate Research Journal (SAGAR)*.

¹⁷⁰ Writers while describing pre-1857 Dilli often use the metaphor of the *shama* (flame), borrowed from the Urdu ghazal. The *shama* was meant to suggest the intensity of a flame reached just before dawn when it must be blown out, and thus the irony of a consummation also portending its impending demise. Farhatullah Beg's famous book "*Dilli ki Akhri Shama*" that describes a thriving literary culture of pre-1857 Dilli uses the same metaphor.

¹⁷¹ R. Khairi. *Ghadr ki maari shehzadiyan ya Bela mai mela*. Kutab khana Nazeeria, Delhi, p.4

Bela Road is constructed over the rural suburbs of Bela by British mandate as part of New Delhi. Here, Khairi contests this colonial construction via nostalgic memory, and evokes a historical re-imagining for his reader which is a form of preservation of the Mughal past. Bela Road, with its new mansions and electric lamps standing for the colonial seduction of progress, is dismissed by the author without second thought for the wistful memory of the old city¹⁷². The modern construction is ironically decried as desolation and wreckage of former habitat of birds and animals, which can also be read metonymically as Dilli's loss for its residents.

Bela Road ka board parhte hi purani dilli yaad a gayi aur bele ki asal tasweer ankhon ke saamne thi, bela sarkandon ka aik ghandaar jungle pacchaas saal pehle Yamuna ke kinaare door tak chala gaya tha. Yahan Dilli walon ki kabaddi aur ankh macholi ke tamasha meri ankhon ne bhi dekhe hain. Mai bhi wohi tha aur aasman bhi wohi lekin haaye zameen wo na thi. Bela ujar chuka tha, sarkandon ki ccha'on gaarat aur parindon ke aashiyane tabah o taaraj ho chuke the. Dil jisko dhoond raha tha uska koson pata na tha¹⁷³.

[Immediately after reading the board that said 'Bela Road', Old Dilli came to mind and the lost picture of Bela was in front of the eyes, Bela 50 years ago as a thick jungle of reeds stretching toward the banks of Yamuna. My own eyes have seen in that land the games of hide and seek and *kabaddi* that the *dilliwallas* have played. I was the same, and the sky was the same too, but the land had irreversibly changed. Bela had withered, the shadows offered by the reeds had disappeared and the nests of the birds had been ruined and destroyed. The heart searched for something that was just nowhere to be found.] H.N.

It is important to note that Khairi chooses Bela for his narrative, as Bela also was where pre-festival celebrations of Phoolwalon ki Sair used to take place with the king as nucleus (as Farhatullah Beg's text also narrates). The space is richly saturated with memories of the old

¹⁷² In *Wida e Zafar*, Khairi while denouncing the rhetoric of progress and development—the official rationale for New Delhi—says “is tameer ki har kudaal (pickaxe) aur taraqqi ka har phaavra (spade) dilli walon ke kaleje par para hai”. [Every pickaxe of this construction and every spade of this so-called development has landed on the very hearts of *dilliwallas*.] R. Khairi. *Naubat Panj Roza yani Wida e Zafar*, p.28

¹⁷³ R. Khairi. *Ghadr ki maari shehzadiyan*, p.5. In *Wida e Zafar*, Khairi says, “mera dil e muhtala khuda maloom kis mitti ka bana hua hai k taraqqi ki roshniyan isko jagmaga sakti hain na fancy chehre isko gudguda sakte hain. Jiddat ka har zarra iske liye museebat, aur daur e taraqqi ka har qadam iske liye afat.” [I wonder of what dust my weary heart is made up of that neither the bright lights of success move it nor the extravagant faces impress it. Every particle of development a pain and every step of progress is turmoil for me.] R. Khairi. *Naubat Panj Roza yani Wida e Zafar*, p.66

Mughal city, and remains symbolic of the king's relationship with the social body of the city. All the pre-1857 festivities and vibrance that is described has the King as its pivot. Farhatullah Beg writes, "ye Silsila us waqt toota jab Badshah se qila choota"¹⁷⁴ [These festivities ceased only when Badshah lost the Qila forever]. The King's reign functions as a marker of social time, and the end of his rule is used temporally to refer to the rupture between the pre and post 1857 worlds.

All spaces and buildings that are mentioned have tangible links to the king, like Mehrauli which was an alternative center of the late Mughal court, Nizamuddin which was a burial place of early Mughals (notably Humayun), and Qutbuddin which was the burial place of most late Mughals¹⁷⁵. Saleema Warraich observes that "architectural sites of the Mughal empire continued to resonate amongst the larger populace. So deeply embedded in written texts, visual images, and collective memory was the association between Mughal [buildings] and the height of Mughal power that it would not be undone."¹⁷⁶

Even public celebrations and conviviality that is described visibly originates from the Fort at its center, such as *Salono*, *Phoolwalon*, Bahadur Shah's *salgirah* (birthday), and Jawan Bakht's wedding procession. In Beg's *Phoolwalon ki Sair*, when the king is not physically in the *pankha* procession, he is paternally looking on from the balcony of Zafar Mahal, smiling benevolently at

¹⁷⁴ Mirza Farhatullah Beg. *Phoolwalon ki sair*. Kutab khana ilm-o-adab, Delhi, 1943, p. 6

¹⁷⁵ Shah Alam II, Akbar Shah II and Mirza Fakhru are buried here, among other Mughals.

¹⁷⁶ Saleema Waraich. 'A City Besieged and a Love Lamented.' p.153. In *Wida e Zafar*, Khairi says "Imaan ki ankh agar is sar zameen par pohunch kar Zahiri ankhein band kare aur dil ke aine mai dekhe to maloom hoga ke jahan khaak urr rahi hai yahan wo lade phande darakht mojoode the ... jinko mumlikat e hind ke ool-ul-azm salateen ne apne haath se sencha."

[when the eye of faith looks upon this earth, closes its external vision and gazes inside the mirror of the heart then it will learn that now where ash flies there used to be long, strong trees . . . which the royalty of Hindustan watered with their own hands.] R. Khairi. *Naubat Panj Roza yani Wida e Zafar*, p.9

the crowd. The king's presence is literally the nucleus that forges the social fabric together, making the public carnival possible. Beg says as much towards the end:

Phoolwalon ki sair rayaya ki aqeedat aur Badshah ki muhabbat ka muzahira thi. Badshah ke baad bhi chali magar markaz (center) aur yakjehti na hone se zor ghat'ta gaya. Ab paanch cche baras se bilkul band hai¹⁷⁷.

[The Procession of the Florists reflected the devotion of the people and the King's love. It continued after the King, but not having a center and enough solidarity resulted in its force dwindling. Now since five to six years it has been discontinued.] H.N.

My earlier proposition that the textual memorialization of these spaces differs in nature and intent from Muslim conservation efforts of the time that were constructing a Muslim religious memory around pre-colonial buildings and monuments is substantiated by these texts. A prominent feature that unites the spaces mentioned in the texts is that they are not "Muslim" spaces, but unmistakably tethered to the symbols of Mughal power and remembered as such. That is why I argue that this nostalgic memorialization of spaces is linked to the Mughal past, loss of sovereignty and destruction of Dilli in the wake of 1857. Spatial commemoration via nostalgic memory serves the function not afforded to the authors in real life.

No mosques or exclusively religious places find a nostalgic mention, even though conservation of mosques was the central object of Muslim activism of the time¹⁷⁸. The shrines and festival spaces that are mentioned are distinctly remembered as memorabilia of interfaith fraternity and a cosmopolitan harmonious past. *Phoolwalon ki sair*'s origin is literally described by Beg to function as a testament to Dilli's inter-faith harmony.

Margrit Pernau in her study of nostalgia around 1857 in 20th century Urdu texts writes, "While the texts center on a locality as the focus for their recollection... colonial power relations

¹⁷⁷ Mirza Farhatullah Beg. *Phoolwalon ki sair*. p.51

¹⁷⁸ Notably, Kanpur mosque massacre in 1913 became a matter of huge controversy.

meant that these spatial references could not lead to any form of spatial practices, such as commemorating special sites. The nostalgic memories, which the Urdu texts evoke, are therefore memories without concrete spaces, objects or spatial practices to support them¹⁷⁹.” Therefore, these authors consecrate and honor in textual memory what was barred them in reality and co-opted as British possessions.

In *Wida e Zafar*, Khairi writes that in the years following the uprising, the surviving residents of Delhi used to gather at Pir Ghaib¹⁸⁰ every Thursday to offer a *fateha* for the old city. Pir Ghaib was occupied by British soldiers as part of the northern ridge in 1858 while re-taking Delhi. In the backdrop of British domination of material spaces, textual memorialization was the only avenue accessible to North Indian writers as I earlier mentioned. The significance of Khairi’s mention of Pir Ghaib, a monument that served as British military camp in 1857, should be read against that context.



Figure 3.1 Pir Ghaib on a moonlit night

¹⁷⁹ M. Pernau. ‘Nostalgia: Tears of Blood for a Lost World.’ p.77

¹⁸⁰ It is said to have originally been built by Firoz Shah Tughlaq (1309-1388) as an astronomical observatory. Popular lore behind the name suggests that it was a sanctuary of a saint who mysteriously disappeared, effectively leaving behind a shrine without a grave.

Biswas, Abhirup. 'Pir Ghaib'. *Hindustan Times*, 2017,
<https://www.hindustantimes.com/photos/india-news/photos-pir-ghaib-a-medieval-observatory-or-the-mausoleum-of-a-vanished-saint/photo-WdR4GuTVh2tTfMMvdzuXdI-4.html>

Farhatullah Beg in *Phoolwalon ki Sair* takes the reader along on a journey through the whole urban landscape of Dilli, beckoning the reader hither and thither like a city guide. When Bahadur Shah's procession to Mehrauli is described, urban landmarks constantly mark the journey through the city to the suburbs.

sawari mubarik in sarkon par se guzar kar dilli darwaza pohunchi... suraj nikalne se pehle pehle sawari purane qilay pohunch gayi. Sher Shah ki masjid k saamne hawadaar rakha gaya...dargah sharif qareeb hi hai thori dair mai wahan pohunch gaye... Badshah Salamat fateha se farigh ho kar dargah shareef se bahir aye, yahan se phir baoli pe aye... wahan se nikal mansoor ke maqbaray ki seedhi sarak par hogaye¹⁸¹.

[The imperial procession passed through these roads and arrived at the Dilli gate . . . before the sun came out, the cavalcade had arrived at the old fortress. The royal sedan was laid down in front of the Sher Shah Mosque. The Sufi shrine is nearby and we arrived there soon enough . . . the King went inside, recited the *Fateha* prayer, and came out to go to the water reservoir . . . after emerging from there we were on the straight road of Mansoor's Maqbara.] H.N.

Many of the urban structures that the writer mentions, he also explains their history if they momentarily become the setting of his characters; all the while locating himself within the narrative and exclaiming his own emotions upon beholding the sights. The narrator seems to be both the story-teller and the historian, borrowing from the older Persianate tradition of literary histories where the writer was an active participant in the sights and structures he described, and invited the reader to experience and share in that emotion¹⁸². The first edition of *Asar-as-Sanadid*

¹⁸¹ Mirza Farhatullah Beg. *Phoolwalon ki sair*. p.19-22

¹⁸² Sudipta Sen. *Historian as Witness: Ghulam Husain Tabatabai and the Dawning of British Rule in India*. Brill, 2017; Sudipta Sen. 'Imperial Orders of the Past: The Semantics of History and Time in the Medieval Indo-Persian Culture of North India'. *Invoking the Past: The Uses of History in South Asia*, edited by Daud Ali, Oxford University Press, 1999; M. Pernau. 'Mapping Emotions, Constructing Feelings: Delhi in the 1840s'. *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 2015; In *Begmaat ke Ansu*, Nizami says "mo'arikh kyunkar sabar kar

(1847), an urban history of Delhi written by Sayyid Ahmad Khan, is an example of the last few texts written in that tradition. In that edition, a whole section is devoted to mentioning the important personages of Dilli at the time, as the city was constituted by its residents in popular imagination, which lent it the ‘living’ character¹⁸³. This illuminates the ritual of reciting ‘*fateha*’ for a city deadened by not just material destruction, but by the exodus of its residents¹⁸⁴.

The author while beckoning the reader to look at a structure in fantastical imagination also laments its present deteriorated state. For example, within the Zafar Mahal he describes the *jharna* (waterfall/pond) which was a late Mughal construction in Mehrauli fed by the Hauz-e-Shamsi tank. The narrator first creates an image of splendor and plenty in Bahadur Shah’s time:

jharna ke paani se [aam k darakht] baara maheene sar-sabz rehte hain aur itne ghane hogaye hain ke aasman bhi mushkil se nazar ata hai... bas ye maloom hota hai ke zameen o aasman sar-sabz makhmal ke ban gaye hain”. A few lines later, goes on to describe its present desolate condition “ab iski bhi bahar gayi. Shamsi talab kat cchat kar houz ban gaya. Nehrain khushk ho gayin. Houz malbe se att gaye. Darakht sookh saakh kar kat gaye¹⁸⁵.

[The *jharna*’s water keeps the mango trees green all year long and they have become so dense that one cannot even see the sky. It feels like the earth and the sky have transformed into green velvet...

A few lines later, goes on to describe its present desolate condition:

Now even its glory has gone. The Shamsi Pond was cut from its main source and became a dry reservoir. The tributaries dried up. The reservoirs were choked with rubble. The trees shriveled and died.] H.N.

sakte hain” (How can the historian-chronicler contain his sorrow [and be patient]). H. Nizami. *Begamat ke Ansu*. p.132

¹⁸³ C. M. Naim. ‘Syed Ahmad and his Two Books called Asar-al-Sanadid.’ *Urdu Texts and Contexts*, 2004. This method of urban history writing was criticized by British historians for not maintaining objectivity and the requisite distance from the ‘subjects’, and Sir Sayyid made major changes to the second edition and completely scrapped the section mentioning the residents.

¹⁸⁴ Ghalib writes, “House after house lies deserted...By God, you may search for a Muslim in this city and not find one-rich, poor, artisans alike are gone. Such as here are not Delhi people.” qtd. in Rakshanda Jalil. ‘Reflections of 1857 in Contemporary Urdu Literature.’ *Mutiny at the Margins*, ed. Crispin Bates. Vol. 1, Sage Publications, 2013, p. 129.

¹⁸⁵ Mirza Farhatullah Beg. *Phoolwalon ki sair*. p.28

In *Wida e Zafar*, Khairi uses a similar narrative technique of contrast to accentuate the loss. While recounting a past memory, he says “ye ujri hui dilli ka waqia hai” [this is the tale of ruined Dilli] and later goes on to narrate “ab bani hui dilli ki dastan suno”¹⁸⁶ [now listen to the story of new Delhi]; It is a playing on the semantics of ‘developed’ and ‘ruined’, and a contrast of the past and present to demystify the colonial enchantment of “New Delhi”. The narrator breaks his own created illusion to keep reminding the reader of the ruination of the present.

Here the narrator is evoking another feature of Persianate histories and chronicles, that of *ibrat-nama*, “a tale of warning at the inconstancy of the world and of the fleeting nature of splendor and glory¹⁸⁷.” Khairi writes in *Wida e Zafar*:

insaana agar ibrat ki dastan sun'na chahe, chashm e beena agar inquilab ka tamasha dekhne ki khwastgaar ho to qilla e mualla ke wo ashjaara dekhe jo sar-e-shaam dhul dhula aur nikhara nikhra chothi ki Dulhan bante the”¹⁸⁸.

[If man wishes to listen to a tale of *ibrat*, and his inner eye be desirous of seeing the vicissitudes of fate, then he should see the trees of the Palace which, when evening descended (in the past), were watered and would glisten like the bride of chauthi¹⁸⁹.] H.N.

In all these texts, after re-counting each gutting incident or remembering each tragedy, the survivors or the narrator invariably say “hamesha rahe naam Allah ka” (only God is infallible) to affirm the same¹⁹⁰.

***Shahr ashob*¹⁹¹ and rightful rule**

¹⁸⁶ R. Khairi. *Naubat Panj Roza yani Wida e Zafar*, p.104

¹⁸⁷ M. Pernau. ‘Mapping Emotions, Constructing Feelings: Delhi in the 1840s’. *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 2015, p.647

¹⁸⁸ R. Khairi. *Naubat Panj Roza yani Wida e Zafar*, p.9

¹⁸⁹ Chauthi is the traditionally the fourth day of marriage when the bride would visit her parents in North India.

¹⁹⁰ Abhishek Kaicker writes “Ibrat...warned the discerning individual of the folly of pride, the inscrutability of fate, and the power of God, who casually destroyed the fragile works of man...[was a feeling] particularly evoked by architectural ruin”. A. Kaicker. *The King and the People*. p.181

¹⁹¹ The origin of shahr ashob is not definitively known, however Eve Tignol in a brief description of its possible roots writes, “Arabic poetry had a long tradition of describing deserted camps and other places...Arabic poets used

Beg, as well as other writers, seem to be re-creating in prose the pre-modern literary form of the *shahr ashob*, literally translated to city laments. Originally of Persian origin, the *shahr-ashub* (city-disturber) was usually a lyric on the disturbance caused by the appearance of a ravishing beloved in a city of thriving commerce. The victim of the beauty would often be a seller of wares whose business would come to a standstill in his captivation with the beloved. The *shahr-ashob* was adopted and re-configured as the *shahr-ashob* in Urdu, sorrowful poetry on urban ruins, a form that took hold of the North Indian literary imagination after Nadir Shah's invasion of Dilli.

These texts can be seen as *shahr ashobs* in prose, engaging in both traditions at times; describing the erstwhile commercial and social vitality of the city, only to juxtapose it with its present state of desolation and wilderness. This provokes a poignant affect and drives home the extent of loss and the intimacy of it. It is striking that all urban architecture that appears in the post-1857 moments in these texts is invariably dilapidated, broken or diminished¹⁹². This holds even for the suburbs or *qasbas* outside Dilli that survivors escape to, reflective of the inner turmoil and chaos of people that is shared by the landscape, however mediated by the lens of nostalgic memory. In other places in the texts too, the urban architecture is shown as creating and partaking in the spatial affect¹⁹³; as a reflection, as companion, and as a place of refuge. As the conception of the

to mourn over atlat (ruins) and lament the destruction of buildings, especially after the destruction of Baghdad by the Mongols or at the loss of cities in Ifriqqiya or al-Andalus (especially Cordoba) during the Reconquista." E. Tignol. "Nostalgia and the City: Urdu shahr ashob poetry in the aftermath of 1857". The Royal Asiatic Society, 2017, p. 567. Carla Petievich has written that the first shahr ashob about Dehli, written by Shah Hatim Dehalvi, was probably inspired by the Persian poet Sa'di's lament on the sack of Baghdad. C. Petievich. 'POETRY OF THE DECLINING MUGHALS: THE "SHAHR ĀSHOB"'. *Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1990, pp. 99–110

¹⁹² Even where specific buildings are not mentioned, phrases like "toota hua gunbad" (a broken dome), "toota hua madrassa" (a run-down madrassah) dot the entire narrative.

¹⁹³ There is rich scholarship that exists on the relationship of space and affect, especially with respect to narrations of the past. In the context of North India: M. Pernau. 'Mapping Emotions, Constructing Feelings: Delhi in the 1840s'. *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 2015; Razak Khan. "The Social Production of Space and Emotions in South Asia." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 2015, pp. 611–633. Web.

city was constituted by its people in the Persianate tradition, the culmination of *shahr ashob* then is the exodus the *dilliwalas* were subjected to, many never to return¹⁹⁴.

It is important to mention the connection of *shahr ashob* with the idea of rightful rule, and social disarray and downfall seen as a divine sign of unjust rule. In that sense, these texts which narrate post-1857 devastation and havoc also pose a political comment on the British rule, implying a rightful rule having been unfairly toppled¹⁹⁵. The principle of *adal* (justice) appears violated in this takeover, affirmed in multiple instances like the indiscriminate massacre, forced exodus of Delhiwallas and sham trial of the king that de-legitimizes the foundation of British Raj¹⁹⁶.

Dilli particularly emerges as a corporeal being, as a living city whose violation and plunder evokes unspeakable sorrow in the residents. The ‘demise’ of Dilli, after the slaughter of its people, becomes another lasting tragedy for the *dilliwallas* to mourn. Shehzadi Zohra Begum while

¹⁹⁴ “pyari surtain ankh se ojhla hui, aur hans much chehre qabar mai ja soye”...”wo log hi na rahe aur sheher bhi un logon ke saath khatam hua.”

[lovely faces disappeared from vision and cheerful visages went to repose in graves... those people are no more and the city ended with them]. R. Khairi. *Naubat Panj Roza yani Wida e Zafar*, p.3, 110. Soofia Siddique analyses the connection of the city and its residents with reference to the *shahr ashob* in her dissertation. Also, the notion of living people constituting a city appears in Persianate histories of the time, for example *Asar as Sanadid* (1847). S. Siddique. *Remembering the Revolt of 1857: Contrapuntal Formations in Indian Literature and History*. SOAS, University of London, 2012; C. M. Naim. ‘Syed Ahmad and His Two Books Called “Asar-al-Sanadid”’. *Modern Asian Studies*, 2011.

¹⁹⁵ A Hindu resident of Dilli says these words in *Begmaat ke Ansu*, “Bahadur Shah hum sab ka baap aur guru tha, kya karain Ram Ji ki hi marzi thi k wo be-gunah barbaad hogaya.”

[Bahadur Shah was our father and guru, it was Ram Ji’s will that he would be ruined with no fault of his own]. H. Nizami. *Begamat ke Ansu*. Matbu’a Aleemi Press, 13th ed., Delhi, 1944, p.10

¹⁹⁶ So Yamane. ‘Lamentation Dedicated to the Declining Capital: Urdu Poetry on Delhi during the Late Mughal Period’. *Journal of the Japanese Association for South Asian Studies*, vol. 12, 2000, pp. 50–72; E. Tignol. ‘Nostalgia and the City: Urdu Shahr Āshob Poetry in the Aftermath of 1857*’. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 27, no. 4, Oct. 2017, pp. 559–73; F. Pritchett. ‘The World Upside Down: Shahr-Ashob as Genre’. *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, vol. 4, 1984, pp. 24–35; C. Petievich. ‘POETRY OF THE DECLINING MUGHALS: THE “SHAHR ĀSHOB”’. *Journal of South Asian Literature*, vol. 25, no. 1, 1990, pp. 99–110; F. Lehmann. ‘Urdu Literature and Mughal Decline’. *Mahfil*, vol. VI, no. 2/3, 1970, pp. 125–31.

narrating her story in *Ghadr ki maari shehzadiyan* says that after coming back to Delhi, seeing the haunting desolation of buildings was another trauma. She says “bahir ki deewarain dekh kar andar ki imarton par fateha parhi¹⁹⁷” (murmured a *fateha* for the city buildings whose tale was foretold by the broken city walls); the urban architecture is grieved for like a person according to the rites of Muslim funerary tradition.

Here the plaintive cry for the city as beloved emerges. In Urdu poetry, *dil* (heart) is often used in the metaphor of city, and there is long tradition of Dilli being invoked through the metaphor of *dil* (heart)¹⁹⁸ and *chaman* (garden). Dilli is the beloved who in keeping with the quintessential disposition of the *Sanam* (idol/stone-hearted beloved) keeps breaking the heart, and yet whose seduction keeps bringing the lover/poet to its *gali-kuche* (narrow streets and by-lanes).

The Red Fort (*Qila e Mualla*) has a history of being painted in late Mughal era as backdrop to Persian romantic folklore, such as Shirin-Farhad and Layla-Majnu, reflective of a literary tradition ‘where poets described relationships between cities and their inhabitants in the metaphoric language of love’¹⁹⁹. The same imagery is also meant to symbolize the relationship of the king and the fort, such as a late Mughal era painting titled “Layla and Majnu, Khusru and Shirin” where tragic separation of lovers is foreshadowed for not just Layla-Majnu and Shirin-Farhad, but also for the fleeting reunion between Shah Alam II and The Fort, whose procession is shown in the background²⁰⁰.

¹⁹⁷ R. Khairi. *Ghadr ki maari shehzadiyan*, p.31

¹⁹⁸ S. Yamane. ‘Lamentation Dedicated to the Declining Capital: Urdu Poetry on Delhi during the Late Mughal Period’. *Journal of the Japanese Association for South Asian Studies*, vol. 12, 2000, pp. 50–72.

¹⁹⁹ S. Waraich. ‘A City Besieged and a Love Lamented: Representations of Delhi’s Qila-i Mualla (“Exalted Fortress”) in the Eighteenth Century’. *South Asian Studies*, vol. 35, no. 1, Jan. 2019, p.145

²⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p.157

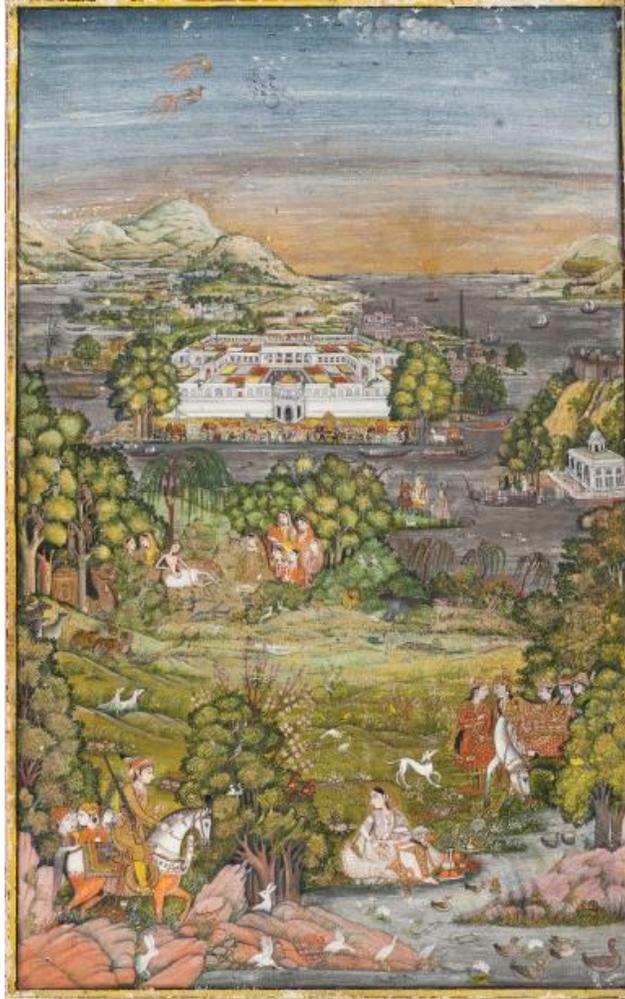


Figure 3.3 ‘*Layla and Majnun, and Khusrau and Shirin*’, Lucknow (Awadh), c. mid-1770s.

Provenance: Los Angeles County Museum of Art M.83.105.22.

Waraich, Saleema. ‘A City Besieged and a Love Lamented: Representations of Delhi’s Qila-i Mualla (“Exalted Fortress”) in the Eighteenth Century’. *South Asian Studies*, vol. 35, no. 1, Jan. 2019, p.147

These moments of wistful longing between buildings and their residents surface frequently in these narratives, especially the last rueful look survivors take on their homes before departing permanently. One of the princesses in *Begmaat ke Ansu* says that in the moment of departure:

hum ne apne bhare poore ghar ko hasrat ke sath aik nazar utha kar dekha ke phir hum kabhi yahan nahin ayenge²⁰¹.”

²⁰¹ H. Nizami. *Begamat ke Ansu*, p.25

[We looked at our bountiful house with a pining gaze, knowing we would never return.]
H.N.

Similar evocative and poignant moments between Bahadur Shah and the Fort are also mentioned in these texts, with the Fort grieving the departure of its beloved, the king. In *Wida e Zafar*, when the King is being taken away as captive, the fort walls are plaintively testifying to his innocence.

“qila mualla ki aalishan imarton ne, jo adal e shahjahani ke geet ga rahi theen, mulzim Badshah ki himayat mai na’ala buland kiya²⁰²”.

[The palace fort's large and beautiful buildings which sang verses of the justness of the emperor, raised their octaves in solidarity with the indicted King.] H.N.

The present-day fort is literally described as a widowed haunt of nocturnal animals in the absence of its rightful resident:

aaj qila e mualla ki wo aleeshan chattein jo ababeelon ka watan aur chamgadaron ka maskin hai us waqt Dulhan banti theen²⁰³”.

[The magnificent roofs of the palace fort, which are now a nest for birds, a den of bats, were once like Brides!] H.N.

The garden as a metaphor for Dilli appears throughout in *Phoolwalon ki Sair*, for example:

“ye jarron hi ki mazbooti thi ke dilli ka sar-sabz o shadaab chaman agarcha hawadis e zamana ke hathon pamaal ho chuka tha...”²⁰⁴.

[It was the very strength of these roots that Delhi’s garden, despite being trampled on by the hands of Fate...]. H.N.

Mehrauli is described as a vast garden of abundance, as concrete materialization of a vision of Paradise reflecting the imperial beneficence (*faiz*) of the Mughal rule. Therefore, where depredation is to be connoted, it is in the imagery of a ravaged garden.

²⁰² R. Khairi. *Naubat Panj Roza yani Wida e Zafar*, p.147

²⁰³ R. Khairi. *Naubat Panj Roza yani Wida e Zafar*, p.15

²⁰⁴ Mirza Farhatullah Beg. *Phoolwalon ki sair*. p.3

Yamuna khushk! Sabza ujaar! Lehlahate hue pode, dehdahate hue phool, chehchahata hua laala, sab khaak ke dhair hain. Yahan is waqt geedar aur loomriyan hain us waqt bulbul aur totiyan theen²⁰⁵”.

[The Yamuna river's all dried up! All the greenery is withered! Those plants that bloomed and fluttered, those flowers that blossomed, the birds that sang! All's gone to ash! Now there are only jackals and foxes . . . before there were bulbul birds and parrots!] H.N.

Wilderness (*bayabaan*) traditionally being the setting of the lover's madness and grief in Urdu poetry, the metaphor seems to extend itself here²⁰⁶. Gardens were also a symbol of imperial grace and a just rule in the Mughal discourse of sovereignty, so much so that Shahjahanabad was constructed as the spatial manifestation of Mughal sovereignty keeping this symbolism in mind²⁰⁷. The use of the garden metaphor for Dilli therefore runs deeper. In numerous places, Bahadur Shah is mentioned as a gardener of the *chaman* (garden) of Dilli, literally as well as figuratively. In one of the opening passages of *Wida e Zafar*, Bahadur Shah is shown in the royal gardens tending to the budding leaves and saplings in an image of paternalistic benevolence for the subjects.

dekhe ke uroos e shahjahanabad ka dulha kis tarha masroof e gulgasht hai aur chaman ki aik aik patti ko apne haath se darust kar raha hai...Daryayi deewar[se]... lahori darwaaze tak mutwatir phere karne wala aur aik aik pode ki dekh bhaal karne wala kon hai?²⁰⁸

[Look, the groom of Shahjahanabad is so engrossed in his walk in the garden, setting every single leaf right with his own hands. Who is the one, who from Daryaii Deewar to Lahori Gate, keeps vigil for and nurtures every single flower?] H.N.

According to Pernau, the image of the king as gardener of the empire can be traced back to the early Mughals, and therefore this usage of the metaphor is consciously evoking an Indo-Mughal conception of sovereignty as an alternate discourse in the heyday of British empire.

²⁰⁵ R. Khairi. *Naubat Panj Roza yani Wida e Zafar*, p.29

²⁰⁶ M. Pernau. 'Mapping Emotions, Constructing Feelings: Delhi in the 1840s.' 2015.

²⁰⁷ A. Kaicker. *The King and the People*. 2020; Waraich, Saleema. 'A City Besieged and a Love Lamented: Representations of Delhi's Qila-i Mualla ("Exalted Fortress") in the Eighteenth Century'. *South Asian Studies*, 2019; M. Pernau. 'Mapping Emotions, Constructing Feelings: Delhi in the 1840s'. *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 2015

²⁰⁸ R. Khairi. *Naubat Panj Roza yani Wida e Zafar*, p.14

Invoking an Indo-Mughal conception of sovereignty

To better understand spatial architecture's representation of sovereignty in the Mughal discourse, Shahjahanabad's construction appears as a paradigmatic example which Kaicker has called Shah Jahan's "theatre of sovereignty"²⁰⁹.

Kaicker has identified central features of this discourse around which the Mughal notion of sovereignty was based; *adal* (justice), *daulat* (fortune), *faiz* (prosperity), qualities which were meant to symbolically affirm the king's divine right to rule and were spatially represented in the city architecture²¹⁰. The pivot of this discourse was the figure of the emperor as an embodiment of it, especially upholding justice as essential to the compact between him and his subjects.

If one were to then read *Phoolwalon ki Sair* and *Wida e Zafar* in this light- the texts that describe the pre-1857 rule of Bahadur Shah, these same features that constitute the Mughal discourse of sovereignty stand out. Mehrauli and its monsoon festivity represent the largesse (*faiz*) extended by the king to the subjects. This celebration distinctly takes place outside of British interference and bureaucracy. In fact, the journey to Mehrauli is necessitated and preceded by monsoon flooding in old Dilli neighbourhoods and crowded homes that make them unlivable, but that the British officials ignore and don't take notice of²¹¹. Mehrauli emerges as a safe abode sheltered by the king's grace, a place of unbound joy and abundance, and symbolizes a relationship between the king and the subject that cannot be replaced by British rule.

Adal (justice) with respect to the person of the king is also exalted in all these texts, with him portrayed as not just a benevolent, but a just king holding all his subjects equal. This attribute

²⁰⁹ A. Kaicker. *The King and the People*. p. 65

²¹⁰ A detailed explanation of this is given by Abhishek Kaicker in *The King and the People*. He also notes that cosmological significations were kept in mind in the construction of Shahjahanabad. Ibid.

²¹¹ Beg mentions that despite being constrained in his authority, Bahadur Shah fully rose to the occasion and helped the residents as was within his power.

of Bahadur Shah is materially enacted in *Wida e Zafar*, “ye dekhiye qila ke darwaaze se deewan e aam tak pehre lage hue hain magar kis zaroorat se? isliye nahin k koi faryadi pohunch na sakey balke isliye ke har faryaadi ko ba-asani baryaab hone dein”²¹² [Look, from the Fort gate till the Hall of Audience there are sentinels standing guard, but for what purpose? Not so that complainants don’t arrive but rather so that every complainant can easily make themselves heard] which is a vivid reference to the justice associated with earlier Mughal emperors, notably Jehangir and Shahjahan. This justice is explicitly juxtaposed with the depersonalized and mechanical conception of it in British governance and the latter is exposed for a facade in the repeated mention of British killing of innocents in 1857.

Chanchal Dadlani in her research on late Mughal architecture argues that during the 18th century, a distinct notion of ‘Mughal’ architecture was consolidated by the later Mughals by constructing buildings in the architectural tradition of Shah Jahan. She writes, “architecture allowed the later Mughals to animate their past, refashion their identity, and stage authority, even as they experienced political loss²¹³”. Bahadur Shah also upheld that legacy, and Zafar Mahal that he constructed conformed to that tradition. Drawing on the architectural style of early Mughals was itself an exercise and representation of the claim to imperial sovereignty²¹⁴.

It is no coincidence that evocations and re-collections of Shahjahanabad, also called Hazrat e Dilli, are so inextricably linked to the idea of the Mughal sovereign. Dadlani says, “from the

²¹² R. Khairi. *Naubat Panj Roza yani Wida e Zafar*, p.16

²¹³ Chanchal Dadlani. *From Stone to Paper: Architecture as History in the Late Mughal Empire*. Yale University Press, 2018, p.1

²¹⁴ Golru Necipoğlu. ‘Framing the Gaze in Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal Palaces’. *Ars Orientalis*, vol. 23, 1993, pp. 303–42. She writes that the Red Fort “was built to frame Shah Jahan’s exalted royal image, an image rooted in a theory of kingship first formulated in Akbar’s reign...the Red Fort functioned as an extravagant stage for the daily performances of an endless show that exalted the Mughal emperor as the most powerful ruler of the world, worthy of the title Shah Jahan” pp. 313,317. Azfar Moin. *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam*. Columbia University Press, 2012. pp.225-237

moment that Shahjahanabad (or the abode of Shah Jahan) was first inaugurated in 1648, conceptions of space in Delhi had centered on the person of the emperor and his symbolic presence in the imperial palace-fortress, the Red Fort... With all roads leading to the emperor, the experience of urban space was dictated by the imperial presence and by the sense of hierarchy and limited access represented by the Red Fort²¹⁵.” The British obsession with displacing Bahadur Shah even before the uprising in a desire to occupy the locus of it- the Red Fort- can be interpreted in that context.

Imaginative re-tellings of the streets and neighborhoods of Dilli can therefore not merely be read as a passive dabbling in nostalgia and innocent strolls.

In *Phoolwalon ki sair*, the narrator describes the Zafar Mahal with acute pathos:

jangli mahal (another name for Zafar Mahal) ab tou waqai jangli mahal hai (the palace of wilderness). Haan kisi zamanay mai bara gaddaar (sprawling) mahal tha... [ab sirf] aik Bab-e-zafar (the gate) reh gaya hai, isi se andaaza ho sakta hai ke jis mahal ka ye darwaza hai wo mahal kya hoga.²¹⁶

[*Jangli Mahal* is now truly a palace of wilderness. Yes, at one point in time it was a huge palace, but now there's only the gate left . . . you can estimate how grand the palace might have been if that is just the gate.] H.N.

Keeping in mind the semantic and performative import of this architecture, despite this being a lament for the imperial structure, it is an affirmation to the grandiosity of it, albeit in retrospect. This is a lament for the lost sovereign as much as it is for the urban ruin. This is another aspect to the political function of *shahr ashob*.

In these texts, Bahadur Shah is invariably portrayed as a Sufi-king (*insan-e-kamil*), a god-fearing ruler concerned for his citizenry and always beset by scruples about divine accountability

²¹⁵ C. Dadlani. *From Stone to Paper*. p.58

²¹⁶ Mirza Farhatullah Beg. *Phoolwalon ki sair*. p.24

for his rule²¹⁷. Bahadur Shah is depicted as a receptacle of divine endowment that he extends to his subjects²¹⁸. This is a distinct invocation of the discourse of sacred kingship that was constructed by the early Mughals, inspired by the Safavid saint-emperors. Azfar Moin lays out in detail how with the help of performative, narrative and spatial practices, a notion of divinely mandated kingship was created, starting with Babur and culminating in Akbar- the founder of a religion, the self-styled savior of his millennium²¹⁹.

Called the “mystical substance of kingship” by Kaicker²²⁰, this beneficence could be passed corporeally, which was the premise behind practices of endowing imperial gifts equaling the weight of the emperor...”one way in which the fortune carried in the king’s body translated into sustenance for the poor”²²¹. This discourse bound the king’s body to the body politic of the empire and sanctified that relationship with a mystical force. In *Phoolwalon ki sair*, Beg affirms this bond when he writes, “jo hum hain wo ye hain aur jo ye hain wo hum hain”²²² (He is of us, and we are of him.) Succession to the lineage of Sufi-kings and its contingent obligation is also invoked in

²¹⁷ In *Wida e Zafar*, Khairi says that Bahadur Shah frequently used to visit his grave in Mehrauli and cry in awe of the divine reckoning. “aksar wahan jata aur qabar par beth kar allah allah karta”. [Often he’d go there and sit upon the grave, chanting Allah, Allah] H.N. R. Khairi. *Naubat Panj Roza yani Wida e Zafar*, p.114

²¹⁹ These practices were as diverse as the institution of taking on spiritual disciples, commissioning imperial chronicles sanctifying the ruler, royally commissioned paintings with cosmological symbolism ascribed to the king, or more public performative practices like appearing for *darshan* in a *jharoka*, among many others. These practices “carried substantial symbolic capital...[and] created obligations for the sovereign”. Azfar Moin. *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam*. Columbia University Press, 2012, p.187. Dadlani says that later Mughals consciously built constructions at Qutbuddin “to draw on the spiritual authority afforded by such an association.” C. Dadlani. *From Stone to Paper*. p.65. Most early Mughals had spiritual disciples, a practice dropped by later Mughals but notably continued by Bahadur Shah who was the only late Mughal to take on disciples. Nostalgia for this sacred kingship appears in these texts, for example Khairi wistfully recalling the days of the *jharoka* in *Wida e Zafar*.

²²⁰ A. Kaicker. *The King and the People*. p. 60

²²¹ A. Kaicker. *The King and the People*. p. 63. Kaicker says “Symbolic contact with the kingly body, mediated through robes of honor that had been adorned or even touched by it, gave something of its legitimacy to the grantee”. *Ibid*, p.61

²²² Mirza Farhatullah Beg. *Phoolwalon ki sair*. p.4

Wida-e-Zafar when Bahadur Shah is shown to reverently touch keepsakes of his Mughal ancestors: Babur's ring, Humayun's comb, Akbar's handkerchief, Jehangir's hair, Shah Jahan's necklace.

The king's body was a sacral entity and contact with it was supposed to re-affirm and uphold the divine mandate adjoining the ruler and the subjects, and by extension his sovereignty. Bahadur Shah's exile by the British is understood in this light, which "paradoxically recognized the divine claims of the discourse of Mughal sovereignty, as one that could not be extinguished but perhaps only displaced²²³."

It is fascinating to note that leaders of post-Independence India referred to the same discourse of sovereignty in upholding the legitimacy of their government, which tells something of the enduring potency of it²²⁴. The discourse of Mughal authority invoked by these early 20th century writers was by no means a dead discourse.

Subhas Chandra Bose gave his *Dilli Chalo* call from Bahadur Shah's grave in Rangoon. Jawaharlal Nehru revived the *Phoolwalon ki Sair* in 1961 and attended it annually as a symbol of the secular promise of democratic India. Indira Gandhi, when she became the Prime Minister, asked all Indian states to send a floral *pankha* each, representing their participation in the festival. Bahadur Shah's shrine also remains a mandatory itinerary item for all Indian and Pakistani political leaders visiting Myanmar and his image as a saint has proved as prevailing as that of being the last

²²³ A. Kaicker. *The King and the People*. p. 308. The British were so apprehensive of Bahadur Shah's bodily remains that they buried him in an unmarked grave and did not allow visitors to the site for 30 years. Sovereignty conceived to be located in the kingly body is pertinent to understanding the British paranoia around Bahadur Shah's grave.

²²⁴ The shrine today remains a matter of diplomatic dispute between India and Pakistan.

Mughal king²²⁵. Thus, even the phantoms of this imperial discourse have the power to animate a notion of sovereignty in the South Asian imagination which speaks to rootedness and historicity.

Therefore, public mourning for the former king, his veneration as a saint and affirming his beneficence within these texts that I am studying are terms of invoking a Mughal discourse of sovereignty and sacred kingship, one that by its divinely endowed attribute cannot be replaced by British republicanism. If seen in the context of Delhi Durbar, it is a rejection of British attempts at appropriating this discourse of power for them not being legitimate heirs to the ‘mystical substance of kingship’.

Beg likens it to a marriage, “ye Mehrauli na thi balke lagan tha”²²⁶, [it was not Mehrauli merely, rather a marriage (between the king and subjects)] a sacred bond that bound the people to their king. Beg says as much at the end of his narrative:

ghadar hua, dilli tabah hui, Badshah Rangoon pohunche. Bandhan toot gaya. Bandhan ab bhi hai, magar wo muhabbat ka bandhan tha, ye qanoon ka bandhan hai”²²⁷.

[Ghadr happened, Dilli was ruined, Badshah was exiled and the Bond broke. There still is a bond, but that one was of love and this happens to be of the law.]

It is taken for granted that the British cannot replicate this compact between the ruler and the subjects. Even the concrete British efforts to mimic this notion of sovereignty (notably the Imperial Assemblage of 1877, Delhi Durbar 1911) remarkably fail for the British being alien to the terms of this discourse.

²²⁵ Bahadur Shah is worshipped as a saint in Myanmar, and any suggestion of relocating his remains to India evokes potential threat of violent agitation by Myanmar citizens.

²²⁶ Mirza Farhatullah Beg. *Phoolwalon ki sair*. p.45

²²⁷ Mirza Farhatullah Beg. *Phoolwalon ki sair*. p.51



Figure 3.3 Narendra Modi, Indian Prime Minister, paying floral tribute at the grave of Bahadur Shah Zafar
Photographer unidentified. 'Modi at Bahadur Shah's grave'. *Times of India*, 2017, <https://toistudent.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/news/newsmakers/pm-modi-visits-bahadur-shah-zafar-s-mazar/24618.html>

Conclusion

Over the course of this thesis, I have undertaken an in-depth study of four Urdu texts from early 20th century about 1857 and the lost Mughal rule. I have shown how these texts use pre-modern literary forms that are highly politically coded and emerge as contestations of British monopolization of 1857 narratives. These texts use the literary forms most suited to the expression of unrestrained lament and mourning, and thus harness the political force of emotions through the impunity afforded by the metaphor and ornate prose. The Karbala allegory re-paints the 1857 uprising in retrospect to claim an enduring Indian victory and affirm divine support on the Indian side. These highly provocative implications are remarkably accommodated by the pre-modern genres, also protecting them from colonial scrutiny in doing so. Creative myth-making takes place around Bahadur Shah and 1857, which gives an insight into the rich repository of social memory and intergenerational lore around this event. Spatial memorialization of places explicitly tethered to lost Mughal authority function as laments for a lost sovereign. These re-affirm the centrality of Mughal kingship for the North Indian imagination and appear as refutations of the British attempts at mimicking the Mughal discourse of sovereignty through the spectacles of Imperial Assemblage and Delhi Durbar. This discourse appears very much alive and resonant in its usage by post-independence leaders of India in invoking the terms of a lost sovereignty.

These primary texts politically pose a challenge to the legitimacy of British rule in their collective re-imagining and reclamation of the Mughal past that moves beyond nostalgia to presenting historical correctives and contesting dominant historical accounts. The texts employ pre-modern genres and modes of remembrance particularly suited to this nostalgic and fantastical re-imagining that re-creates an image of the Mughal rule as glorious, just, and as the patron of intercommunal peace that appears threatened by the British takeover.

Social memory remains a rather fleeting archive, and more scholarship on it in the South Asian context is needed. Most Indian archives of 1857 exist non-institutionally and need to be rescued from the margins of History. The immense value in studying this archive cannot be overstated. More research needs to be done beyond the frameworks of nostalgia and loss to gain new insights into relations of social space, intergenerational memory, and the literary form.

Appendix

Bag-o-Bahar, a commissioned text at Fort William published in 1804, written by Munshi Mir Amman, is a prime example of Fort William texts that came to be closely associated with authentic early modern Urdu prose. An exercise in ‘literary vernacularization’, *Bag-o-Bahar* performed the linguistic functions that were being institutionalized by the John Gilchrist-led initiatives²²⁸. It narrated a highly inaccurate history to create a colonialist origin story for Urdu, associating it with Muslim military adventurism and Indo-Muslim courtly patronage²²⁹. *Bag-o-Bahar* institutionalized a vernacularized dialect of Urdu, “colloquial” and “conversational”, at a time when Urdu’s elite courtly register had an overwhelming sway in Delhi and Lucknow. The import of this episode is suggested by the fact that *Bag-o-Bahar* gained popularity as authentic Oriental literature²³⁰.

This text was considered such an affront by the North Indian writers that a writer from the Lucknow court, Rajab Ali Beg Surur, wrote the iconic *Fasana-e-Ajaib* (1838-42) as a rejoinder to the aesthetic transgression and adulteration presumably done by *Bag-o-Bahar*²³¹. In denouncing the colloquial idiom of Mir Amman, Surur produced a dastan-like text in rhythmic ornate Indo-Persian prose as the ‘authentic’ literary form of the North Indian aesthetic tradition²³².

Fasana-e-Ajaib was “entirely within the *dastan* tradition”, important to note what form the language appeared in outside of institutional endeavors and British patronage²³³. Multiple editions of the text were subsequently published, attesting its immense popularity in the nascent Urdu print-public.

It is important to note however, that though *Bag-o-Bahar* is today seen as a quintessential text of early modern prose, it took three decades after its publication to garner acceptance and popularity in North India itself. In fact, in North India the Fort William texts published in Calcutta were derided for their linguistic usage. Ralph Russell writes, “Every gentleman of taste, asserted the Lucknow critics, knew that this was not the way to write literary prose; and to show how it should be done they pointed to Rajab Ali Beg’s *Fasana-e-Ajaib*”²³⁴.

Both texts later remained in competition for many years vying for the place of the authentic Urdu literary aesthetic. It is therefore quite fascinating in retrospect that *Bag-o-Bahar* has in fact come to represent early modern Urdu prose today, while *Fasana-e-Ajaib* even though written decades after, is seen as representing a pre-modern aesthetic. Maryam Wasif calls Surur’s text “the

²²⁸ Sheldon Pollock qtd. in Khan, Maryam Wasif. *Translated Orientalisms*, pp. 143

²²⁹ Russell, Ralph. *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature: A Select History*. Zed Books, 1992; Khan, Maryam Wasif. *Translated Orientalisms: The Eighteenth-Century Oriental Tale, Colonial Pedagogies, and Muslim Reform*. UCLA, 2013.

²³⁰ Khan, Maryam Wasif. *Translated Orientalisms*, p. 136

²³¹ Khan, Maryam Wasif. *Translated Orientalisms*, pp.136-146

²³² Faruqi, Shamsur Rahman. “Unprivileged Power: The Strange Case of Persian (and Urdu) in Nineteenth Century India.” *Annual of Urdu Studies*, 1998.

²³³ Russell, Ralph. *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature*. p. 84-85

²³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 84.

first act of resistance against the colonial codification of a literary register into a standard language²³⁵”.

Later, British initiatives like the Allahabad Government Notification of 1868 officially incentivized the creation of this new Urdu prose with decidedly British notions of what constituted good literature- simple, didactic, morally edifying, and utilitarian. Potential dissemination of selected texts through inclusion as colonial school textbooks was a strong incentive and according to Hali, this notification “galvanized all the people...[as] the announcement itself was like a current of electricity”²³⁶. The notification called for “useful works in the vernacular... nothing obnoxious to morality. The only condition is that the book shall subserve some useful purpose, either of instruction, entertainment, or mental discipline.”²³⁷

The very well-known and arguably first Urdu novel, *Mirat ul Uroos*, was written by Nazir Ahmed for the same prize. It won in 1869 and was later included into the school curriculum for its edifying value especially with regards to female education. Nazir Ahmed’s prose was simple and unadorned, distinct from the dastan style, which according to critics was heavily influenced by the colloquial prose style engineered decades earlier at Fort William²³⁸. This book became a part of all Urdu school curriculums for decades to come and remains a compulsory reading in Pakistani Urdu textbooks to this day.

According to renowned Urdu scholar C. M. Naim, the Allahabad notification cemented the idea that “the Government of India was the new patron of learning... that it had the power not only to approve certain ideas through rewards and disapprove others through neglect, but they also had the extraordinary power to disseminate the approved ideas through an educational system of their own devising”²³⁹. The coordinated functioning of the colonial structures (Company/later British Raj, colonial education system, British patronage, printing presses) exerted an influence over the burgeoning canon “on a scale that not even a Grand Mughal could have indulged in”²⁴⁰.

In a glaring omission, no books of poetry were ever chosen for these awards, poetry being a choice victim of the British modernist critique²⁴¹. Nazir Ahmed’s third novel *Taubat un Nasuh* (The Repentance of Nasuh) won the first prize in which the protagonist Nasuh’s project of religious reform calls for the “dislocation of its [Muslim] object from India²⁴²”, reaffirming the idea of Muslim foreignness to Hindustan. In a momentous event for the nascent Urdu canon, Nasuh burns all the classical Indo-Persian literature in his son’s room decrying its corrupting influence in what has been called “one of the most horrifying scenes in Urdu novels²⁴³.” Rather unsurprisingly, *Fasana e Ajaib* is a part of this burning pile.

²³⁵ Khan, Maryam Wasif. *Translated Orientalisms*, pp. 148

²³⁶ Naim, C.M. *Urdu Texts and Contexts: The Selected Essays of C.M. Naim*. Permanent Black ; Distributed by Orient Longman, 2004, p. 293.

²³⁷ *Ibid*, p. 292

²³⁸ Russell, Ralph. *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature*. p. 98.

²³⁹ Naim. *Urdu Texts and Contexts*, p. 293

²⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p. 177

²⁴¹ *Ibid*, p. 174

²⁴² Khan, Maryam Wasif. *Translated Orientalisms*, p. 212

²⁴³ Naim. *Urdu Texts and Contexts*, p. 311

The project of this gradual ‘reform’ of Urdu prose is seen advanced in Ratan Nath Sarshar’s *Fasana-e-Azad* (1878-79). In a visible departure from the *dastan* tradition, there is a purging of the fantastical and the supernatural in this 3000 page text that explicitly holds before itself realism as a standard. This is a significant moment for the developing Urdu prose because texts like these were produced directly for the printing press and represented the changing tastes of the North Indian literary publics. Continued serialization of these texts in periodicals speaks to popular and sustained demand for this new kind of prose. *Fasana-e-Azad* was almost directly influenced by Don Quixote and exalted an uncritical view of British modernity²⁴⁴. Begum Shaista Suhrawardy, the first Indian woman to undertake a doctoral study of Urdu literature in the UK, writes (in which year):

“With *Fasana e Azad*, we come into the actual domain of the novel. The supernatural is left behind; the miraculous and the impossible are discarded; characters are no longer princes and kings of fictitious and imaginary countries, but men and women from all strata of Lucknow society²⁴⁵”.

Periodicals of the emerging print culture democratized the hitherto elite, exclusionary literary spaces like the *mushaira* and contemporary readers engaged in a dynamic imagining and contestation of the newly emerging literary culture. Literary discourse, that till now was the domain of the elect at highbrow *mushairas*, was brought to periodicals and newspapers. Reviews and comments published from readers of the time give valuable insight into the changing literary landscape, especially because these serialized texts were only later published as books²⁴⁶. A letter from Haider Ali of Amravati, a contemporary reader of *Fasana-e-Azad*, published in *Avadh Akhbar*, gives an insight into the changing literary tastes. It reads,

“Even though [*Fasana e Azad*] is an invention [*bandish*], every aspect seems totally true to the readers. Nothing is against reason. You should publish this as a book so it will be preserved, and our fellowmen [*hamvatan*] will keep benefitting from it, learn culture [*tahzib*], and be saved from evils. And other people should write novels like this and not give place to any old-fashioned [*daqiyanusssi*] ideas”.²⁴⁷

The moral fixity of the metropolitan Oriental tale, realism and the Fort William colloquial prose thus come to be cemented in Urdu literature by this point.

²⁴⁴ Russell, Ralph. *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature*. p. 88

²⁴⁵ Suhrawardy, Shaista. ‘A Critical Survey of the Development of the Urdu Novel and Short Story.’ Ph.D. Dissertation, University of London, 1945, p. 31

²⁴⁶ Dubrow, Jennifer. *Cosmopolitan Dreams: The Making of Modern Urdu Literary Culture in Colonial South Asia*. University of Hawai‘i Press, 2018, pp. 85-90

²⁴⁷ Dubrow, Jennifer. *Cosmopolitan Dreams*. p. 86

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