Nazir Ahmad Dehlvi’s Mirat-Ul Uroos: Through The Lens Of The Colonized

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Abstract: There are umpteen “novels” which figure in the “must read” lists of books on the city of Delhi. While most of them include Twilight in Delhi by Ahmed Ali (1940), very few would include a predecessor by the name of Mirat-ul Uroos (1869, translated in 1903 as The Bride’s Mirror) by Maulvi or Diptee Nazir Ahmad. In the context of Delhi, its study is extremely rewarding as the earliest example of ethos in Shahjahanabad affording a rare glimpse into the interiors of the homes and minds of both the male and female native population. This is a Shahjahanabad which is well incorporated into the colonization project, without quite realizing it. The city space, the domestic space, the educational space, the linguistic space and the literary space are all swept by the invisible hegemonic intervention. Ahmad is unaware of the invisible and insidious impacts of colonization and how the British contact has already stamped him and his ilk in an indelible manner- the imprints of which are manifest in The Bride’s Mirror in various ways. The paper focuses on this picture of Shahjahanbad from the point of view of the incipient cultural subjectivity in the early dawn of colonization.

Keywords: Delhi, Shahjahanabad, Urdu novel, culture, colonization

There are lists and lists of books or “novels” which are a “must read” on the city of Delhi. While most of them include Twilight in Delhi by Ahmed Ali (1940), very few would include a predecessor by the name of Mirat-ul Uroos by Maulvi Nazir Ahmad Dehlvi or Diptee Nazir Ahmad, as he was variously called. Mirat, however, is a widely discussed book in the context of Urdu literature and also the early Indian novels. In the context of Delhi, it is the earliest example of ethos in Shahjahanabad as well as a glimpse into the interiors of the homes and minds of both the male and female native population. This is a Shahjahanabad which is well incorporated into the colonization project, without quite realizing it. The city space, the domestic space, the educational space, the linguistic space and the literary space are all challenged by the invisible hegemonic intervention- visible retrospectively in the ambiguity of ‘progress’ and ‘preservation” in the native response to all the sweeping changes around it. Ahmad’s contemporary biographer, Sir Abdul Qadir, in his The New School of Urdu Literature, underscores the chief contribution of Mirat as:

Maulvi Nazir Ahmad’s great service to Urdu knowing India is his supplying it with books specially adapted for female education and it may safely be said that his chief feature of his subsequent writings is that each one of them may be placed in the hands of a girl of tender years by the most scrupulous and conscientious of fathers. (Qadir, 1898, p.55)

Celebrating the new lease of life to Indian writing with the arrival of British patronage and professionalism, he sees Mirat as one of the many texts that owe their origin to this spurt. Once again the colonial confusion is visible in the fact that while Qadir applauds the British support and technology, he declares the “tone of independence” of Mirat as its best quality:

One reason for this sale, in addition to its intrinsic qualities of the books … was that Maulvi Nazir Ahmad did not depend on literature when he began to write. His services under the British and the Nizam’s Governments had earned him a respectable pension and otherwise placed him beyond want. This privilege, enjoyed by so few of the writers in India, has given to his writings a tone of independence possessed by so few of the productions of these days and placed him in a position to guide the public taste and form it, rather than pander to it in its vitiated condition. (Qadir, 1898, p.48-49)

Qadir as well as Ahmad are unaware of the invisible and insidious impacts of colonization and how the British contact has already stamped the creator and the creation in an indelible manner- the imprints of which are manifest in the text in various ways. The paper focuses on this picture of Shahjahanbad from the point of view of the incipient cultural subjectivity of the space and its residents in the early dawn of colonization.

Nazir Ahmad Dehlvi (1830-1912) also known as “Diptee” (Deputy) Nazir Ahmad, was an Urdu scholar and writer, and a social and religious reformer. Ahmad hailed from a family of maulavis and muftis of Bijnor (Uttar Pradesh) and Delhi. His father was a teacher in a small town near Bijnore who trained him in Persian and Arabic. In 1842, Ahmad was enrolled to study at the Aurangabadi Mosque under the tutelage of Abd ul-Khaliq in Delhi. In 1846, Ahmad joined the Delhi College. He was a disciple in its Urdu section because of his father’s injunction that "he would rather see me die than learn English" (Pritchett, 1903, p. 205). He was engaged in studies till 1853. During this period he also got married to Abd ul-Khaliq's granddaughter. After a brief stint as a teacher of Arabic, he joined the British colonial administration in 1854. He was appointed deputy inspector of schools in the Department of Public Instruction in Kanpur in1856 and Allahabad in 1857. He took the valuable advice of a friend to learn English which he did in 1859-60. He translated the Income Tax Law and the Indian Penal Code into Urdu in 1860-61. For these contributions, he was posted as deputy collector in the North-West Provinces (thus the title “deptee”). In 1877, Ahmad proceeded on an administrative assignment to the princely state of Hyderabad but in 1884, political feuds
forced him to quit and return to Delhi. He remained in Delhi till the time of his death from stroke in 1912.

Nazir Ahmad writes *Mirat-ul Uroos* (between 1868 and 1869, Arabic for The Bride's Mirror, translated into English by G.E. Ward in 1903) as he says for the edification and instruction of his daughters. He explains:

I began writing books at a time when my own children were of an age to start their schooling. I had my own experience of learning and teaching, and as an employee in the Education Department had also had the occasion to supervise teaching. I knew in every detail all the defects of educational methods and of the books in use. “Once you have seen the fly in your drink, you cannot swallow it”- and so I began to write books on my own account and to teach from them. This was the motive which first impelled me to write. (As quoted in Russel, 1992, p.118)

It is often noted that *Mirat* was “discovered” accidentally by Matthew Kempson, Director of Public Instruction, through Ahmad’s son. Unlike later books like *Binat ul-nash* and *Tauba ul nasuh*, at least this text was meant entirely for family consumption and private circulation. It was not written to be a “prize-winning adab” (Naim, 1984, p. 290) in response to the call from the Northern Provinces government for suitable curricular material for girls. Whether it was written with an eye on government appreciation and recognition or not, yet it is very clear from Ahmad’s statement that it was written under the influence of his British employers and their policies. Shaista Bano Suhrawardy looks at *Mirat* as a “realist” text which describes “Indian life as yet untouched (or unaltered for it had already come into touch) by contact with the West” (Suhrawardy, 1945, p.42). The distinction which she draws between “untouched” and “unaltered” is significant. We have already seen how *Mirat* embodies a critique of prevalent teaching-learning methods originating in the British government education department. On close examination, it is possible to see how it also bears the consequences of the British contact in many more ways as well. Hence, the ideas and images presented in the text are very much “altered” by the British contact, whether self consciously as stated by Ahmad, or hegemonically, without quite being aware of the colonialist intervention. The latter is truer for Ahmad’s generation, as the colonized is far too innocent at this juncture in history to sense the cultural teeth or bite of political domination.

*Mirat* voices the need for women’s education passionately in the ‘Introduction’. The purposes served by acquiring education as cited by Ahmad range from safeguarding personal modesty and interests and tiding over adversity if there be to being self reliant and useful in the house. Regrettting the non-existence of serious urge and apparatus to impart education to women in his country, he attempts to fill in this void by writing a moral parable for empowering women to transact the business of their lives efficiently and commendably. In the ‘Introduction’ to this work, Ahmad voices the conviction that if women gain knowledge, then it will not only alleviate their own suffering and inconsequence but will also be in the best interest of family, community and society (Ahmad, 1869/ 1903, p.1-17). There seems little doubt that women are meant for housekeeping, so the extent and content of education is also specified accordingly. To learn to be an efficient housekeeper is a must by learning to manage accounts, to cook, to offer gracious hospitality to guests and to be an expert in cutting and stitching of clothes. Although women do not have the compulsion to earn livelihoods or distinguish themselves in the intellectual world, yet learning to read and write is a big advantage as these skills make them worldly wise. Another very compelling reason for getting educated stressed by Ahmad is that women are treated shabbily by men due to their own laziness and if they emerge out of this inertia, they will emerge out of their disrepute. They will also emerge out of seclusion for while they cannot physically transgress the *purdah*, mentally they can, through books and leaning. And finally, women’s education can transform the way they can physically and morally nurture their children.

While there is a passionate plea for women’s education, yet in this society generally the idea is that it cannot overflow the measure of the role prescribed for women in society. At the forefront of these educational initiatives for women are men who are also leading movements of general reform in Islamic society. The concept of the “ashrafi” is redefined by them in the face of new socio-economic realities of the post-1857 society. This status is no longer based on birth or a lavish lifestyle but on virtues and conduct. The fragmented Muslim society regroups itself along the lines of a community which has common interests which need to be extracted and secured from the British administrators. This internal reform proceeds along two lines – the “transitional reform” and the “acculturated reform”. While the former is of pre-colonial origin and comprises of indigenous methods of dissent, the latter is born out of the colonial encounter and borrows from colonial paradigms and prototypes. Where the native male Muslim elite were concerned, they surrendered their sovereignty in the political arena but not in the patriarchal one. During the British Raj, when new systems of economy and administration were being implemented, the Indian Muslim male elite wanted a finger in the pie of the available economic resources and thus were amenable to adapting those British mores which were likely to pay off. They, however, bargained with the British administrators to leave the domestic space under their influence in return for a free hand in the public space. This clever ploy to remain the masters within if not without was masked as cultural confrontation and resistance. This made them accomplices in the British colonialist conspiracy against women as by extracting enhanced and exclusive power from the colonial masters in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, they imposed more stringent patriarchy in the name of cultural preservation.

Zakaullah (1832-1910) attended Delhi College to become a teacher of Mathematics and was convinced that vernacular education was sufficient for Muslim women. The Muslim Cambridge being cultivated by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan at Aligarh was not his idea of the kind of education India needed. Many Delhi College men shared a similar
belief that education should not lose its vernacular base. If this happened, consequences will be especially detrimental for women as women’s education was essentially within homes under the tutelage of ustad or ustanis. Sir Sayyid was not a votary of women’s education either as he felt that men and sons should benefit first from Oxford and Cambridge style education, the effect of which will permeate automatically to women is what he believed. Women’s education became a common theme in the writings of Muslim “reformers” of all shades. Women’s education in typically vernacular curriculum consisting of Persian and Arabic grammar, calligraphy, arithmetic and practical training in household management was professed by all as the cementing factor in family, religious and cultural structures which were severely threatened by the economic and political ambitions of men. This generation of men, therefore, produced tracts after didactic tracts to maintain women on an ‘as is where is’ basis.

Khwaja Altaf Husain “Hali” (1837-1914), and Sayyid Ahmad Dehlavi (1846-1918) wrote profusely on women’s education. Like Nazir Ahmad was an educator serving in the government’s education department, so were Hali and Dehlavi working for Delhi Anglo Arabic School and Simla High School respectively. They had been exposed to the new learning and institutions of the west, yet while writing for women, they were careful to advocate a type of educational model which was oriental and Islamic. Hali wrote Majalis un-Nissa, a ‘conference’ of upper middle class women of Delhi, in which they asserted in chaste begamati zubaan that they should not disregard education as they formed the nucleus of the family and hence they should endeavour to develop their influence and diligence to the best benefit of the family. As Gail Minault writes, “Hali emphasized that women were the chief agents of cultural continuity. In an age when the men were forsaking their culture for the loaves and fishes of the British Raj, it was more than ever necessary for the women to be anchored in their own religion and culture” (Minault, 1986/2002, p.181). Dehlavi penned Insha-e-Hadi un-Nissa, a guide to letter writing for women which became a textbook in vernacular and Anglo-vernacular education in Punjab. As till this time writing was a taboo for women, so Dehlavi is careful to keep the range of letters within the close family circle. He started a bi-weekly journal for women, Akhbar un-Nissa, but had to discontinue it due to the outrage it created in the Muslim community. Dehlavi’s other works in this genre written in the idiomatic begamati zubaan were Mirat Zaman Ki Mazedar Kahani (a tract on time management), Tashkir-e-Shauhar (how to have good relations with the husband), Akhlaq un-Nissa (on child rearing) and Qissa-e-Mahr Afroz (on courtey etiquettes). He even compiled a dictionary of the begamati zubaan called Lughat un-Nissa. The Deobandi School, with its Islamic revivalism, produced Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawee’s Bihishti Zewar (Heavenly Ornaments) to school them in the ‘true’ practices of Islam. Thanawee was not interested in plight of women as such but Muslim women in particular and advocated that Islam is the only acceptable route to impart upliftment to women’s lives.

Thanawee proscribes Mirat for several reasons. It is radical in its outlook as it equates Islam with other religions, he felt such writings “weaken faith”. This radicalism can be attributed to the imprint of western modernization that has sneaked into Ahmad’s world view. Ahmad’s received westernization and colonized subjectivity juxtapose religious against secular, traditional against modern, scriptural against practical and piety against success. Writes C M Naim,

In giving such importance to women, in allowing them the inherent capacity to be co-equal with men in almost all matters, and in laying such emphasis on women’s education, Nadhir Ahmad was going against the prevalent views … We are not suggesting that Nadhir Ahmad’s was a lone voice - there were many others who expressed sorrow at the plight of women - but it was certainly the most radical and far-reaching. (Naim, 1984, p.306)

In Ahmad’s Mirat, as Pritchett observes, “The story of her (Asghari’s) life pushes Nazir Ahmad’s view far enough to reveal (to the reader if not to the author) the paradoxical vision on which it rests. For Asghari calls into question the neat role division Nazir Ahmad has laid down between men and women” (Pritchett, 1903, p. 214). Apart from clerical disapproval and these paradoxes inherent in the issue of women’s education, there is also the risk of women outperforming men - just as Asghari emerges to be the most shrewd, diplomatic, officious, self dependent, reputed and rich member of the entire clan:

Nadhir ahmad presents at least one major female character who impresses us by being different from the prevalent image and self image of Muslim women. These creations of Nadhir Ahmad are amazingly dynamic people, possessing sharp and practical minds (Naim, 1984, p.305)

The guidelines of conduct Ahmad proposes for men and women also carry an imprint of the west. He readily empathises with the British agenda of imparting education to women. He speaks almost in despair of the purdah system which severely restricts the potential of women. Asghari tells her pupils how she found women without purdah of the village where her family had sought shelter during the 1857 uprising to be no less dignified and respectable. She makes a strong case for the equality of women by convincing her astonished pupils that a woman can also be “king” and do everything which her male counterpart would. The robust and noble nature of English women is valorised by Asghari. Though Ahmad pays lip service to the Adam and Eve relational status of the two sexes by writing that “the creation of woman was merely to insure the happiness of man” and that “It is great folly in a woman to suppose that her husband is on the same level with herself”, yet the narrative veers towards the western construct of family life where the difference makes for a mutually complimentary equilibrium (Ahmad, 1869/1903, p. 62). In fact, the manifold virtues of Asghari put her at par or even raise her above her male relations. As Pritchett writes in the ‘Afterword’ that, “she is almost an honorary man”, even an “honorary patriarch” (Pritchett, 1903, p. 214). She is referred to as ‘bhai’ (brother) or ‘beta’ (son) by the elders. She has no children who, we are told by way of a rather
lame explanation, die in infancy. She intervenes in the
careers of her father-in-law and brother-in-law, rebukes her
husband, keeps him away from bad company and in good
stead, takes advantage of her aristocratic pupils for securing
a good match for her sister-in-law and leaves a rich legacy
of material assets from the Rs.20 a month allowance her
father-in-law fixed for the running of the house. Pritchett
makes a very interesting point that her larger than life role
goes unnoticed and unchallenged by the family and the
community which is so enamoured by the “energy,
organisation, diplomatic skills and managerial prowess” of
this paragon of good qualities that she gets away with all her
meddlesomeness. Pritchett concludes that

What her story really demonstrates is that in practice,
smart, shrewd people (including women) can manipulate
less capable people (including men) to great advantage.
What Asghari’s story shows is that nothing succeeds like
success. (Pritchett, 1903, p. 215)

Isn’t the story of Asghari another version of the success
story of the British in India and elsewhere? This serves a
quid pro quo for the phenomenon of the language and its
ideology permeating tangibly into the psyche of the learner.
Belonging to the Macaulayan class of interpreters, Nazir
Ahmad overwrites the Islamic narrative with western
correctives. Writes Naim:

These novels of Nadhir Ahmad are just the right kind of
success stories that the Muslims of India needed to hear in
the trying years after the failure of the mutiny and the
dissolution of the symbols of their temporal power.
Separating the world of God from the world of Caesar …
these novels were precisely the kind of adab that both the
rulers and the ruled seemed to have desired at that particular
time in history. (Naim, 1984, p.306)

Women’s education figured prominently in the colonial
discourse as well. The decider in the tug of war between the
native elites and the colonialists in the political and legal
arena was what to do with the lives of Indian women. The
alleged downtrodden plight of Indian women and the
barbaric treatment they received at the hands of Indian men
were used as arguments to rationalise the colonial mission
(Devji, 1991). The entire colonial mission hinged on
rectifying the ills of a society which was cruel to its women.
It was difficult for the British to explain their civilising
presence in the so called ‘barbaric’ country if the ‘barbaric’
family remained the same. The British reformatory
intervention was misplaced owing to several reasons. The
notions of ‘Indian family’, ‘Indian male’ and ‘family law’
were all constructs prejudiced by the imperatives of the
colonial mission. The British tried to redefine the pluralist
Indian culture into a hegemonic and monolithic one based
partly on British notions of family and marital relationship
and partly on oversimplified and homogenised ‘Hindu’ and
‘Muslim’ stereotypes which brought the largest majority
under common jurisdiction. The colonial attempt to codify
and canonize private family relations resulted in
misinterpretations, standardisations and categorizations
which sought to transfer women from native operations of
patriarchy to its European counterpart. This brings into the
picture a related group, the British feminists, who were
struggling on home turf for greater personal and political
rights. They incorporated the Indian women into their fight
for dignity and rights. The chant of native woman and her
uplift soon became the anthem of white feminist burden as
the demand for suffrage was ennobled by the missionary
motive of contributing more significantly to the cause of the
native woman. The British feminists also did not attempt to
peek behind the stereotyped veneer of the hapless Indian
woman and, in fact, went on to perpetuate this image. The
British feminists adopted a paternalist and patronising stance
towards the native women. While they wished to protect
them from child marriage, sati or difficult widowhood,
domestic violence and sexual abuse, yet they could not think
of them as their equals, eligible to the same emancipated
status as them. The maximum they could visualise was a
peaceful homely environment and protection from sexual
exploitation – precisely the kind of sequestered life from
which the Victorian feminists were rebelling. Thus, while
the colonial legislators and the British feminists were avid
defenders of the Indian woman, they stopped short of
considering her an autonomous individual. This group which
was being championed was thought incapable of telling its
own story or constructing its own identity and hence despite
figuring so prominently in the discourse, it remained largely
invisible and silent behind the closed doors of the native
household.

*Mirat-ul Uroos* is a claimant to the distinction of being
the first novel in Urdu. While there are other works which
contend to the same title, as F B Pritchett says, “The Bride’s
Mirror may or may not have been the first Urdu novel, but it
certainly was the first Urdu bestseller” (Pritchett, 1903, p.
204). It certainly was the first literary success of Ahmad. A
notice by the Northern Provinces Lieutenant Governor no.
791 A dated August 20, 1868, announced a cash prize for
any book which “shall subserve some useful purpose, ... that
it shall be written in one of the current dialects, Oordoo or
Hindee, and there shall be excellence both in the style and
treatment” (Pritchett, 1903, p. 205). “Books suitable for the
women of India will be especially acceptable, and well
rewarded” was another condition (Pritchett, 1903, p. 205).
*Mirat-ul Uroos* won a cash prize of Rs.1000 in 1870 in
addition to a watch for its author from the Lieutenant
Governor and a recommendation for inclusion in school
curricula. After its release in 1869, within twenty years, it
went into continuous reprints with over 1,00,000 copies to
date and was also translated into Bengali, Brajbhasha,
Kashmiri, Punjabi, and Gujarati. A sequel followed in the
form of *Binaat-ul-Nash* (*The Daughters of the Bier,* a name
for the constellation Ursa Major). *Taubat-un-Nasuh* (*The
Repentance of Nasuh*) was written in 1873-74, *Fasaana-e-
and *Raya-e Sadiqah* in1892.

In 1903, translated into English by G. E. Ward as *The
Bride’s Mirror,* its subtitle reads ‘A Tale of Life in Delhi a
Hundred Years ago’. Explaining the need for this
translation, he writes, “It makes no claim to literary merit;
but since so little is known in England about the social and
domestic life of our Indian fellow subjects, an authentic
picture of one phase of it by a distinguished Muhammadan
gentleman may perhaps be not devoid of interest to the British public in general” (Ward, 1903, Translator’s Note). It is interesting to note that exactly hundred years ago from the year of the translation, an event occurred which was of equal significance to the British as well as the natives of Delhi, and which propelled the city and its people towards their appointed destiny- the occupation of Delhi by the British after their victory over the Marathas in 1803. Nazir Ahmad’s own purpose behind writing this book was to teach his own daughters and the “secluded sex” (Ahmad, 1869/1903, p.1) in general some valuable lessons of life. While he writes Mirat from this reformist perspective, the translation is made from an imperialist perspective. It affords a glimpse into the mohallas, havelis and zenanas of the Dilli which the British had neither desire nor ardour to penetrate physically. Gauri Viswanathan explains that the British sensed that an “efficient Indian administration rested on an understanding of Indian culture” (Viswanathan, 1989, p. 28). The British did not underestimate the importance of “knowledge that enabled the conquest and was produced by it” (Dirks, 1992, p. 3). This knowledge was put to use to reconstruct and transform the cultural forms of “traditional societies”. Writes Tahir Kamran,

People like William Jones, James Mill, Richard Temple, Daniel Ibbetson and host of other British administrators and scholars appropriated the indigenous knowledge. They, after recasting the acquired knowledge of the colony in the light of their epistemic understanding and cultural context, imparted it back to the indigenous people. Hence, colonial masters not only assumed power over the physical self of the colonised but also made them to internalise the cognitive structures rooted specifically in the western knowledge system as the Universal truth. (Kamran, n.d, p.1)

It is not just the translation which underscores the fact that the original content and intent are of no use to the British readership but its own imperialist agenda of subordinating the culture but the notice by the Northern Provinces also drives home the same point by calling for “useful books” (Naim, 1984, p. 290). These “useful” books were to be of “approved design and style”, “in any branch of science or literature” and of “some useful purpose, either of instruction, entertainment or moral discipline” (Naim, 1984, p. 290). All three injunctions are quite telling from the point of view of cultural engineering being undertaken through them. The very word “useful” is a gift of the utilitarian ethics and it is this emphasis on utility which drives a wedge in the knowledge spectrum in the form of science (ilm) versus literature (adab). The introduction of western section in institutions like Delhi College where the western got identified with scientific and oriental with literary made this distinction formal. This sense of usefulness was informed on the one hand by the Utilitarian ethics mandating social and practical measurability of ideas and actions and on the other, by pure economics on the part of the Indians who realised that Arabic and Persian Studies will no longer yield dividend the way accountancy and technical skills will. Mirat seems to posit a kind of an Islamic version of the Protestant ethic of embracing socially useful and productive work, frugality, morality, responsibility and sobriety as rubrics of ideal conduct. As Susie Tharu perceptively points out that a “totally new sense of responsibilities and social function of literature and literary study” were grafted onto the hitherto self justified creative enterprise (Tharu, 2000, p.16). While the patronage of the arts was till now with the aesthetically inclined kings and aristocracy, the notice announced with no uncertainty that it has now passed into the hands of the British who now have the power not only to approve and disapprove ideas but also to propagate and disseminate them through their administrative and educational outfits.

The “approved design and style” impacted the language and imagination of the native who forsook its oral traditions in favour of the written ones. The entry sought by the Government of Northern Provinces was to be in the vernacular medium, that is, “Hindee or Oordu”, which could form a part of the syllabus especially suitable for girls. The outreach of the vernacular medium was, of course, to the less privileged, who could be more effectively governed, if colonially mediatised ideas were drilled into them in a cost effective medium. The vernacular medium remained the medium of education at the elementary level while English was accessible and affordable only to those who could be culturally mutated to serve the colonial cause. The British concept of the vernacular in North India was of ‘Hindustani’ which was simplified Urdu generally spoken by the masses across religions and classes. John Gilchrist commissioned original or translated works in Urdu at the Fort Williams College established in Calcutta in 1800 for training the young British employees of East India Company in the vernacular without which, he felt, its widespread Indian possessions could not be effectively managed. Though initially Fort Williams College, Calcutta, undertook mass translation and creative work but it was soon felt that a more convenient method was to reap benefits from the Indian crop of literates and use them to create less problematic and more pliable subjects. Fort Williams College Urdu achieved what it never aimed to achieve- a loosening of the Urdu tongue in speech patterns which got formalised from their orality into gentrified prose (Russel, 1992, p. 86). For the Muslims, this development was fortunate because the patronage extended by the British to Urdu not only ensured Muslim political and cultural ascendancy over numerically greater Hindus, but it also offered them an opportunity to turn over a new leaf from their stagnating Persian heritage. Though Ghalib is seen as the epitome of the Urdu fineste, yet we also know how Ghalib struggled to keep his expression complex so as not to become pedestrian and he produced an equal body of work in the Persian language. This typifies the position of the Urdu language in the cultural matrix of the nineteenth century Dilli society. In order to make Hindustani the official medium of administration, the British zealously sought homogenisation and standardisation for convenience and uniformity. In the process, not only did they kill the innumerable regional variants but also many regional dialects and languages.

Punjab offers an eminent example in this regard where Urdu was foisted as a “common vernacular” or lingua franca
marginalising Punjabi language and Punjabi speaking rural folks to the margins of society. The Punjab administration working in Urdu imported Urdu speaking professional middle class from other regions, thus completing the alienation of Punjabi. This preferential treatment to one language over a host of others bred conflict and identity politics among hitherto co-existing languages like Urdu-Hindi-Punjabi in Punjab. Similarly, it led to the crystallisation of Urdu and Hindi as separate linguistic identities from what was till now a healthy amalgam. Their polarisation got completed in the separatist religious discourse of the 20th century. Urdu became the cultural symbol to substantiate the claim for an independent Muslim state. The Nastiliq script, visually similar to the script of the Quran, was promoted to secure the status of Urdu as the language emblematic of Islam. The same process was replicated in Hindi where it was forced to search for a modern, relevant identity by severing its ties with Urdu, privileging the KhoiB version, using the Devnagari script and modelled on English expression, introducing linguistic patterns appropriate to scientific and intellectual expression. For Hindi, in other words, coming of age, in the shadow of English and Urdu, was a more tortuous ordeal but it found support from the increasingly literate and powerful Hindu intelligentsia. In fact, the clamour from this group resulted in the withdrawal of unilateral patronage to Urdu by the British first in Bihar and then in the Northern Provinces. As Tariq Rahman (2011) points out, the processes of Sanskritization for Hindi and Arabization for Urdu became indexical markers for contrasting religious identities (Rahman, 2011, p. 1-40). Thus, Urdu was first appropriated as the “common language” for purposes of British administration, then it became the rival language to the regional vernacular and finally, it emerged as the Muslim language.

From their advent in India to 1784, the East India Company had a pragmatic language policy since its primary aim was to transact amicably with the indigenous people. In order to fulfill this objective, the University of Oxford instituted a professorship of Persian Studies for the “cultivation of the Persian tongue, as a useful attainment in such persons as are designed for the service of the East-India company” (Rahman, 2004, p. 6). With the 1784 Pitt’s India Act, however, when the Company came under the control of the British crown, the administrators came to espouse a more Anglicist policy and Bentinck’s English Education Act of 1835 cleared coast for English becoming the colonial administration’s official medium, “endorsing a new function and purpose for English instruction in the dissemination of moral and religious values” (Viswanathan, 1989, p. 44). Macaulay, the vehement champion of Anglicist policies, in his 1835 A Minute on Education, emphasized that to minimize expenditure on education in India, the Crown must choose English over the vernacular mediums. Thus, efficient management of resources necessitated the incorporation of the native in the English language regime and keeping up bilingual systems or cultivation of indigenous languages was seen to cause an unwarranted strain on the resources:

I feel...that it is impossible for us, with our limited means, to attempt to educate the body of the people. We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population. (Macaulay, 1835, para 34)

This policy bifurcated the Indian populace into two- the interpreters or the elite with English language proficiency, and the receptors or the non-elite who could be manipulated through the former (Durrani, 2012). In the same Minute, he raises a banner to “strike at the root of the bad system” by discontinuing the publication of Arabic and Sanskrit books and by shutting down the religious schools of learning (Macaulay, 1835, para 35). Thus, Macaulay’s language preference is implicated in his prejudice against indigenous languages and institutions as the suppression of Arabic and Sanskrit also amounted to the suppression of Islam and Hinduism. With the privileging of the English Language, colonial and missionary education received a fillip automatically. This “British strategic colonising mission” hinged on a language ideology which bracketed language, thought and behaviour together (Durrani, 2012, p. 32). It was hoped, on the one hand, that the interpreter class of English speakers will imbibe British viewpoints and follow the associated cultural traditions as a natural corollary, but more importantly, on the other hand, it was required that by beginning to think like the native English speakers, they then stay loyal to the Crown (Durrani, 2012). The immediate Muslim response to English education is embodied in the religious edict, or fatwa, of Shah Abdul Aziz (1746–1823) in which he declares that there is nothing wrong with Muslims learning English per se as long as it is not used for obsequious purposes (Rahman, 2002). As Aziz’s fatwa could be construed variously, so while some Muslims families saw it as a circumscription, others saw it a good opportunity. It was treated as a windfall by what Aijaz Ahmad calls “a new kind of petty bourgeoisie who was violating all established social norms for its own pecuniary ends” (Ahmad, 1992, p. 116). Nazir Ahmad easily falls into this class as he received education at Delhi College, obtained working knowledge of the English language, found employment in British government departments and earned awards and titles like ‘shams-ul-ulema’ from the government. The impact of language learning on cultural subjectivity is visible throughout in Mirat.

The phrase “some useful purpose, either of instruction or entertainment or mental discipline” opens a more complicated colonial discourse. M. Asaduddin traces the birth of the Urdu novel by demonstrating how the rambling, phantasмагorical and primarily Islamic world view of the duostaan gradually yielded to the realist, individualist and moralist world view of the European novel. The flat characters of the duastaans became more and more defined
from their socio-economic and psycho-intellectual locations. Nazir Ahmad’s *Mirat* is a claimant to the contested title of the first novel in Urdu language but generally it is recognised to be a proto-novel or a novel by default because Ahmad did not set out to write a novel but his work ended up having many novel-like features (Asaduddin, 2001). This is because, while writing his tale, Ahmad adopted quite a few devices in order to make it eligible for favourable British consideration. First and foremost, it is written in a straightforward fictional form. The setting is naturalist like the European novel. The language is credible and accessible with quite a bit of the story unfolding through the dialogue mode. One immediately noticeable quality of this work is its robust narration and colloquial diction of the *begamati zubaan*—the Urdu spoken in the *zenana* of houses to great effect. The authorial omniscient voice of the *daastaan* narrator takes a backseat and there emerge a multiplicity of voices speaking in character and verisimilitude. The Fort Williams College had already popularised the no-frills Urdu. This Urdu, though derided by purists at Delhi and Lucknow, became the preferred medium by the British, the periodicals, the printing and publication houses in Lucknow like the Britannica or Delhi Renaissance (q.v. Mittal, 2013). The initial 75 founders of the Indian National Congress as well later members and Gandhi himself were among English-educated Indians, that is, qualitatively no different from Macaulay’s interpreters or translators, but they learned to use the discursive tools and acculturation produced from English language not to accept but to protest the colonizer’s subjugation. Nazir Ahmad, however, predates this role reversal and subversion of the imperialist ideology as he lived in the calm before the storm in what is called the Pax Britannica or Delhi Renaissance. The initial experience of colonial intervention translated into the earliest phase of Indian engagement with modernity which consisted in the simplistic recasting of the indigenous cultural identity in the image of the political victor. As political victory was pitched as the touchstone of cultural superiority, hence imitation of the victor and repudiation of the loser through criticism and reform became the thumb rule for early modernity. Nazir Ahmad’s *Mirat*, therefore, makes for an interesting study in the context of Delhi city both as a predecessor to the more popular and accessible *Twilight in Delhi* which is poised at a later phase where the Muslim native is compelled and equipped to question its compromised identity as well as for the nugget of cultural history embedded in it that quite distinctly is the “dawn” which catches the somnolent erstwhile ruling elite and culturally decadent gentry off guard by springing the unholy surprise of colonialism, modernity and westernization.

**REFERENCES**


