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Print Capitalism: Rise of the Muslim Indian National Consciousness and Muslim Women's Education in Colonial India

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Abstract

Benedict Anderson connects the rise of print capitalism to the rise of nationalism in Europe as well as in the colonies. Print capitalism and nationalism shared a similar relationship in the Indian subcontinent too that remained a British colony for almost 200 years, from 1757 to 1947. Employing Deputy Nazir Ahmad's novel, Mir'āt al-'Urūs *(1869), I argue that the introduction of print capitalism proved crucial to the rise of Muslim national consciousness and for Muslim women's education to redefine their sociopolitical role in the new Muslim imagined community under British colonization. Print capitalism, via the possibility of mass-produced books like* Mir'āt al-'Urūs*, transformed the Muslim national imagination by making Indian Muslims a community in anonymity. I offer this new reading of* Mir'āt al-'Urūs *to trace the interaction of print capitalism, Muslim national consciousness, and new roles for Muslim women in colonial India.*

Keywords

print capitalism, nationalism, Muslim Indian national consciousness, imagined communities, women's education.

In his celebrated book *Imagined Communities*,[1] Benedict Anderson connects the rise of print capitalism to the rise of nationalism in Europe as well as in the colonies. Anderson notes that the "explosive interaction between a system of production and productive relations (capitalism), a technology of communications (print), and the fatality of human linguistic diversity" made possible the "emergence of the new imagined national communities."[2] Print capitalism and nationalism shared a

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[1] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991 [1983]).

[2] Ibid., 42.

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similar relationship in the Indian subcontinent too that remained a British colony for almost 200 years, from 1757 to 1947. Employing Deputy Nazir Ahmad's (d. 1912) novel, *Mir'āt al-'Urūs* (The Bride's Mirror) (1869),[3] I argue that the introduction of print capitalism proved crucial to the rise of Muslim national consciousness and for Muslim women's education[4] to redefine their sociopolitical role in the new Muslim imagined community under British colonization. Building on two previous readings of the novel by David Lelyveld and Masood Raja, I offer this new reading of *Mir'āt al-'Urūs* to trace the interaction of print capitalism, Muslim national consciousness, and women's place in it in colonial India.

Focused on the plight of Muslim Indian characters and culture under British colonization, *Mir'āt al-'Urūs* has traditionally been read as a novel addressed to the Muslim audiences. Set in Delhi, the novel aimed at training young Muslim women into becoming conscientious daughters, wives, and mothers who could perform new and effective roles in both the private and public sphere under the British rule. Employing the dichotomy of good and bad characters, the didactic novel compares two sisters: Akbarī (which literally translates as the older one) and Aṣgharī (which literally translates as the younger one). Akbarī, the spoiled first-born, is an example of bad womanhood; she is selfish, disrespectful, irresponsible, and most importantly, uneducated. Unlike Akbarī, Aṣgharī is the perfect Muslim feminine ideal incarnated; she is respectful, skillful, responsible, and most importantly, educated. Despite being only thirteen years old, Aṣgharī's education (i.e., her ability to read, write, and do arithmetic) helps her manage her house budget, run a neighbourhood school for girls from *sharīf* Muslim families, and guide her husband in finding a suitable job in *kachahrī* under the British government. Ahmad deliberately employs the didactic fable form to associate bad womanhood with lack of education and associates successful womanhood with education and knowledge. Print capitalism, via the possibility of mass-produced books like *Mir'āt al-'Urūs*, changed the Muslim national imagination by making Indian Muslims a "community in anonymity."[5] I place my discussion of *Mir'āt al-'Urūs,* arguably the first novel in Urdu language, within the larger history of arrival, establishment, and impact of the printing press in India.

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[3] Nazir Ahmad, *Majmū'ah-i Dipṭī Nadhīr Aḥmad* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2004).
[4] Education, in this paper, means the ability to read, write, and do Arithmetic—which is an upgrade to the religious and Qur'ānic education current at that time.
[5] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 36.

Aninidita Ghosh notes that initial reasons for printing in the Indian subcontinent were religious.[6] However, later administrative and academic needs of the East India Company resulted in the proliferation and capitalization of print culture in India. The East India Company needed to print its codified rules and regulations to "train civil servants" and "provide a wider audience for British Orientalist scholars."[7] But it was only after "the indigenous enterprises" established their printing presses with "commercial motives" that printing presses turned into a lucrative industry.[8] The language that the British introduced and the technology to produce the works in it—the printing presses—also gave rise to a lucrative native print culture because the Indians, who earlier worked with the British printing machines, started their own printing presses.

Shifting from the earlier "functional role" of printing presses,[9] indigenous presses started printing in vernacular languages to cater to the local tastes and popular demands of the masses. Availability of print sidelined the great master languages (like Latin and Arabic) and replaced them with dominant vernacular (like Urdu) that became languages of power of a different kind from old administrative vernaculars.[10] Though "educational literature, almanacs, mythology, Hinduism," and "ephemeral pamphlet literature" that included "sensational romances, dramas, erotic poems and songs," were the most published genres, indigenous presses particularly competed to print the most popular "recreational literature" in vernacular.[11] Presses in Battala, which was "the heart of the vernacular market," surpassed the collective number of publications from other "respectable" presses.[12] These works were adapted from preprint literary traditions and used "earthy and idiomatic colloquial," in complete opposition to "standard, desirable literature."[13]

Ghosh highlights that the proliferation of print culture collided with the earlier Indian "preprint" cultures of "orality" and the "preprint

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[6] Aninidita Ghosh, "An Uncertain 'Coming of the Book': Early Printing Culture in Colonial India," *Book History* 6 (2003): 23–55.

[7] East India Company was an English trade group and one of the strongest British enterprises that was formed to establish and extend the trade with Indies; but it ended up trading only with India and Portuguese. Gradually, the company grew so powerful that it turned India into a British colony.

[8] Ghosh, "An Uncertain 'Coming of the Book,'" 26.

[9] Ibid., 31.

[10] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 45.

[11] Ghosh, "An Uncertain 'Coming of the Book,'" 28.

[12] Ibid., 31.

[13] Ibid.

literature communities."[14] These "collisions and negotiations" between two opposing forces, "orality and print," gave way to "Indian commercial vernacular publishing" that resulted in an appropriation of the printing language and new writing styles, prosaic writing being one among them.[15] This combination of oral and print story-telling styles is also evident in *Mir'āt al-'Urūs* as Ahmad constantly addresses his readers to capture their attention as well as guides them through the plot of the novel. This "vernacularizing thrust of capitalism"[16] led to a gradual amalgamation of Western and Indian writing styles, resulting in new patterns and styles of writing. Indian elite literati and British colonizers strived to "cleanse and standardize [this] untidy colloquial" of the natives to introduce a standard language in which books about history, culture, and prose could be printed for the general readers.[17] Such was the growth of print industry that within four years (from 1853 to 1857), the number of published books doubled from 303,275 to 571,670 in Calcutta. Print capitalism resulted in cheaper paper and "competitive printing markets," which made the books incredibly inexpensive and affordable for masses.[18] This brief detour into the history of print in India establishes that prose fiction quickly became a popularly accepted genre. Due to this changed political climate, Muslim writers in particular focused more on the "utilitarian paradigm" of literary production, with less of an "aesthetic emphasis."[19] Thus, it is the perpetuation of local knowledge and customs as well as the coverage provided by the native newspapers and novels that eventually become crucial to the rise of Muslim Indian national consciousness and popularized Aṣgharī as a role model for Muslim women in colonial India. Overall, print capitalism made the novel *Mir'āt al-'Urūs* widely accessible to Muslim communities in India.

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[14] Ibid., 25.

[15] "Vernacular production was split between Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi, and Pashto . . . 77.74 percent of the books printed were in vernacular." Robert Fraser, *Book History through Post Colonial Eyes: Rewriting the Script* (London: Routledge, 2008), 73; Ghosh, "An Uncertain 'Coming of the Book,'" 25.

[16] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 36.

[17] The largest number of Indian publications was in the genres of "educational literature," "mythology," "Hinduism," and "fiction" comprising "sensational romances, dramas, erotic poems, and songs." "Western system of punctuation, paragraphs and versification" was also incomprehensible to the Indian readers. Ghosh, "An Uncertain 'Coming of the Book,'" 28, 38.

[18] Ibid., 30.

[19] Masood Raja, *Constructing Pakistan: Foundational Texts and the Rise of Muslim National Identity 1857–1947* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 74.

Anderson enumerates two forms of representation of "imagined community that is the nation": the newspaper and the novel.[20] The "rise of journalism was directly related to the development of prose,"[21] which was the most radical impact of print in the nineteenth century.[22] Hence, both newspaper and novel were inherently commercial. Anderson maintains that the date of publication and the varied juxtaposition of stories on the pages of a newspaper helped people "think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others" through an act of imagination and national consciousness.[23] Thereby, in the process of reading the daily newspaper, the reader also gets connected to a large community of readers who all form part of an imagined nation. Same is true for the novel, which is an "extreme form of the newspaper."[24] Novel, because of print capitalism, proved crucial to the creation and sustenance of Muslim national imagination in colonial India.

As opposed to the "obsolescence of the newspaper on the morrow of its printing,"[25] novel had a "permanent form, capable of virtually infinite reproduction, temporally and spatially."[26] Furthermore, a book, i.e., a novel, "prefigures the durables of our time" as a "distinct, self-contained object, exactly reproduced on a large scale" and "sold on a "colossal scale."[27] Reportedly, "two thousand copies [of *Mir'āt al-'Urūs*] were acquired to be distributed to English schools; a hundred thousand copies were sold over the next few years."[28] The cultural influence of *Mir'āt al-'Urūs* was so profound that it replaced *Bihishtī Zaivar* (Heavenly ornament) as the guidebook for Muslim women and their responsibilities towards their families and towards their national community.[29] While *Bihishtī Zaivar* was more patriarchal and exclusionary, *Mir'āt al-'Urūs* was more progressive, one might even say relatively more feminist, in its

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[20] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 24–25.
[21] Ali Jawad Zaidi, *A History of Urdu Literature* (New Delhi: Sahitya Academy, 1993), 214.
[22] Vinay Dharwadekar, "Print Culture and Literary Markets in Colonial India," in *In Language Machines: Technologies of Literary and Cultural Production*, ed. Jaffrey Masten, Peter Stallybrass, and Nancy Vickers (London: Routledge, 1997), 112.
[23] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 33–36.
[24] Ibid., 34.
[25] Ibid., 35.
[26] Ibid., 44.
[27] Ibid., 34.
[28] Margrit Pernau, *Ashraf into Middle Classes: Muslims in Nineteenth Century Delhi* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 357.
[29] *Bihishtī Zaivar*, written by Ashraf 'Alī Thānavī (d. 1943), was aimed at Muslim girls' education to make them into better wives. The book used to be a part of Muslim women's dowry so they could use it as a guidebook to learn about their wifely responsibilities and navigate their marital lives.

stance on women's education and their role in the private and public sphere. Ahmad himself gifted *Mir'āt al-'Urūs* to his daughter in her dowry "as a jewel of a great price."[30] The novel, for example *Mir'āt al-'Urūs*, provides multiple "sociological organisms" (i.e., characters like Aṣgharī and Kāmil) that "move calendrically through homogenous, empty time"—just like a nation which is a "solid community moving steadily down (or up) history."[31] The book has the power to shape an experience "by millions of printed words into a 'concept' on the printed page, and in due course, into a model"[32] by connecting the "interior time of the novel" to the "exterior time of the readers' everyday life"—hence, giving the readers "a hypnotic information of the solidity of a single [national] community."[33] In other words, when one reads the exploits of "the solitary hero" or other characters in a novel set in "a sociological landscape" and a "timescape," one also, in the process, thinks of them as part of the national "imagined community." *Mir'āt al-'Urūs* provides both micro (inside the house) and macro (in *kachahrī)* view of this calendrical time in which the Muslim nation was moving under the British rule. Ahmad presents a model of Muslim community in *Mir'āt al-'Urūs*, which is prescribed to be printed, distributed, and emulated by the Muslim (imagined) community in India—a process facilitated by print capitalism.

In addition to that, print language, Anderson asserts, "invents nationalism"; thus "the very idea of 'nation' is nested firmly in virtually all print languages; and nation-ness is virtually inseparable from political consciousness."[34] Vernacular print language, used by indigenous printing presses to print novels, laid the foundation of national consciousness—in the case of *Mir'āt al-'Urūs*, Muslim Indian consciousness—in three ways: it provided a medium of communication in the spoken vernacular (i.e., Urdu); it gave "a new fixity to language"; and it made vernacular languages "formal models to be imitated, and where expedient, consciously exploited."[35] This newly introduced administrative vernacular and language of "loyalism" held "central ideological and political importance" and "aimed at creating a space for the Muslims in the British system of power."[36]

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[30] Frances W. Pritchett, "Afterword [to *The Bride's Mirror*]: The First Urdu Bestseller," 2004, http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00fwp/published/txt_mirat_intro.html. 205.
[31] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 26.
[32] Ibid., 80.
[33] Ibid., 27.
[34] Ibid., 135.
[35] Ibid., 44–45.
[36] Raja, *Constructing Pakistan*, 74; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 67.

Jennifer Dubrow argues that early vernacular novel arose in India because of its "ability to hold divergent points of view" to "explore irreconcilable problems under the colonial rule."[37] Dichotomous characters in these novels were particularly suitable for engaging in the "challenges and contradictions of the colonial period."[38] Though Dubrow acknowledges the cosmopolitan form of Urdu novels, she repeatedly contends that religion was not a part of Urdu writers' identity.[39] But *Mir'āt al-'Urūs* evidences that Muslim writers combined their modern and Islamic identities in their writing. In fact, Ahmed, by targeting a female audience as the reader of *Mir'āt al-'Urūs* and as agents within both the private and public sphere, offers a break from exclusionary epistemological practices within Islamic intellectual tradition.[40] Quoting Frederick Jameson's *Political Unconscious* (1981), Dubrow also asserts that reading a novel is "a socially symbolic act, as the ideological—but formal and immanent—response to a historical dilemma."[41] Hence, print capitalism made novel into an effective vehicle in making Indians—in this case Indian Muslims—comprehend their new social, political, and cultural place and altered roles in the colonial India under British Raj.

Overall, the shift of focus from a colonial experience to the national experience occurred because of three factors.

1. Industrial capitalism increased the physical mobility via railway (In his preface to *Mir'āt al-'Urūs*, Ahmad devotes three paragraphs to railway system in India).
2. The colonial state or corporate capital needed "armies of clerks," which birthed what David Lelyveld terms the *kachahrī* milieu.
3. "Spread of modern style education"[42] by colonial state and private religious and secular organizations, which brings our focus on the Aṣgharī's education and school, and then shifts in Kāmil's educational focus.

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[37] Jennifer Dubrow, "A Space for Debate: Fashioning the Urdu Novel in Colonial India," *Comparative Literature Studies* 53, no. 2 (2016): 289, https://doi.org/10.5325/complitstudies.53.2.0289.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Dubrow, *Cosmopolitan Dreams: The Making of Modern Urdu Literary Culture in Colonial South Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. 2018), 2, 11, 13.

[40] For further reading on constructive Islamic feminist ethics, read Zahra Ayubi, *Gendered Morality: Classical Islamic Ethics of the Self, Family, and Society* (Columbia University Press, 2019).

[41] Dubrow, "A Space for Debate," 291.

[42] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 115–16.

Though the first *revelation* in Islam preaches universal education for all human beings, Muslim women's education was not a norm in the rigidly gendered colonial India—a situation which was further exacerbated by Muslim traditions of *pardah* (veiling) and *zanānah* (inner apartments of a house reserved for the women of the household in the Indian subcontinent).[43] The situation was so deplorable that it was difficult to find even a hundred literate women in a city as big as Delhi.[44] However, Muslim reformers and writers, like Nazir Ahmad, employed novel writing as an effective medium to propagate modern education for Muslim women in colonial India. His novel *Mir'āt al-'Urūs* has a fair number of both its defenders and contenders.

Frances Pritchett in her "afterword" to *Mir'āt al-'Urūs*'s revised English translation declares it the first Urdu best-seller. The novel received Northwest Frontier Provinces government prize in 1870 for useful works in vernacular to be included in every Urdu syllabus.[45] Matthew Kempson called *Mir'āt al-'Urūs* a work "unique of its kind,"[46] while Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah considers it "the first real novel in Urdu, and still the best."[47] However, Muhammad Sadiq favours the novel by saying that Ahmad was writing to "supply textbooks for juvenile readers" via his "thin and unequal plots" that had an "unusually slow tempo."[48] Ahmad shares his impetus behind writing *Mir'āt al-'Urūs*, "I sought a book that was didactic and prescriptive" and that could "polish women's thoughts and also use an interesting narrative style to keep the reader entertained."[49]

Given the changed political climate for Muslims in colonial India, it is unsurprising that the first Urdu novel,[50] *Mir'āt al-'Urūs*, had a "strong

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[43] Meena Bhargava and Kalyani Dutta, *Women, Education, and Politics: The Women's Movement and Delhi's Indraprastha College* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005). Muslim women received basic religious education like reading the Qur'ān and learning Persian and Arabic. This paper, however, discusses the more pragmatic English education in the colonial India.

[44] Ahmad, *Majmū'ah-i Diptī Nadhīr Aḥmad*, 797.

[45] Pritchett, "Afterword."

[46] Quoted in ibid.

[47] Shaista Akhtar Banu Suhrawardy, *A Critical Survey of the Development of Urdu Novel and Short Story* (London: Longmans Green, 1945), 25–26.

[48] Mohammad Sadiq, *A History of Urdu Literature* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1984), 410–14.

[49] Ahmad, *Majmū'ah-i Diptī Nadhīr Aḥmad*, 791.

[50] Ralph Russel claims that Nazir Ahmad should not be considered a novelist since he never claimed to be a novelist. Ralph Russel, *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature: A Select History* (London: Zed Books, 1992), 92, 112. However, he does refer to Ahmad's "novels and other writings" elsewhere. Russel, *Hidden in the Lute: An Anthology of Two Centuries of Urdu*

public imperative" of serving as "an interesting text" to propagate women's education "in the name of the betterment of the nation."[51] Ahmad's rationale for advocacy of women's education is centred around Aṣgharī's role as a wife and mother in the domestic sphere as well as her role as an advisor to her husband in public sphere. While the novel expands Muslim women's domestic and public duties, without giving them much autonomy and authority in either sphere, it was an upgrade from women's previous role where people would only consult women for matters related to cooking and clothing.[52] Via Aṣgharī, Ahmad provides a fictionalized yet realistic example for Muslim women of colonial India to inspire them to educate themselves to be better housewives for their husbands and for the imagined Indian Muslim community. Nevertheless, advocating a compromise and adaptation to the changing sociopolitical circumstances was a challenging task.

Seeking to transform Muslims' attitudes towards women's education was like shaking the whole foundation of Muslim familial life, since the "eastern ideal of female" was structured around "strict purity, seclusion, and quiet domestic duty."[53] Muslims also had a strong sense of lost identity and communal detachment because the British had ousted them from power. *Mir'āt al-'Urūs* captures these aspects of Muslim insecurities, anxieties, and desires. Saleem Akhter, commenting on Muslims' "sense of loss and inferiority complex after the fall of Mughal dynasty," notes that Nazir Ahmad was well suited to undertake the corrective plans to erase these negative effects amongst Muslims on a national level.[54] As an educationist, and religious and political reformer, Ahmad contends that the only way to carve a substantial and influential social space under the British Raj is to learn the English system. Ahmad, through his writing, makes the case that the British colonized India because they possess the critical skills and technological advancement through their education.[55] However, Ahmad had to advocate the English model of education cautiously to maintain the balance between the English education/anglicization and Muslim traditions.

Literature (New Delhi: Viking, 1995), 3. Because of this, Pritchett speculates that Russel perhaps would call Ahmad a "proto-novelist." Pritchett, "Afterword."

[51] Raja, *Constructing Pakistan*, 79.

[52] Ahmad, *Majmū'ah-i Diptī Nadhīr Aḥmad*, 801.

[53] Bhargava and Dutta, *Women, Education, and Politics*, 6.

[54] Saleem Akhter, *Urdū Adab kī Mukhtaṣar Tarīn Tārīkh: Āghāz sē 2000 tak* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2000), 4. All Urdu to English translations in this paper are provided by me.

[55] Ahmad, *Majmū'ah-i Diptī Nadhīr Aḥmad*, 804.

Anderson contends that novel shows "the movement of a solitary hero through a sociological landscape of fixity that fuses the world inside the novel with the world outside."[56] This hero, in *Mir'āt al-'Urūs*, is Aṣgharī. Expanding Anderson's idea, Masood Raja suggests that instead of a fixity, the early Urdu novel like *Mir'āt al-'Urūs* shows "the particularity of a Muslim experience in a changed political climate."[57] The novel shows the interdependence and interaction of the women's responsibilities in the private sphere in Muslim families and men's roles in public sphere in colonial India. Because of the altering socioeconomic structure, most men worked in other cities—leaving women to take care of the household expenditures and making them responsible for financial and familial matters. Aṣgharī's father works in Mountainous areas as a bookkeeper and her father-in-law is a steward to a wealthy landowner in Lahore. As a result, it became advisable for women to acquire knowledge about the world and learn arithmetic to manage their household budgets responsibly. Ahmad notes that there are two possible ways of learning for men: experiencing the world and reading books, but highlights that, because of the strict tradition of *pardah*, women can only learn and gain knowledge through reading books.[58] Within the sociopolitical logic of *Mir'āt al-'Urūs*, education is a means of reading, writing, practicing mathematics, and developing critical skills to observe the ways of the world. Since Aṣgharī is able to do all of the things listed above, she is able to manage her budget as well as make smarter household and sociocultural choices. Her education earns good reputation for Aṣgharī in the private sphere and for her husband Kāmil in the public sphere. It is noteworthy that "pre-colonial India had a wide spread system of indigenous education" but there were no schools for women.[59] Though Indians, under British colonization, went through a "transition of learning" which also involved *madrasah*s for Muslims,[60] formal education for women remained a problem because of the tradition of *pardah*.

Ahmad highlights this problem in the preface to *Mir'āt al-'Urūs* by recognizing that women's education is not customary in India. In the same preface, he invokes *ḥadīth* to quote that the Prophet (peace be on him) asked his wife Ḥafṣah to teach writing to 'Ā'ishah.[61] He

[56] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 30.
[57] Raja, *Constructing Pakistan*, 74.
[58] Ahmad, *Majmū'ah-i Diptī Nadhīr Aḥmad*, 803.
[59] Bhargava and Dutta, *Women, Education, and Politics*, 2.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ahmad, *Majmū'ah-i Diptī Nadhīr Aḥmad*, 799.

acknowledges that women coming from noble/*sharīf* families sometimes read the Qur'ān's translation, exegesis, and didactic Urdu magazines, but maintains that "only reading religious texts is not suitable for young minds."[62] He also rebuts the misperception that non-religious education would corrupt women and lead them astray from the path of righteousness and virtue. Instead, he holds readers responsible for their reading choices.[63] Ahmad exemplifies the innumerable advantages of education to argue that education makes women more sagacious, independent, and respectable who would also raise better children.[64] One could call Ahmad a backdoor feminist who is using the British education to make Muslim culture more equitable for the Indian Muslim disenfranchised i.e., women. Even the ability to read and write was an empowering element for women in that sociocultural milieu.

Since most men worked in other cities, many women had to beg other educated people to write letters to their husbands and fathers. Unlike those women, Aṣgharī herself is able to write to her father and other family members. Because of the fact that Aṣgharī is educated and sagacious, her father also trusts her and consults her for all important household decisions.[65] Similarly, when she gets married, she quickly gains the trust of her father-in-law as well. Aṣgharī's older sister Akbarī, because of being uneducated, lacks wisdom and critical observation. While Aṣgharī is esteemed for her management of the household affairs and budget, Akbarī quickly earns bad reputation for the mismanagement of her household. Transgressing the standards of propriety set for married women in the society, Akbarī sleeps in till late, keeps her hair unkempt, and dresses carelessly. She also likes to play with her dolls and toys which displeases her husband 'Āqil who deems these habits childish and petty.[66] Despite the fact that Akbarī's husband 'Āqil does not earn enough money to live independently, Akbarī forces him to leave his family and live in a separate house. But she does not possess the skills and wisdom to run the house within their budget.[67] As a final blow, Akbarī gets swindled and loses all her gold jewelry. The swindler uses miraculous and devotional stories to earn the trust of naïve women. After exploiting women's religious sentiments, she sold different exorbitantly priced items to these women, which she claimed she

[62] Ibid., 791.
[63] Ibid., 797.
[64] Ibid., 796, 800.
[65] Ibid., 810–11.
[66] Ibid., 818.
[67] Ibid., 828.

collected from the Ka'bah during her multiple pilgrimages. Eventually, she would rob women of their own precious belongings.[68] Because of Akbarī's lack of education, she lacks an understanding of the world and gets swindled. Through this consequential last example, Ahmad suggests that had Akbarī been able to read, she would have gained the skills and knowledge to see through the swindler's stories. For Ahmad, education (reading and writing) and worldly knowledge are not mutually exclusive as the novel is based on the assumption that those who are educated will read didactic and instructive texts to observe a sociopolitically shifting world and learn the ways to navigate it—which is precisely what Aṣgharī does.

Aṣgharī gets married at a young age of thirteen years to 'Āqil's brother, Kāmil, and she becomes a mother within two years. Her husband, who is still a student, is younger and more vacuous than Akbarī's husband. Aṣgharī's father-in-law earns a salary of Rs. 50—out of which he keeps Rs. 30 for himself, and sends Rs. 20 to his family. His family had to meet all their personal, familial, and social needs within that money. His wife, Aṣgharī's mother-in-law, was uneducated, did not know mathematics, and had no understanding of the worldly affairs, which left 'Aẓmat, the house maid, incharge of the entire house. 'Aẓmat heavily embezzles the money devoted to household expenditure. As a result, the family is in debt and owes money to the grocer, the washer, the cleaner, the tailor, the butcher, and the baker. Aṣgharī's sagacity, ability to read, and her arithmetic abilities help her identify embezzlements in the house expenditure. In addition to that, 'Aẓmat had also been borrowing money from the moneylender under Aṣgharī's father-in-law's name—so much money that the moneylender threatened to file a lawsuit, if not paid back on time. Coincidentally, the city government posted the cleanliness notices on the city entrances to direct city residents remove any street garbage and clean their streets. 'Aẓmat plucked the notice from the city gate and posted it on the door of Aṣgharī's house. Afterwards, he misreported to Aṣgharī's illiterate mother-in-law to tell her that the moneylender has filed the lawsuit, because of which the court has posted the litigation notice on their door. Aṣgharī's mother-in-law is devastated on the news and gets ready to sell her gold jewelry to pay the money. But Aṣgharī reads the cleanliness notice and comforts her mother-in-law by assuring her that there will be no litigation.

[68] Ibid., 830.

After taking care of the moneylender, Aṣgharī writes a letter to her father-in-law to report the status of budgetary affairs at home and asks him to visit. Upon his arrival, she shows him the grocery prices as described by ʻAẓmat. He asks his son, Aṣgharī's husband, Kāmil to do the household budget but he, because of not studying mathematics, fails to do that. Aṣgharī's father-in-law fires ʻAẓmat and makes Aṣgharī incharge of house budgets. Because of her education, Aṣgharī restores an almost shattered house of her in-laws. Aṣgharī's father-in-law applauds her for her keen eye on the accounts and the household. These incidents earn Aṣgharī the title of "*tamīzdār bahū*" which translates as the "well-mannered daughter-in-law,"[69] whereas her older sister Akbarī is called "*mizājdār bahū*" which translates as the "ill-tempered daughter-in-law."[70]

Since it was customary for well-to-do Muslim families to have maids to run errands in colonial India, this novel was relatable to Muslim households. While Ahmad's point of view might appear sexist or misogynist to the contemporary reader, his propositions about women's place and role in private and public spheres were quite revolutionary at the time he was writing. To argue for the importance of education and arithmetic for women, Ahmad writes, "Men carry the burden of heavy financial responsibilities . . . but women are the ones who manage the house budget, so men and women are like two wheels of a vehicle. If both wheels fail to work well together, the vehicle cannot function."[71] By building this narrative around an ordinary Muslim household, Ahmad responds to who contended against women education by arguing that since women did not join professional jobs, they did not need any education. Ahmad's novel argument was so successful that, after the publication of *Mir'āt al-ʻUrūs*, more Muslim men wanted to marry educated women for the prospects of a better life. But Ahmad expands the uses of education beyond personal life into professional when Aṣgharī starts running a neighbourhood educational and vocational school for girls.

Through Aṣgharī's school, Ahmad proposes a way in which Indian Muslims can modernize and adapt to the changing conditions as well as teach their own native values and traditions to the young Muslim women to transfer them to the next generations. In fact, *Banāt al-Naʻsh* (The Daughters of the Bier) (1872), Ahmad's sequel to *Mir'āt al-ʻUrūs*, is completely devoted to Aṣgharī's school, its management, and its impact on Muslim community. Talking about her school, Aṣgharī comments, "I

[69] Ibid., 854.
[70] Ibid., 816.
[71] Ibid., 794.

don't merely instruct my students in their education; I also teach them about their other social and family responsibilities which will befall their shoulders."[72] Aṣgharī's students learn reading, writing, and basic mathematics along with household skills like cooking, embroidery, budget management, and other mannerisms expected of Muslim women from *sharīf* families in India. Her pedagogy is untraditional and interesting which is why Aṣgharī's school becomes a huge success. While most people considered telling stories a waste of time, Aṣgharī helps her students expand their vocabulary and develop better speaking skills to convey their meaning more clearly by telling captivating and didactic stories. She uses riddles to sharpen her students' critical thinking and quick perception.[73] When a woman objects that Aṣgharī's students spend their whole day playing with dolls, Aṣgharī responds, "Even though these students only build and organize their doll houses and make arrangements for the weddings and other celebratory occasions for their dolls. But through these activities, they learn about the real-life house management and gets familiar with the household responsibilities."[74] Via Aṣgharī's school in *Mir'āt al-'Urūs* and then in *Banāt al-Na'sh*, Ahmad helped normalize teaching as a profession for women and demonstrated that Muslim women of *sharīf* families could get education in a safe environment, without taking any drastic risk that threatened the Muslim social and familial structure in colonial India.

Indian Muslims were divided into two social classes: *ashrāf* (higher class and respectable) and *ajlāf* (lower class and less respectable). After the 1857 mutiny, the British changed the "direct administration" which resulted in "decline in resources such as stipends, employment, and other privileges that Ashraf Muslims had enjoyed" in the Mughal rule as well as they made "changes in inheritance law and pensions"—leaving many *sharīf* Muslim families with "limited resources." Additionally, "local system of knowledge transmission in India came under extreme strain as the colonial administration entrenched itself in India."[75] While previously *pardah*-observing women were educated either by family members or visiting female teachers, increasingly that was becoming harder for Muslim *ashrāf* who had lost their previous resources and affluence under the British. Under these circumstances, proposing the idea of running a school by a *sharīf* woman was truly a helpful concept

[72] Ibid., 900.
[73] Ibid., 902.
[74] Ibid., 900.
[75] Shenila Khoja-Moolji, *Forging the Ideal Educated Girl: The Production of Desirable Subjects in Muslim South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 27.

for *sharīf* Muslims in India.[76] The British also introduced new educational institutions that provided opportunities for upward social mobility for *ajlāf* or which created a new kind of *sharīf* which included "scholars, landed elites, as well as enterprising traders and merchants."[77] While in *Mir'āt al-'Urūs*, Ahmad elevates the *sharīf* background and the need for *ashrāf* to unite by showing that Aṣgharī only accepts girls from *sharīf* families in her school, rejecting all *ajlāf* girls, and by showing that Akbarī's friendship with girls from *ajlāf* or lower-class families was also an unsuitable choice that further brought her bad reputation. In her school, Aṣgharī attempts to highlight the old *ashrāf* by teaching her students the mannerism and values of Muslim *ashrāf* class. Overall, Ahmad pens a collective Muslim national consciousness by showing that they are all an imagined community, facing the same sociopolitical challenges. To resolve these challenges, he highlights a way of education which ensured a sociopolitical space for Muslim community in colonial India while also safeguarding Muslim traditions, customs, and values. Furthermore, he inculcates an acceptance for the English in his Muslim readers to create sociocultural and political harmony.

Masood Raja uses Nazir Ahmad's novel to contend that Urdu literature "negotiate[ed] an altered political landscape within its particular Muslim context"[78] wherein *Mir'āt al-'Urūs* played a role in "articulating a particular Muslim identity" and "creating a hegemonic relationship with the British."[79] I maintain that Ahmad remarkably employs Aṣgharī's character to make the Muslim community realize this new political landscape and encourages a change of perspective about their new roles and challenges. Instead of juxtaposing Muslim women in opposition to Western women, Ahmad presents a comparison between both to show that those who are "possessed with native wisdom and who realize the changes occurring outside the domain of the zenana" are successful and respectable women.[80] Aṣgharī shares her cultural and historical knowledge, gained via vast reading, with her students to invalidate their dislike for the British government and create goodwill instead.

Aṣgharī's students, during a political conversation, argue that India has been without any ruler since the British captured the last Muslim ruler, Bahādur Shāh Ẓafar in the 1857 mutiny. But Aṣgharī counterargues

[76] Ibid., 26–27.
[77] Ibid., 24.
[78] Raja, *Constructing Pakistan*, 77.
[79] Ibid., 75.
[80] Ibid., 80.

that since the British were powerful enough to capture Bahādur Shāh Ẓafar, they are the new rulers now. Aṣgharī further explains to her students that Queen Victoria rules over India, while she lives in the Britain. Her students could not believe that a woman was capable of governing a country from thousands of miles away. To show her students that native women are also competent and wise enough to govern a country, Aṣgharī compares Queen Victoria with the Begum of Bhopal. She tells her students that just like the Begum of Bhopal manages her small state, Queen Victoria manages her vaster and much bigger government. She also elevates the rule of Queen Victoria by narrating some incidents from the history books to argue that women are equal—sometimes even better—rulers than men. While the world had seen some cruel and unjust male rulers in the world who ravaged havoc on the earth, things are mostly peaceful in Queen Victoria's governance.[81] By using these conversations, Ahmad not only responds to the misperceptions about Western women, but also helps Muslim women readers imagine themselves as members of the Muslim community. In addition to women's ability to govern, Aṣgharī also tells her students that the English women do not observe *pardah*. She also shares an example from native Indian context. Aṣgharī narrates that during the mutiny of 1857, she had to hide in a village where women did not observe *pardah*, but such was the mannerism of those women that even the *pardah*-observing women were envious of their exemplary values and impeccable character.[82] In these conversations between Aṣgharī and her students, Ahmed employs the classic politico-theological premise to recognize power as a source of legitimacy. Via these conversations, Aṣgharī not only acknowledges the British rule, hence the necessity to adapt to new sociopolitical conditions, but she also emphasizes the need for women's active political role in British India. Aṣgharī's examples also emphasize a reconsideration of performative religious rituals, like *pardah*, to instead shift the focus towards Muslim women's sociopolitical agency. These anecdotes opened the minds of Muslim readers and helped them break their own mental chains about women's potential and their role in a man's public world.

Men lived in "a big, bad world that required strength and cunning for survival," unlike women, who were expected to "stay at home from marriage to death, visited, not visiting, carried in, as the saying went, in

[81] Ahmad, *Majmūʻah-i Diptī Nadhīr Aḥmad*, 903–08.
[82] Ibid., 909.

a bridal palanquin, carried out in a coffin."[83] British commentators on Indian society complained about the "enervating and stultifying influence of the zenana on the developing character of the Indian males" which rendered them "timid, ignorant, and altogether unfit for the conduct of public affairs," notes Lelyveld.[84] *Mir'āt al-'Urūs* proposes a shift in that role of *zanānah* by inviting women to exercise power in the public sphere—which is the *kachahrī* in new political conditions in colonial India.

David Lelyveld, citing *Mir'āt al-'Urūs,* notes that men sought employment in the *kachahrī* milieu in the post-1857 socioeconomic circumstances.[85] *Kachahrī,* the cluster of administrative and legislative offices, was "a nexus for a variety of interests, some divergent, some interlocked."[86] He observes that *kachahrī* as a social milieu included people from different geographic localities having different religious and ethnic backgrounds. They shared the common vocabulary of *sharīf* culture; "all those rich resources of etiquette, ceremony, hospitality, aesthetic tastes, and kinship alliances—fictive or made palpable through marriage—were ready at hand to maintain and manipulate social relations."[87] The way to find a job, as Nazir Ahmad shows through Aṣgharī's advice to her husband, is to befriend those who held government jobs and eventually secure a job with the British government. Along with a stable government employment, these jobs in *kachahrī* had multiple other perks including options for bribes, access to revenue records, and knowledge of legal rules and regulations which became quite useful especially under the British rule. While the people in the *kachahrī* came from different geographical, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, usually they all shared a *sharīf* background. "Membership in the *kacahri* meant belonging to a wider world" whose benefits included escape from a "quarrelsome domestic situation" and involvement in "intellectual complexities of government and law" as well as "coming in contact with the wielders of power."[88] Even though the British maintained a list of people from "good families" or *sharīf* families for "appointment to higher revenue posts from naib-tehsildar on up to deputy collector," increasingly it was "difficult to rise to such

[83] David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1978), 37.
[84] Ibid., 48.
[85] Ibid., 56.
[86] Ibid., 57.
[87] Ibid., 64.
[88] Ibid., 62.

positions by starting as an apprentice clerk; one would do better to have something in the way of educational qualifications."[89] Lelyveld further maintains that after 1865, "some knowledge of English was necessary for higher levels in legal profession or judicial service" but "rigorous educational requirements" remained "very slow."[90] This required combination of a *sharīf* background and education can be traced in Kāmil's search for job in *kachahrī*.

Kāmil, Aṣgharī's husband, wasted his time slacking and playing chess with his friends—instead of focusing on his studies. He was studying Arabic which was part of the older, pre-British system of education. Aṣgharī discourages Kāmil from wasting time in playing chess and convinces him that his habits are tarnishing the family's *sharīf* reputation.[91] When Aṣgharī's father-in-law found Aẓmat's embezzlements, Kāmil had not been able to answer his father's questions related to budget and calculations. Aṣgharī, by quoting that example, argues that one cannot secure a job by getting obsolete and impractical education under the British government in colonial India. She also quotes her father saying that one cannot hope for a job unless one learns mathematics and builds a network of connections in the *kachahrī* under the British government. Muslims particularly lagged behind in English education, which also meant lack of access to new language of power.[92] Upon Aṣgharī's guidance, Kāmil starts rigorously learning mathematics as well as paying better attention to Arabic. Lelyveld asserts that Indians' decision to receive English education was tied to their decision to be involved in the *kachahrī* milieu.[93]

Researchers and scholars have enumerated the following as the contributing factors for the rise of English education under British Raj in colonial India: the British believed their language, literature, and education to be superior than the local systems; the Indians were fascinated by the English systems and wanted to emulate their progress or the idea of the European enlightenment; and the British employed the Indian who had English education. But one common feature amongst all of these readings is the promise of employment in the British administration in India.[94] Aṣgharī also advises her husband to find a job

[89] Ibid., 97.
[90] Ibid., 95.
[91] Ahmad, *Majmū'ah-i Diptī Nadhīr Aḥmad*, 886–87.
[92] Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation*, 85.
[93] Ibid., 89.
[94] Ibid.; Kumar Krishna, *The Political Agenda of Education* (New Delhi: Sage, 1991); R. K. Kochhar, "English Education in India: Hindu Anamnesis versus Muslim Torpor,"

with the British in *kachahrī.* Kāmil asked Aṣaghrī's advice on seeking some job with her father. But instead of taking favours from the father-in-law, she recommends that Kāmil should start "networking" in *kachahrī.* She suggests, "Build connections with people who hold government jobs; that way you'll be able to get updates on all the job vacancies."[95] Following Aṣgharī's advice, Kāmil starts hanging out in the *kachahrī.* Equipped with a *sharīf* family background, he has the perfect combination of qualifications, assertiveness, and now ambition to be eligible for a government job. While landowners, good lineage, and money held power, the only way to "participate in political decisions about the allocation and control of social resources was to make some accommodation with the ruling power post-1857."[96] Jobs in *kachahrī* were also important for the "distribution of wealth, power, and prestige" in British Indian society.[97] Kāmil eventually earns the trust of a British officer and starts working for him.

People in the *kachahrī* start recognizing and gradually guiding Kāmil. He starts getting small contract gigs to substitute those employees who wanted to go on leave.[98] Eventually, one of the employees whom Kāmil was substituting resigned and Kāmil got a regular/permanent government job as a log keeper for Rs. 10 per month in his place.[99] Hence, *kachahrī* offered Kāmil the opportunities to turn into "a new kind of *sharif*"[100] by learning the new language of power. When the British officer, Mr. James, is transferred to Sialkot, Aṣgharī suggests that Kāmil should move there to work with him. After some speculation, Kāmil agrees to move with the British officer for a salary of Rs. 50 per month, as opposed to his previous monthly salary of Rs. 10.

Ahmad offers a Muslim prototype in Aṣgharī and Kāmil's characters; they are able to comprehend the challenges posed to their Muslim identity in the post-1857 sociopolitical landscape. Realizing this shift, they choose to learn the language of the new power and gain English education to (re)claim their space in the new system, without sacrificing or compromising on their Muslim sociocultural values and traditions.

Economic and Political Weekly 27, no. 48 (1992): 2609–16; Syed Nurullah and J. P. Naik, *History of Education in India during the British Period* (Bombay and Calcutta: Macmillan, 1943); Syama Prasad Mookerjee, "Education in British India," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 233 (1944): 30–38.

[95] Ahmad, *Majmūʻah-i Ḏiptī Nadhīr Aḥmad*, 912.

[96] Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation*, 63.

[97] Ibid., 89.

[98] Ahmad, *Majmūʻah-i Ḏiptī Nadhīr Aḥmad*, 912.

[99] Ibid., 913.

[100] Raja, *Constructing Pakistan*, 82.

Reading the exploits of these characters in the novel, the Muslim reader in India also felt connected to others of his and her kind who all form a sort of a national community. Aṣgharī has the "performance of an ideal *sharif* subject, one who reproduces her own and her family's [and Muslim community's] social standing"[101]—she also turns her husband into that subject who exemplifies a way to adapt from the old *sharīf* to the new *sharīf*. The novel, thus, responds to perceived Muslim anxieties about the threatening changes under the British government in India. Along with that, it assures the imagined Muslim community of their shared Muslim national consciousness and proposes a way to safeguard that, while simultaneously redefining Muslim women's role in the Muslim nation. Ahmad advocates the "kind of education [prescribed via this novel] if the Muslim nation want[ed] to reclaim its status."[102] On the whole, *Mir'āt al-'Urūs* does serve the purpose, *à la* Anderson, of concretizing the Indian national experience in a given space and time. But it was print-literacy that made possible "the imagined community floating in homogenous, empty time."[103] Print capitalism made this collective Muslim national experience available to the imagined Muslim community in colonial India to make it "not merely ineradicable form human memory" but also "learn-able from."[104]

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[101] Khoja-Moolji, *Forging the Ideal Educated Girl*, 26.
[102] Ibid., 27.
[103] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 116.
[104] Ibid., 156.