CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03175-3 - Islamic Reform in South Asia
Edited by Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella
Excerpt
More information

PART I

Reformist Journeys

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03175-3 - Islamic Reform in South Asia
Edited by Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella
Excerpt
More information

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03175-3 - Islamic Reform in South Asia
Edited by Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella
Excerpt
More information

1

The Equivocal History of a Muslim Reformation

Faisal Devji

By the middle of the nineteenth century many of India's thinkers were occupied with a single task: to understand and assimilate the modernity they thought had made British rule possible. Until late in the century these efforts were made in the name of religion, with Hindu and Muslim groups founded to reform their respective faiths, and this meant that the idea of modernity had no secular history in India. In this essay I want to look at the way in which Muslim intellectuals who were part of the influential Aligarh Movement came to think about their society as something that had to be reformed and made modern (Lelyveld 1978). Named after the town in northern India that housed its most prominent institution, the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, later Aligarh Muslim University, the Aligarh Movement was also primarily a North Indian phenomenon, but one whose intellectual influence extended much beyond the borders of India. This movement was founded by a group of men who belonged to a class of professional or salaried gentry, known as the *shurafa*, which had furnished administrators to pre-colonial states and now attempted to do the same for colonial India. Sayyid Ahmad Khan, a minor aristocrat, was the founder and acknowledged leader of the Aligarh group, which called itself a party or school in English, and a movement or *tahrik* in Urdu, and whose important activities, the college apart, comprised the Muhammadan

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03175-3 - Islamic Reform in South Asia
Edited by Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella
Excerpt
More information

Educational Conference and voluminous writings, including a journal, the *Tahzib-ul-Akhlaq* or Refinement of Morals.[1]

The Aligarh Movement's efforts to modernize Muslim lives by rejecting 'superstition' and inculcating English education and Victorian forms of organization have received ample scholarly attention, though what I am concerned with here is their deeply ambivalent character, which has been little studied. For instance, long-standing attempts by reformist intellectuals to purify the Urdu language and its literature of 'contrived', 'exaggerated' and 'unnatural' forms of expression did end up changing linguistic usage, but at the same time and incongruously preserved much of the literary tradition because these men continued writing in the old way themselves.[2] Why the ambivalence of this simultaneous repudiation and preservation? In this essay I will look at the way in which Indian reformers sought to create a 'modern' Muslim society while at the same time taking pleasure in the very tradition they so vehemently criticized. Focusing on two important Urdu novels of the nineteenth century that dealt with the themes of history and modernity, I will argue that Islam's reformation was accomplished by gendering the 'bad' past in a series of complex ways. On the one hand, such a past had to be experienced and enjoyed by compelling women to speak out from within it. And on the other, this tradition had to be given up for modernity by forcing women to remain silent about it. It will be my contention that this dual gendering of the past produces its own form of pleasure as nostalgia, something that shadows the project of Muslim reform and even makes it possible as the ambivalent 'preservation' of a rejected tradition.

While many of the practices recommended by the Aligarh Movement for their modernity were common to reformers across religious lines all over India, the Muslim guise they took in the north of the country bore a distinctively historical stamp. The past that was rejected by Aligarh's gentlemen continued to haunt their modernity in the form of nostalgia. And this evocation of a lost past was so powerful that it came to characterize the whole of Urdu culture, in the process giving rise to an aesthetic of loss and melancholy that is today understood and enjoyed in music, film and literature by consumers who share neither the religion nor the language of

[1] I have written about Sayyid Ahmad Khan's notion of modernity in Devji (2007).
[2] For the politics of Urdu's literary reform, see Pritchett (1994).

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03175-3 - Islamic Reform in South Asia
Edited by Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella
Excerpt
More information

northern India's Muslims. In some ways, then, the nostalgia for a vanished history remains by far the most powerful element in the Muslim culture of this region, if only as a sign of its own suppression by Aligarh's reform movement. Although commentators and scholars have noted the aesthetic force of this melancholy since the nineteenth century, they more often than not interpreted it literally, as a consequence of the decline of Muslim power and its aristocratic culture in India. And while there might well be some truth in such a literalist reading of the phenomenon, I would like to argue that this deeply entrenched form of nostalgia serves instead as a trope by which to conceive and enjoy modernity. The novels I shall go on to analyse, therefore, do not simply take up inherited patterns of literary melancholy, but rather transform them into distinctive forms of nostalgia that have little to do with a lost past and everything to do with the founding of a modern Muslim society.

The Prostitution of History

First published in 1899 and in print ever since, Mirza Muhammad Hadi Ruswa's *Umrao Jan Ada* made the courtesan into a sign of the Muslim past. She is a figure who continues to be invoked as a sign of this past in literature, music, film and popular culture in general all over South Asia. Umrao Jan, the novel's eponymous heroine, is a retired and reformed courtesan from Lucknow, the brilliant capital of a Muslim kingdom annexed by the British shortly before the Indian Mutiny. She has lived through the events of 1857 and was uniquely placed, says Mirza Ruswa, to observe the great historical changes of her time, having associated with and performed for the grandees of the realm (Ruswa 1989: 36). The novel is her autobiography as told to Ruswa. But there is something curious both in the fact that Umrao, as woman and courtesan, is considered a good witness to history, and that her narrative can only be heard through Ruswa. Insofar as traditional histories were made up of witness reports, that is to say insofar as they could not construct the past by evidence other than witness reports, Umrao's role as witness to history is perfectly plausible. But what exactly is she witness to? Is it a history apart from herself, or her own autobiography? The answer is by no means clear, for Umrao Jan's story, while it is certainly meant to conjure up a whole past to which she is not central, at the same time expresses itself in terms of an autobiography and not the traditional witness report that had provided the main source of history writing in the past. Indeed Umrao's

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03175-3 - Islamic Reform in South Asia
Edited by Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella
Excerpt
More information

narrative has to be read through in order to grasp a past that it can only represent, in the sense of being representative of it. The verse that begins the novel's first chapter illustrates this:

> *Lutf hay kawn si kahani men?*
> *Ap biti kahun ke jag biti?* (ibid: 38)
>
> In what kind of story does pleasure lie?
> Should I relate my experiences or those of the world?

And this indicates a problematization of the old history as witness reports, or as a critique of certain witness reports by others, because the witness herself is here subordinated to her history as its object. Perhaps as a woman or courtesan, that is to say as someone traditional or even archaic, Umrao becomes a guardian of the past as secret, a secret that can only be revealed to and by Ruswa as male writer. Finally, it is Mirza Ruswa who is the historian here, while Umrao Jan herself ends up as objectified as the history she narrates; a past that can no longer be something witnessed, but instead only something elicited through and not by witnessing. In fact this mediation, this prostitution of her past, constitutes Umrao's only function, as the couplet that ends the book makes clear:

> *Marne ke din qarib hain shayad ke ay hayat*
> *Tujh se tabiat apni bahut sir ho gai* (ibid.: 268)
>
> The days for dying are perhaps nearby, for, O life
> My disposition has been sated by you.

Now although Mirza Ruswa might be the story's historian, his position as the novel's author has always been ambiguous in that he never made it clear if Umrao Jan was an actual character whose narrative he recorded, or simply a creation of his imagination. Indeed Ruswa encouraged this ambiguity in his book, which is written as a true story. And this raises the question of who can narrate the history of this new past that is objective and not bound to witness reports. Who is Umrao Jan after all? A woman; but not only a woman, a courtesan, someone who is of the masculine world but not male; someone ambiguous. We might say that a courtesan can become witness to history and as history only because the notion of an objective past shakes up old ideas of authority or renders them ambivalent. Precisely because of her structural ambiguity Umrao Jan is able both to witness an

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03175-3 - Islamic Reform in South Asia
Edited by Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella
Excerpt
More information

autonomous or objective past, and to represent it in the sense of being its site of representation, the only place where all the worlds of the past met, even if only sexually. Umrao Jan's unique position as narrator, a position to which Mirza Ruswa attributes his history's importance and novelty, lies entirely in the fact that as a prostitute she embodies a place that unites the most diverse historical experiences into a witnessing that is simultaneously, and perhaps voyeuristically, witnessed as history.

When the past is represented in and by the memoirs of a courtesan, what meaning do historical narration and reading have? Or to put it another way, what implications do the narrator's position as prostitute and her audience's position as voyeurs have for historical experience generally? Is narration a prostitution of the past, in both senses of the phrase? Is reading history erotic, or is it the same as reading pornographically? Odd questions, no doubt, but ones the novel might be made to answer. The novel, not as Umrao's magnificent depiction of a passing age, which has established her story in the first rank of Urdu literature, but as her motivation to narrate it (an explanation which prefaces the autobiography proper) and her reflections on this narrative (which conclude the novel). The novel begins with a couplet that sets a recurring theme in the book:

> *Ham ko bhi kya kya maze ki dastanen yad thin*
> *Lekin ab tamhid-e zikr-e dard-e matam ho gayen* (ibid: 15)
>
> I too used to remember such delightful stories
> But they have become the beginning of a narration
> of the pain of mourning

Taken alone this verse is quite innocuous, a typical example of the Urdu lyric's shift from superficial happiness to a philosophical sorrow. But its thematic context in the novel, and unusual reference to narration rather than experience, indicates a different purpose. On the one hand this couplet may mark a difference between the realistic historical novel and a type of prose fiction, the *dastan*, which had preceded it. On the other hand it might be distinguishing between types of historical narration, with Umrao's factual, skeptical, eminently modern history turning all previous narratives into mere stories. Indeed, such an emphasis on a new kind of truth is present throughout the novel and reformist writing in general. The only difference between our verse and the brave new world of reformed history is its identification of truth or realism with a suffering that makes the stories

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03175-3 - Islamic Reform in South Asia
Edited by Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella
Excerpt
More information

of the past delightful in comparison. The reformation's historians were all prey to nostalgia, but they seldom made the tragic connection between the inevitable pain of a colonial present and the irrecoverable stories of the past. This is why the gap between historical ideal and everyday reality rarely inspired them to irony, while for Ruswa historical narrative is nothing but ironic. So he follows his opening couplet with an account of how Umrao's autobiography came to be written, an account he calls, ironically, *shan-e nuzul*, or occasion of revelation, the technical term for the historical background of quranic verses. Ruswa's use of the phrase is at once serious (it evokes the reformist historicization of the *Quran* in particular) and ironic (in its application to the fictional narrative of a prostitute).

Umrao Jan is persuaded to relate her autobiography at a poetic gathering, where her verses are taken to be unintended appeals for narrative expression. Her first couplet is the last verse of a lyric she cannot remember:

> *Kis ko sunaen hal-e dil-e zar ay Ada*
> *Awargi men hamne zamane ki sayr ki* (ibid: 18)
>
> To whom should I relate the state of my sorrowing heart, O Ada?
> I toured the age in a state of shiftlessness

While the appeal to narration is clear here, it is expressed in the typical manner of the lyric; what is unusual is the idea of touring or contemplating (*sayr*) the age (*zamana*). The traditional poetic locations for touring were the city, the wilderness, the garden and the world, which is to say physical places. The age is not only something abstract, it is also historically distinct; indeed distinct ages were made into the objects of history for the first time by the reformers in place of the ruler or dynasty. Umrao Jan's history, therefore, is that of a new entity, and the manner of apprehending this history is touring, a curiously passive, neutral attitude. History, in other words, is something alien that is passively represented. This too is a departure from traditional historiography, one that implies a new kind of subjectivity.

Umrao Jan cannot remember the rest of her poem, or history, and the task of the gathering is to make her recall this past as an erotic secret. History, we might say, is here a reaction to loss, the alienating loss of something as large and distinct as a whole age. Soon the courtesan remembers the lyric's first couplet:

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03175-3 - Islamic Reform in South Asia
Edited by Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella
Excerpt
More information

Kabe men ja ke bhul gaya rah dayr ki
*Iman bach gaya mere mawla ne khayr k*i (ibid: 19)

Having gone to the Kaba I forgot the road to the temple
My faith was saved, my Lord did good

In the mystical tradition of the lyric the Kaba represents sterile Muslim legalism, while the temple stands for the allure of idolatry. Normally, then, the poet forsakes the Kaba for the temple. Umrao's reversal of this order implies that forgetting the alluring past at least has the advantage of saving faith in the staid virtues of the present. Given the gathering's task of historical remembrance, however, this advantage, which prevents narrative, cannot survive, and Umrao is forced by her audience to overcome her scruples and recite. She begins with a hemistich that sets the mood for another erotic poem, and for her whole history:

Shab-e furqat basar nahin hoti (ibid.: 20)

The night of separation never ends

The theme of loss here is not new, but we have seen how it is radicalized by application to the age. Having thus established the mood, Umrao recites the lyric, whose last couplet is:

Ay Ada ham kabhi na manenge
Dil ko dil ki khabar nahin hoti (ibid.: 21)

O Ada we'll never agree
Heart has no knowledge of heart.

This verse, as Mirza Ruswa points out, has two meanings. On the one hand it could be read as 'we'll never agree that a heart has no knowledge of (one's own or another's) heart'; and on the other hand, 'we'll never agree: a heart has no knowledge of a heart.' In either case it raises a problem of knowledge, and given the tenor of Umrao's previous utterances, might we say this couplet deals with the issue of historical knowledge? How can Umrao know her lost or forgotten history? How can we? The historical character of this problem is underlined when one of the participants at the gathering guesses that the couplet tells of Umrao's own experience. The

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03175-3 - Islamic Reform in South Asia
Edited by Filippo Osella and Caroline Osella
Excerpt
More information

courtesan responds to this suggestion in the fashion of traditional poetics, which does not accept personal expression:

> Whatever the personal experience, I have expressed a poetic subject (*shairana mazmun*). (Ruswa 1989: 21)

Umrao Jan is again denying the history she has hinted at and will soon begin to narrate, a history she cannot even think in the context of traditional aesthetics, and which has to be forced out of her as something completely new. After the gathering disbands, Umrao Jan, Mirza Ruswa and their host, a certain Munshi Sahib, sit down to dinner. The munshi asks Umrao to recite her couplet about touring the age once again, and when she does so, says:

> There is no doubt that your history (*halat*) must be very interesting. I've been thinking that ever since you read this end-verse. If you relate your past experiences (*sarguzasht*) they won't be without grace. (ibid.: 36)

This request, Mirza Ruswa is quick to tell us, does not indicate the traditional desire for a story, but represents a properly historical inquiry:

> Our Munshi Sahib had a great fondness for stories and tales (*qissa kahani*) from his youth. Apart from the *Thousand and One Nights* and the story of Amir Hamza, he had read all the volumes of the *Bustan-e Khayal*. There was not a novel that he had not seen. But after living for some days in Lucknow, when the excellence of the true discourse of the eloquent was revealed (to him), the flimsy stories, poetic language, and horrible, uselessly passionate speeches of most novelists ceased to appeal to him. The conversation of Lucknow's spirited people had pleased him greatly. This end-verse of Umrao Jan's had (therefore) given birth to that idea in his heart which has been indicated above. (ibid.: 36)

Umrao puts up a good deal of resistance to the munshi's idea, which derives from a theory of the spoken word as authentic historical content, but is at last forced to tell her story over the course of a few days. And Mirza Ruswa tells us that he surreptitiously transcribed her narrative, showing

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org