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The Novelist as Critic: The Disparaging Versions of Urdu Poets in Early Urdu Novels

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Abstract. This paper aims to show that the negative portrayals of the Urdu poets that figured in early Urdu novels was a manifestation of the rivalry that developed between the genres of poetry and novel in the second half of the nineteenth-century. By analysing Nażīr Aḥmad's novels Taubat-al Naṣūh (The Repentance of Naṣūh, 1874), Fasāna-e Mubtalā (The tale of Mubtala, 1885), and Mirzā Hādi Rusvā's Sharīf Zāda (The gentleman,1900), the paper seeks to demonstrate that the depictions of poets as profligate, degenerate, foppish, narcissistic, effeminate, sycophant, and idle are revelatory of the strategy adopted by the novelists to undermine the cultural appeal of poetry. This paper shows how the novelists deployed various fictional devices as powerful tools of literary evaluations. The novelists' assumption of the authority of literary critic accorded a weight to their opinion, helping them exercise censorship on classical Urdu poetry. The didactic design of the reformist novel readily accommodated the prolonged discussions of literary matters. The fluidity of literary genres in the late nineteenth-century caused by the proliferation of lithographic press in South Asia allowed novels to incorporate the elements of literary criticism. This paper also highlights the significance and inseparability of the early Urdu novel in the history of Urdu literary criticism in late nineteenth-century India. This research paper seeks to demonstrate that the marginalisation of poetry was not only linked with the emergence of novel as a new genre but also inextricably related to the cultural imperialism of the British administration in India.

Keywords. Early Urdu Novel, Urdu Poets, Urdu Literary Criticism, Nażīr Aḥmad, Mirzā Hādi Rusvā, Nineteenth-century literature.

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Introduction

The proliferation of lithographic presses in late niteenth-century North India contributed to the transformation of old genres and the growth of new ones. The rapid expansion of book trade exemplified by the success of the Naval Kishore Press created a whole range of new possibilities in colonial India (Stark, 170). The generic diversification of the printed word found inadequate the traditional classification of genres, leading to the introduction of additional categories that sought to capture the novel formations. The plenitude of the print led to what can be described as a generic confusion that made it difficult to establish unambiguous generic boundaries. For instance, a conspicuous characteristic of early Urdu novels is their proximity to the form of drama (Oesterheld 188). Since the boundaries of the novel were still not ossified and its generic expectations not clearly defined, it often found itself entering the domain of literary criticism. The literary evaluations made within the pages of early Urdu novel fulfilled the functions of literary criticism. The reformist thrust of the early Urdu novel made its didacticism conspicuous by allowing the novelist to issue strictures on literary matters. By arrogating to themselves the role of a literary critic in the prefatory matter and authorial interventions, the novelist sought to become the arbiter of literary taste. This research paper emphasises how the novelist used the weight of this authority in the rivalry that developed between various genres. This competitive spirit is most clearly visible in the attitude of the novelists to the genre of poetry in the second half of the nineteenth-century. A search for respectability for the emergent genre of novel, the creation of an identifiable readership in the market, and the patronage of the colonial state, all these factors propelled the practitioners of the novel to launch relentless attacks on Urdu poets. Because of its concerns with contemporaneity, the genre of the novel collected material from a wide range of sources such as reformist tracts and Urdu literary criticism to add to its scathing indictment of classical Urdu poetry.

Questioning the Relevance of Poetry

This section of the paper aims to explain the historical context which enabled Urdu novelists to make a scathing indictment of Urdu poets. The transition of political power in the aftermath of 1857 rebellion initiated in the Muslim intelligentsia the process of introspection and a revaluation of cultural legacy. The identification of poetry as one of the causes of the decline of Muslim sovereignty led to a reformation of the genre of poetry by Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād (1830-1910), who developed a new aesthetics based upon the British model. Criticising the excessive use of metaphors in Urdu poetry, he held the English poetics up for emulation for its realism in Āb-e Ḥayāt (The water of life, 1880). According to Āzād, the "general principles of

English writing" is that "whatever situation or inner state you write about, you present it in such a way that you cause the same feeling or the same mood to pervade the heart...as would be aroused by experiencing or seeing the thing in itself" (Āzād 89-90). Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī (1837-1914) undertook the project of poetic reformation in Muqaddama-e Shʿir-o-Shāʿirī (An introduction to poetry, 1893). Emphasising the interconnectedness of poetry and society, he advocated the reform of the principal genres of Urdu poetry as per the requirements of the age. Ḥālī attempted to remove the feelings of lust and sexual desire from ghazal, arguing for the inclusion of a variety of respectable manifestations of love (181-182). His work at the Government Book Depot in Lahore as the editor of translated books from English into Urdu increased his familiarity with a variety of books on English criticism and literature. The reformist poetics he developed for Urdu literature partly drew upon critical opinions drawn from English works (Shackle and Majeed 6). Seeking to correct the perceived degeneracy of the Urdu poetry, his Musaddas (Musaddas, 1879) laments the decline of the once powerful Muslim community. The imagery of Musaddas (1879) is borrowed from natural cycles such as the ebb and flow of tides. The abandonment of the classical theme of wine and intoxication in favour of the phenomenon of nature was hallmark of the new poetics that W.R.M. Holroyd, the director of public instruction, had suggested for Anjuman-e Punjab (Pritchett, 35-36). However, the changes wrought in the genre of poetry after its scathing indictment by the reformers were ignored by the Urdu novelists, who continued their relentless attack on the genre. The novelists levelled a barrage of charges against Urdu poetry, pronouncing its irrelevance in the colonial milieu.

Naẓīr Aḥmad (1830-1912), a novelist, schoolteacher, reformer, and translator rose to the rank of Deputy Collector in the Revenue Department in nineteenth-century British India. Naẓīr, who had also worked as a Deputy Inspector of School in the Education Department, submitted his first three novels, Mirāt ul-ʿArūs (The Bride's Mirror, 1869), Banāt un-Nʿash (The daughters of the bier, 1872), and Taubat-al-Naṣūh (The Repentance of Naṣūh, 1874), in response to the Allahabad Gazette Notification of 1868, which sought to encourage the production of "useful works" that were not "obnoxious to morality" (Naim 122-123). It is this idea of colonial morality, referred to as "an objectionable tendency" by William Muir (1819-1905), then lieutenant governor of the North Western Provinces, that informs the book (N. Aḥmad The Repentance xi). The colonial project of the purification of reading taste of Indians was a prominent concern in the second half of the nineteenth-century. His third Urdu novel, Taubat-al Naṣūh (1874, The Repentance of Naṣūh) dramatizes the clash between the titular protagonist's relentless enforcement of a new moral regime in the household and the defiance of his eldest son Kalīm, an embodiment of the so-called perils of poetry. In his analysis of the sharīf culture, David Lelyveld documented that chess, pigeon-flying, kite-flying, and poetic competitions were some of the activities of pure pleasure which were essentials of growing up sharīf (Lelyveld 44-55). Kalīm's

assertion of his achievements in the art of poetry needs to be viewed in this historical context. However, this model of sharāfat came under severe criticism after the loss of Mughal sovereignty in 1857, which entailed the defeat of their cultural norms. In Nażīr's novel, the description of the Indian state of Daulatabad as a place full of flatterers and degenerate courtiers provides the context for Kalīm's travel to the state. The comparison of the state to "a minor Lucknow" and references to its maladministration are cited as a justification for the British intervention (N. Aḥmad, Taubat 230). The news of the dismissal of courtiers by the new administration set up by the Resident in Daulatabad before the arrival of Kalīm in Daulatabad has already been shared with the readers of the novel. The device of dramatic irony in this episode brings out the naivete of the poet who is completely detached from the reality of a new dispensation and its criterion of evaluating the worth of literature. This oblivion to a changed political reality makes him the object of ridicule:

> If you are not interested in praise and eulogy then this (yours truly) is an expert in versifying the themes of the pleasures of success in love, of pangs of separation from the beloved, of the excitement of waiting and desire, of coquetry and gallantry, of disillusionment, of expressing in quatrain, of double entendre of names in verse, of riddles, of the meeting of lovers, of incorporating another's line in one's own verse and building on it, of evaluation, of battles and of socializing, of simile and of metaphor, of comparisons, of portrayals, in short of all types of subjects. (N. Aḥmad The Penitence 171).

The satirical treatment of the poet in this scene conceals the poet's acute sense of exilic marginality created by the denial of employment under the new dispensation. However, the depiction of the marginalization of the poet does not draw the readers' sympathy owing to the recurrence of the negative associations of poetry. In this episode, the portrayal of poets as parasitical on the wealth of the noblemen and state prevents the readers from empathising with his miserable plight. In this quotation, the poet's statement of his versatility to compose in different poetic forms is viewed as his readiness to please his prospective employer. His description of his job profile as an eulogist of the privileged is an instance of the reductive definition of the poet. Kalīm's declaration that the pursuit of fame and wealth is his sole objective strips poetry of its essence and significance.

The identification of poetry with sycophancy and reference to its patronage as a waste of resources can be understood by looking at the lack of support for poets in the aftermath of 1857. The revenue-free grants endowed to the poets by Indian rulers had reduced considerably. It is in this changed socio-economic context that Nażīr referred to poets as the rich men's panegyrists in his 28 December 1888 lecture (B. Aḥmad Lekcharoñ 1: 58). The ridicule of the poet's dependence on the court is also attributable to the

increasing independence of the author from royal patronage as a result of the creation of a market-oriented economy after the introduction of print technology in India. The undermining of court patronage can also be linked to the attempt of the colonial state to eliminate allegiance to the Mughal nobility. Since Nażīr Aḥmad was a recipient of British patronage in his early career as a novelist, the role of the colonial state in the emergence of novel as a genre of modernity is worthy of scholarly investigation (Naim 120-150). The necessity to realise the changed political scenario is also perceptible in Nażīr's definition of poetry as the amusement of the prosperous (B. Aḥmad Lekcharoñ 1: 58). His statement that "there are neither such opulent men nor such leisure as was available in the past" ("ab nā pehle se amīr rahe nā agli si faraġhateñ") associates poets with the world that belongs to the past, feeding into the configuration that emphasizes the newness of the novel (my trans. B. Aḥmad LekcharoñL 1: 58). The dramatization of the clash between Urdu poetic tradition and colonial modernity is represented by Kalīm's defiant adherence to tradition and his complete disregard for the exigencies of colonialism. The titular protagonist's contempt for Kalīm's taste for poetry and literary accomplishments is indicative of a cultural change brought about by the colonisers.

Kalīm's inability to find a berth for himself in this city after British intervention is suggestive of an imperial arrogance towards a poetic vocation so cherished by Indians. This episode in the novel highlights the irrelevance of poetry under the colonial dispensation. The narrow utilitarian principles of the British administration are invoked to emphasize the uselessness of poets. This overwhelming feeling of the outdatedness of poetry became manifest in an environment when the ʿulūm (learnings) that did not address the exigencies of time were pronounced useless by Indian Muslim reformers (Ḳhān 25). Nażīr's assertion that poetry made no contribution in the development of community and nation is attributable to a pervasive sense of defeatism that characterised the assessment of Urdu classical literature in the second half of the nineteenth-century (B. Aḥmad Lekcharoñ 1: 57). Muslim reformers' frantic exercise of soul-searching, self-flagellation, and deep introspection identified indulgence in poetry as one of the causes of the decline of Muslim community, making the poet a scapegoat for the decline of Muslim kingdoms.

The Character and Gender of the Urdu Poet

The prefaces of novels are often treated as important statements in the history of literary criticism. Nażīr's disparagement of poetry reappears in the preface to Fasāna-e Mubtalā (the tale of Mubtalā, 1885): "Hamāre yahāñ ki shʿārī mein ʿishq bāzī aur bad tehzībī ke sivā hai kyā- Sharīf ḳhāndānoñ ke naujavān laṛke akṡar isi maktab se ḳharābī ke lachhan sīkhte..." ("What is there in our poetry but flirtation and uncivilized chatter. The young boys of respectable families often learn corrupt manners from this school") (N.

Aḥmad Fasāna 11). The novelist objects to the inclusion of the study of poetry in school syllabi, where students are made to learn by heart the subjects the mere mention of which can prove to be ruinous for young boys. In schools, they toil so hard to commit it to memory that it becomes an inherent part of their mental constitution (N. Aḥmad Fasāna 12). The description of poetry as infectious betrays the anxiety of the novelist regarding the influence and popularity of this genre. In the preface, the author issues a warning to the readers that exposure to poetry is enough to develop a taste for it, which can prove ruinous for the young. The author deploys the suggestion of a cankerous disease to articulate a profound concern for the future of the young generation. Nażīr's argument for the reform of education to forge a new character for the Muslim community is a movement away from poetry. The primary concern of Nażīr's early novels was the development of suitable textbooks for girls. In Fasāna, the reformation of education entails the exclusion of poetry from schools.

The technique of characterisation is governed by the didactive design of the novel. The portrayal of Mubtalā in the novel is aimed at revealing the dangers of poetry. By looking at the penname Mubtalā, the narrator conjectures that the poetry he would have recited in his adolescence must have been on the beauty of style, coquetry, and elegance (N. Aḥmad Fasāna 11-12). The exposure of young boys to the amorous subject of Urdu poetry was a cause of major concern. In Fasāna-e Mubtalā, the action of the novel is frequently paused to allow for an elaboration of Nażīr's views on the perils of poetry. The authorial interventions and address to the readers together with the preface enable the novelist to build a strong case against poetry. The eponymous protagonist's attraction to poetry is shown as a step in the trajectory of his moral decline inherent in the plot of the novel. It is a fatal flaw in his character that makes him enamoured of a courtesan. The image of the poet as a profligate is established in the invocation of the figure of courtesan, whose expulsion from the respectable world of the Indian middle-class was related to the project of respectability. This cautionary tale about Mubtalā's ruin appears to be drawing an unconscious link between the temptations of poetry and Haryālī, a courtesan, whose poetic and conversational skills cast a spell on the protagonist: "Uskī zubān kahe detī thī ki ḳhvaṣī ya muṣāḥibat ya kisi dusre ṭaur par us ne bādshāhi meḥlāt mein ẓarūr tarbiyat pā'i thī" "Her language betrayed that she either served as a female attendant or as a favourite or companion of a prince or princess or in some way received training in aristocratic palaces" (N. Aḥmad Fasāna .132). The amplification of this association in the novel is intended to create a moral taint in the practice of poetry.

The narrator's abhorrence for the name of the protagonist (as he is known by his nom de plume) is a statement of his distance from the much-maligned art of poesy. The invocation of a moral category present in the title of the novel also serves to indict the practitioners and connoisseurs of Urdu poetry. The third chapter of the novel dwells on the long catalogue of his

"vices" that include his foppishness, frivolousness, and his taste for poetry (N. Aḥmad Fasāna 28). The inclusion of poetry in this long list of condemnable habits is indicative of its relegation to the status of a corrupting habit in late nineteenth-century colonial India. In such negative depiction of poets, an implicit binary is set up between the degrading influence of poetry and the reformist character of the novel. What is hidden in this oppositional relationship is the cultural legitimacy granted to the new literary form for its purifying impulses. This frontal attack on poetry contributed to its marginalisation in the hierarchies of literary genres in Urdu literature.

The Urdu novel Sharīf Zāda (The Gentleman, 1900) by Mirzā Hādi Rusvā (1858-1931) is the story of ʿĀbid Ḥusain's pursuit of knowledge under difficulties penned for edifying the sons of the ashrāf (respectable) families. This fictional "biography" of a successful man also includes the portrayal of one of ʿĀbid's classmates, whose passion for poetry distracted him from his studies at Roorkee College. This indulgence in poetry later manifests itself in a dereliction of official duty and idiosyncratic behaviour resulting in the termination of his job (84-85). What is highlighted in the portrait of ʿĀbid's classmate is his incapability to discharge his official duties because he has been incapacitated by his devotion to poetry. Rusvā's novel sets up an opposition between the "regal temperament" of the classmate and the protagonist's battle with economic precarity (85). Poetry here is transformed into a metaphor for the idleness of the aristocratic class and its incongruity in a colonial environment. The new work ethics that Muslim intelligentsia sought to develop in the colonial regime had no place for the leisure of poetry. The portrayal of a minor character as an emblem of the debilitating effects of poetry serves the purpose of a cautionary tale. It is reiterated time and again that ʿĀbid's repugnance for the poetic vocation keeps him focused on his goal. A biographical novel that deals with the issues of self-help, upward mobility, the promotion of trade and commerce for the welfare of the country, and the importance of modern scientific experiments views poetry as a useless profession.

Rusvā includes ʿĀbid's letters in the novel to lend this biographical novel an air of authenticity. However, the use of the epistolary technique serves the purpose of carrying on discussion on poetry that keeps resurfacing in the text. In a reply to a letter written by his friend, Mirzā, ʿĀbid attributes his hatred for poetry not only to the uselessness of this art but also to its deleterious effects on mankind. The letter concludes with an appeal to his friend not to destroy the career of young men by initiating them in the unproductive amusement of poetry (186-188). The writing of qaṣīdah (eulogy) is described as the most frivolous business in the whole world (187). In his letter to Rusvā, Abid argues that the long persistence among Muslims of the tradition of poetry has been detrimental to the welfare of the country (198-199). The use of the epistolary technique in the novel enables the protagonist to articulate his views on the subject of poetry. Employing such affective strategies as the feeling of community, patriotism, and the future of the

country, a case is built against the vocation of a poet. The practitioners of novel at this historical juncture sought to become a spokesperson for the nation and community, declaring classical poetry to be detrimental to individual and national progress. Abid's dislike for Urdu poetry was typical of the psychology of the new generation of pious, moralistic, and colonised Indians, whose devaluation of their own cultural legacy was caused by the political, military, and scientific triumph of the British in late nineteenth-century.

The depiction of poets as effeminate is a strategy employed by Urdu novelists to strip them of cultural legitimacy. By questioning the masculinity of the poet, the novelist undermines the social acceptance of the poet in a society characterised by masculinist ethos. The creation of doubt regarding poets' gender and their reduction to comic figures serve to undermine their cultural authority. Nażīr's humorous description of Kalim's toilet scene underscores his effeminacy, comparing him to a woman for devoting much of his time to his appearance. His narcissism is brought out by calculating the time of the day he spends looking into the mirror:

> *Agarche rāt ko māng aur patiyoñ ke liḥāẓ se rumāl bāndh kar aur sar ko alag thalag rakh kar soʾai the, magar āʾinah mein mūnh dekhā to zulf ki pareshānī par is qadar tāsuf kiyā ki sar isḥāq nyūṭan ṣāḥib ne bhi apne aurāq ki abtarī par itnā afsos na kiyā hogā.*
>
> Although, for the care of the plaited hair, he had covered his head with a handkerchief the night before and had slept in such a posture as not to ruin it, but when he inspected his face in the mirror in the morning, he grieved so much over the scattered state of the hair that even Sir Isaac Newton must not have on the ruin of the scientific papers (N. Aḥmad Taubat 245).

The fuss he creates over the trimming of his beard and moustaches by the hairdresser is a sign of his self-conceit. His excessive attention to sartorial matters is satirised when he struggles to get into his tightly stitched clothes: "Now starts the wrestling of fitting into the sleeves of the coat and the tight extremity of the legs of the trousers. The difficulty is that the cloth is so fragile that it cannot withstand the pressure of pulling and pushing. The slightest force can tear it apart" (N. Aḥmad Taubat 245, my translation). The titular protagonist of Fasāna is a dandy, who represents the degeneracy of the twilight of Muslim aristocratic culture in north India. For his prolonged study of the self in the mirror and self-decoration, he is compared to a bride, creating a confusion of gender roles. He is so obsessed with his own self that he keeps looking back on his own shadow in the sun. The narcissism and effeminacy of his character is emphasised to curtail the cultural power of poetry (37).

The influence of Victorian morality on Indian Muslim reformers manifested in the project of literary purification. This exercise of sanitisation

entailed a strong disapproval of themes that were not in conformity with the modern concept of decorum. The marginalization of erotic poetry in late nineteenth-century colonial society served to paint many classical Urdu poets as immoral. Their poetic compositions were viewed as symbols of a decadent culture that became a matter of embarrassment for the new service class (or emerging middle-class) in colonial India. The identification of Urdu poets with degeneracy and deviancy in the novels composed by Indian Muslim intellectuals attached a stigma to the art of poetry. The centrality of the classical Urdu poets to Kalīm's so-called moral depravity is highlighted in a novel that deals with the related issue of upbringing. The episode in which Naṣūh inspects Kalīm's cabinet of books seeks to identify the cause of the latter's tragic flaw. The catalogue of censored books appears as part of a profound concern with what was perceived as the perilous character of Urdu poetry. That the tragedy of his death is attributable to his upbringing and the literature he reads is the principal message of the novel. The technique of characterisation in the novel foregrounds the dangers of such texts. Fictional techniques became powerful tools of literary evaluations whereby the novelist assumed the authority of a literary critic.

The Expulsion of Poets from the Republic of Literature

Taubat-al Naṣūh was translated into English in 1884 by Matthews Kempson (1831-1894), then Director of Public Instruction in North Western Provinces. In his preface to Kempson's translation, William Muir (1819-1905), then lieutenant governor of the North Western Provinces, pointed out "an objectionable tendency" in Indian literature which created obstacles in the education of girls: "Husbands and fathers naturally hesitate to encourage a taste for reading to be gratified by the perusal of questionable books" (xi). Nażīr's involvement in the sanitising project is attributable to his advocacy of women's education which required a more inclusive readership. Kempson's project of identifying the books of censurable variety in Indian literature was the introduction of a new principle of selection and rejection that had evolved in the second half of the nineteenth-century. It is precisely this obsession with colonial morality that is visible in Naṣūh's survey of Kalīm's personal library in his place of retirement. The bonfire of books made in this episode is a severe criticism of the classical Urdu poets. Naṣūh's dismissal of the books as degrading can certainly be called a display of his reformatory zeal. But what I want to highlight in this paper is the role of a literary critic that he assumes implicitly and the weight it lends to his opinion. The catalogue of books he proscribes is an announcement of their inappropriateness in the era of British colonialism. The titles of poetry he reads are categorized as 'obscene', as "obscenity" for the British was "a catch-all-category" covering such widely different genres as sex manuals, popular romances, or texts offering advice on sexual relationships (Gupta 50). Such pronouncements on the lack of morality in poetry has the potential of narrowing the category of

literature. What is entailed in these ethical valuations is the exclusion of Urdu poets from the republic of literature. Moreover, the expunging of erotic elements from Indian literature was an important concern as a corollary of the argument that sexual indulgence had brought about the fall of the Mughal empire. In the book-burning scene in Taubat-al Naṣūh, ʿAlim, the younger son, flings the Urdu poems of Ḥaider ʿAli Ātish (1777-1846) into the fire. The ostensible reason behind the addition of the Lucknow poet to the bonfire of immoral books is the meaning of his pen name, 'fire'. Nażīr pronounces Atish's collection of poems as vulgar because of the conformity of some of his poetry to the other meaning of his pen-name, 'passion' (N. Aḥmad Taubat 189-190). The poet's sensuous description of the beauty of a woman's body, which was customary in the poetry of his time (in the poetry of Nasikh), is the reason why his collection of poetry is burnt in Taubat-al- Naṣūh (Ali 206). The removal of the erotic elements from Urdu classical poetry was a recurrent theme in the Urdu literary criticism in the last quarter of the nineteenth-century. In Muqaddama-e Shʿir-o Shāʿirī (An introduction to poetry, 1893), the Urdu literary critic, Ḥālī sought to cleanse ghazal of the lust and sexual desires, pleading for the inclusion of a variety of respectable manifestations of love, such as the love of parents for children, and the love of husband for wife (181-182). Ḥālī argued that the use in ghazal of words that describe the specificities of woman's body is inconsistent with the state of a purdah-observing society (183). In Taubat, the collection of the Urdu poet, Mirzā Mazhar Jān-e Jānan (1699-1781) is added to the bonfire of books for its supposed immoral contents (190). Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād's famous anecdote about Jān-e Jānan's flirtations with his disciple ʿAbdul Ḥaī Tābāñ is possibly a reason for this disapproval (141-142). The theme of pederasty in the classical Persian literature became a cause of embarrassment for the Muslim intelligentsia, who attempted to provide an explanation for such allusions in order to distance themselves from it. In the conflagration of books, the satires of the Urdu poet, Mirzā Rafi Sauda (1713-1781) are consigned to fire (N. Aḥmad Taubat 190). One of the possible reasons for Naṣūh's burning of Sauda's satires is that the subject of his satirical wit was often personal including the greatest religious leader of his time, Shah Waliullah (1703-62). He gave free rein to "a quick wit and an exuberant, often Rabelaisian, sense of humour" (Alam and Russell 39). The verses of Chirkīn (1797-1832) also appear in the list of books Naṣūh sets fire to for their treatment of scatological issues in Urdu poetry. The conflagration of the works of classical Urdu poets is an announcement of their expulsion from the new literary republic that Nażīr sought to forge. The failure of these poetical compositions to adhere to the new moral guidelines drawn by the author of Taubat disqualifies them from the category of suitable literature. The fact that this literary purge targeted at the poets was carried out in the pages of a novel is reflective of the battle of the genres in late nineteenth-century North India.

The highlighting of the so-called mischievous contents of poetical

works by the portrayal of Naṣūh as a reformer in the novel lends a certain kind of authority to his literary judgement. Though Naṣūh employs his skill of persuasion to convince his family about the need for reforming their reading habits, his rhetoric of reform is directed at the reading public. His dialogue with his family is an articulation of his reformist project. The narratorial voice seeks to influence the opinion of readers by establishing with them in a close relationship. Naẓīr deploys various fictional techniques to justify his exercise of censorship on classical Urdu poetry. The conflagration of Kalīm's cabinet of books is meant as a condemnation of the supposed depravity of the literary imagination inherent in Urdu classical poetry. The realistic and reformist tendencies of the novel were brought out by foregrounding its hostility to the excesses of Urdu poetic imagination. The devaluation of certain Urdu poets by the novelists must have consigned many literary works to oblivion, thereby shaping the construction of a literary canon in Urdu literature. The diminution of their literary value by introducing colonial morality as a new criterion of literary worth underlies the canon formation in late nineteenth-century.

Conclusion

The porous boundaries of the early Urdu novel in late nineteenth-century enabled Urdu novels to discharge the function of literary criticism. By arrogating to themselves the role of a literary critic in the prefatory matter and in the use of various fictional techniques, the novelists sought to highlight the deleterious effects of classical Urdu poetry. Such prolonged meditations on the damages of poetry in nineteenth-century Urdu novels brought this genre under an unprecedented scrutiny. A constellation of charges made against poetry transformed the image of once venerated Urdu poet into a set of stereotypes. The reduction of poetry to the status of a corrupting habit in early Urdu reformist novels is also attributable to the novelists' search for cultural legitimacy. The reductive images of the poets that figured in the novels is indicative of the rivalry that developed between the genres of poetry and novel in the second half of the nineteenth-century. The novelists' profound concern for the declining condition of the community expressed in the disparaging allusions to classical Urdu poets also fuelled the claim of the new genre to become a significant representative of the community. However, the status of novel as a genre of colonial modernity is detectable in its adherence to the criteria of utility and colonial morality as important ingredients of literary value. By pronouncing poetry as a worthless relic of the past, the Urdu novelists self-fashioned themselves as the harbinger of new age, demonstrating its heightened awareness of the issues of temporality.

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