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Ik Mis Sīmīñ Badan se kar liyā Landan meñ Aqd

Abul Kalam Azad

Commentary & translation by

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&

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Our collaboration on this translation grew out of our meeting in 2016, when Ahmad Aqeel Sarwar came to York for the MA in Global Literature and Culture which Claire Chambers was then convening. What began as an academic encounter soon became an intellectually transformative exchange for us both. It prompted Aqeel to change several of his previously-held assumptions and inspired Claire's decision to embark on the serious study of Urdu. Equally productive is the way our reading of this essay is framed by our different biographies, training, and worldviews. We hope that this shared but not identical perspective brings something apt to Abul Kalam Azad's "Ik Mis Sīmīñ Badan se kar Liyā Landan Meñ Aqd," translated here as "Marrying a Fair-Skinned Miss in London," a piece whose concerns with intimacy, cultural crossing, and the pressures exerted on marriage emerge vividly through dialogue and disagreement. Perhaps it should be pointed out that unlike the men in Azad's essay, we were both already happily married when Aqeel moved to England!

Maulana Azad was not a writer shaped primarily by the subcontinent's vernacular literary worlds, but by a strikingly mobile and cosmopolitan upbringing. He was born in Mecca in 1888, to an Indian Muslim scholar and an Arab mother. A few years after his birth, the family settled in Calcutta, now Kolkata. He would go on to live for many years in that seat of literary Urdu, Delhi, where he died in 1958 at the age of 69. Sources describing his life emphasize that he received a rigorous home education in Islamic learning rather than a standard

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madrassa curriculum, and that he had an early grounding in Arabic and Persian theological and literary classics. That background makes its way into this translation. “Marrying a Fair-Skinned Miss in London” is not just about religion but is written out of a religiously learned sensibility that treats public argument, literary allusion, and moral debate as inseparable.

The same background also helps explain the distinctive texture of Azad’s Urdu. At home, he reportedly spoke Arabic with his mother and Urdu with his father. In other words, Arabic was not a decorative or pious patina added later, but one of the languages in which his intellectual world was formed. When he turned to journalism, he did so in Urdu, first through early ventures and then through *Al-Hilal*, launched in Calcutta in 1912. This is around the same time that he wrote “Ik Mis Sīmīñ Badan se kar Liyā Landan Meñ Aqd,” which we estimate to have been published between 1912 and 1914. Contemporary descriptions of his writing stress that *Al-Hilal* was revolutionary in Urdu journalism because it intermixed religion and politics, and established a forceful, animated prose style. In that sense, our English translation of this essay is best approached as a text emerging from an Arabicized, scripturally informed Urdu prose culture rather than from a more Persianate or purely literary idiom.

Azad’s political life also gives the piece its power. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* identifies him as a leading Islamic theologian and a senior Congress figure, later India’s first minister of education. Other scholarship on his early writings shows how strongly his work was bound up with anti-colonial politics, Hindu-Muslim unity, and a deliberate rereading of Islamic history for modern political ends. He was anti-British but, more interestingly, he used journalism and theological writing to argue that modern Muslims could be intellectually rigorous, politically committed, and publicly engaged without surrendering religious seriousness. The salience here stems from the fact that the text stages marriage, race, and colonial modernity not as private matters but central to communal self-understanding. Although satirical, the London marriage plot is more than just comic. It is part of Azad’s decision to turn domestic life into battlelines on which empire, nation, and religious identity are negotiated.

For us, one of the most interesting aspects of “Marrying a Fair-Skinned Miss in London” is the way it makes gender perform ideological work. The fair-skinned woman is a romantic object, but crucially she is made to stand for prestige, modernity, colonial aspiration, and the pull of Europe. At the same time, the text’s insistence on marriage exposes a

familiar double bind. Women are praised, regulated, desired, and symbolically burdened all at once. Read against Azad's broader public commitments, this is quite revealing. Later discussions of his educational thought repeatedly note his emphasis on women's education and social uplift, suggesting that he saw women as central to reform. Yet the translation also shows how even reformist discourse keeps women at the heart of male anxieties about honour, continuity, and cultural survival. The piece is especially fascinating because it is simultaneously crusading and complicit. It is both critical of colourism and sculpted by the gendered assumptions of its moment.

The work's intertextuality plays an important part in that ambivalence. The text belongs to a period of Urdu writing in which genre boundaries were more fluid than anglophone readers might expect. Dialogue, satire, sermon, essay, and polemic co-exist without apology. The essay's dialogic contours recall fellow Congress member M. K. Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* (1909), which is also framed as a conversation between 'the Editor' and 'the Reader'. In both texts, debate is a way of thinking out loud in public, so the argument feels exploratory and morally urgent rather than just being declarative.

An extended allusion to Abdul Halim Sharar's *Flora Floranda* widens the essay into the terrain of Urdu historical fiction. Sharar's 1899 novel belongs to the same late colonial literary world, and Azad uses that intertext to sharpen his warning about cross-cultural marriage, female naming, and the transmission of faith.

The essay's title and argument also place it in dialogue with Akbar Allahabadi. Allahabadi's poetry famously mocked Westernised self-fashioning and the cultural dilemmas of colonial modernity. Allahabadi's 1909 poem "Mis Sīmīñ Badan" is borrowed in full at the end of Azad's article and gives the essayist a title to expand on. Allahabadi's reference to Sir Syed Ahmad Khan¹ at the end of the verse engages with the tensions in his reformist vision. Syed Ahmad supported the education of Muslim men in Europe while remaining opposed to comparable education for Muslim women,² even as he admired European

¹ Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817–1898) was a Muslim reformer and founder of the Aligarh Movement, which aimed to promote modern, Western-style education for Indian Muslims (see next note).

² Although Sir Syed supported women's education in principle, he largely advocated home-based instruction for Muslim women rather than modern institution-based schooling.

and British women as cultured, well-behaved, and educated. Allahabadi (and, following him, Azad) draws attention to the social and cultural consequences of sending young Muslim men to Europe, arguing that it is impossible for them to encounter European society without also interacting with European women. The poem thus exposes the contradictions underlying this model of Muslim modernisation.

Azad's piece thus reworks similar anxieties to Allahabadi's satirical nazm through a prose essay that is argumentative, performative, and rhetorically lively. Yet, the text moves beyond its starting point as a tract opposing interracial marriage. It is a compact, highly stylised intervention into the literary politics of early twentieth-century Urdu, using marriage as a vehicle for thinking through empire, gender, faith, and cultural imitation at once.

One of us, Claire Chambers, in her book *Britain Through Muslim Eyes* (2015), discussed the way in which early twentieth-century Muslim women themselves were increasingly debating how to benefit from Western education and modernity while maintaining South Asian and Islamic ways. Among elite women, learning was understood as essential to Muslim 'uplift,' with particular emphasis on higher education and the training of women as teachers and doctors. Some of these women even went to London, and Claire wrote about two such figures, Atiya Fyzee³ and Maimoona Sultan.⁴ Yet purdah and seclusion continued to constrain even privileged women's access to public life. Beyond these elite circles, the problem was more basic. It pertained to extending even the most basic education to ordinary Muslim girls, for whom meaningful access to schooling remained far from universal.

Azad's article is less interested in the education of women, treating the gender rather metaphorically. It raises the cultural and religious question as to whether there is any possibility of conciliation between

³ Atiya Fyzee (1877–1967) was a Bohra Muslim writer, traveller, and advocate of women's education. She came to Britain in 1906–1907 to study on a teacher-training programme and her letters about her experiences were later published in Urdu as *Zamāna-i Tahṣīl* (1921) and translated as *Atiya's Journeys* by Siobhan Lambert-Hurley and Sunil Sharma (2010).

⁴ Shahbano Begum Maimoona Sultan (1900–1980) was a member of the heavily matriarchal Muslim ruling family of Bhopal. Aged about eleven, she accompanied the Nawab Begum on a 1911 journey to Britain and Europe and recorded her experiences in Urdu in *Siyāhat-i Sulṭānī*, subsequently translated as *A Trip to Europe* (1914).

two individuals from different religious and cultural backgrounds, especially in the unequal context of empire.

Taken in the round, Azad was not only a nationalist icon whose death Jawaharlal Nehru greatly lamented. He was also a Meccan-born, Arabic-formed Muslim intellectual writing in an Urdu that bears the imprint of Arabic grammar, sacred learning, and journalistic urgency. As a political thinker, he fused anti-colonial nationalism with religious scholarship. He was also a writer whose treatment of women was inseparable from his larger reformist imagination.

That is why we believe that this text is valuable to have in English translation. It lets anglophone readers see Azad not only as a public figure of Indian nationalism but also as a prose artist. This author made a short essay about marriage carry a hefty raft of theology, satire, and political commentary.



Marrying a Fair-Skinned Miss in London

What have you done?

Yes! You heard right.

You married a fair-skinned Miss in London!

Yes, sir, in London! Married a Miss with a silken body.

But why? For what reason? Was there no beautiful, graceful Hindustani woman, so you had to search for love among European women? Did you not find a single silken body in Hindustan, so you had to cast your eye – may God forgive me – towards the women of Europe?

Isn't it unbecoming for a Muslim man to abandon his education, community, and family ties to form relationships with people of a different race, religion, mentality, and temperament? Don't be shy, sir! Don't avert your eyes; look me in the face. Did your conscience really allow you to form such an unnecessary and unnatural bond with a nation so temperamentally opposed to your own?

Oh please, sir! You're just stuck in the old ways. Your mind is still full of backward thoughts and remains untouched by the radiant rays of modernity. That's why you're still in darkness. You're utterly unaware of current realities, still dreaming old dreams.

In today's world, it is essential for us, the people of Hindustan, to form national relationships with the ruling race – to socialise and

intermingle so that familiarity replaces the alienation that hinders our progress (which depends, of course, on the attention of the colonisers). Besides, if we form close ties, they might finally overcome their suspicions about Muslims in both religious and political matters. So, it is with this noble goal in mind that this servant of the nation . . . married a fair-skinned Miss in London . . .

Wonderful! Esteemed sir! So, is this what national friendship with the ruling class means now? Is marriage the only form of interaction left? Are dining together, conversing, socialising, and friendship not enough for cultural connection? Isn't it said that there are four causes of affection: sitting together, speaking together, eating together, and drinking together? Surely those would suffice?

And then your statement that the Britishers' attention is necessary for our progress is completely wrong. A single example cannot be presented from history where a slave nation made progress due to the attentions of its conquerors. Instead, those independent nations which developed the concept of self-help created their own routes for progress without relying on external help. Such nations established children's schools, art colleges, and universities to gain knowledge and skills, and that too without any foreign help. Indeed, they made progress with their own ideas and self-motivation. The example of Europe is enough to prove this. In such situations the government does provide support, which is its duty and obligation, but this does not mean that . . .

You have no answer . . . And some time passes.

Okay, leave it, this is no reason at all.

But sir, Islam has given us permission to have relationships with People of the Book. Then why are we having this discussion?

Come on! Now you are taking refuge in religion. Listen: when Islam allowed such relationships, there was no way to avoid them. Islam permitted marriages with People of the Book to demonstrate that it accommodates human needs and offers great ease, showing its comprehensiveness and flexibility. In most cases where relationships like these were necessary, religion did not present any hurdles. But this allowance was not meant to encourage such relationships without necessity. Moreover, when Islam first permitted interfaith unions, Muslims held power, and the non-Muslim nations involved were often the conquered ones. There was no fear then that Muslim identity would be weakened by unions of this character, unlike the present situation where the power relations are reversed.

We are now the conquered people, and a European nation is our conqueror. In much the same way, amid mixed relationships the woman from the conquering nation will inevitably hold power, while the man will remain subordinate. Amid these dynamics, it is easy to anticipate the influence of the woman's behaviour, habits, and religion on any offspring born from the marriage. Religion does permit many things, but often these permissions are context-specific and based on personal needs or benefit. On that basis, the potential national harm caused by such marriages should not be ignored. However, please tell how much this would harm the children? You argue that the father's influence on his progeny is generally stronger, and you consider this point valid. If you can present a concrete example proving this claim, then your argument will stand; otherwise, I cannot accept it.

Don't you know? You seem to be a learned man, so you must have read about the history of the Moors. I want to cite an incident from that history which occurred during the Islamic Empire. From this, you will be able to deduce that although today the European nations hold power, at that time the Islamic Empire reigned supreme – and yet such an incident still occurred. You can also find this story in Mr Abdul Halim Sharar's historical novel *Flora*. During the reign of Abd al-Rahman II in Spain,⁵ Christians were given a good degree of liberty. One remarkable incident concerns a brother and sister: a girl named Flora and her brother Ziyaad. Their father was a devout Muslim who had an illicit relationship with a beautiful Christian woman. Flora was born from that relationship. Although the father gave her a Muslim name and presented her publicly as a Muslim, the Christian mother called her Flora, in keeping with her own culture and language. Flora's father could not stay at home all the time, and so the influence of her mother shaped the girl on a daily basis. In this way, the mother instilled all the values and customs of Christianity in her daughter. Over time, both parents died, leaving Flora in the care of Ziyaad. The local Christian clergy tried to remove Flora from her brother's guardianship, arguing that she should not be raised by a Muslim man. Ziyaad did everything he could to make his sister realise that Islam is the true religion, but his efforts were in vain. Then, the matter became even more complicated when Christian women kept coming to Ziyaad's household to take Flora away. Ziyaad tried to stop them, but he failed. Flora often left their house and roamed around from place to place,

⁵ Umayyad ruler Abd al-Rahman II, emir of Córdoba from 822 to his death in 852 CE, presided over one of al-Andalus's most fertile periods of cultural and intellectual efflorescence.

prompting Ziyaad to search frantically for her. These events led to deeply tragic incidents that shook the Empire and left its people shocked and tense. Flora and Ziyaad both faced ruin, and their compatriots could only watch in grief.

In short, even though the Muslims were conquerors at that time, a single cross-cultural relationship triggered a chain of tragic events. Households were torn apart, lives were lost, and both the Muslim and Christian communities were thrown into turmoil. Why did such devastation occur? And for what purpose? All this chaos stemmed from that single relationship – a relationship like the ones you were praising.

Now consider our present situation, in which the influence of the conquering nation over the masses is even greater than it was then. If harm of this kind could come about when Muslims held political and cultural power, how much more serious are the dangers nowadays? Relationships with members of the conquering nation do not merely risk personal difficulties; they have the potential to unleash widespread social harm. They have done so before and, given the imbalance of power today, they will certainly do so again.

You have no answer and look here and there, coughing.

Let it go! I just have to clear my throat. But what answer do you have to this: educated people like us need educated women – and such women are rare in India. So, what should be done, and what can we ourselves do? Inevitably we must look towards what I laughingly call the educated and ‘civilised’ nations of Europe. How can educated men like us be expected to listen patiently to ignorant women who speak only of superstitions, bad omens, djinns, and fairies?

Truly, your statement has some validity from the perspective of women’s subsidiary social position. The injustices they face were discussed in Mr Chaudhary Khushi Muhammad Nazir’s⁶ lecture at the Rampur Conference. But you have taken from his lecture this point to be used as an excuse, blaming these marriages on Indian women’s illiteracy. And until women’s education is addressed in India, you will continue to use this excuse.

Gentlemen, if you are truly patriots, then you should strive to

⁶ Chaudhary Khushi Muhammad Nazir (1871–1944) was a Kashmiri civil servant and Urdu poet. He is best known for the long narrative poem ‘Jogi’. Begun in 1903 and completed in 1934, it contrasts an ascetic life with the social and communal tensions of colonial India.

educate our own women, to make them capable, and then to marry them. In this way, your personal needs will inspire a national commitment to women's education, rather than serving as an excuse to seek out so-called 'educated ladies' from another nation, live (though hardly happily) with them, and turn a blind eye to the state of your own society.

Apart from this, the Indians who have entered into such relationships live in constant anxiety. They cannot afford the expenses or adjust to the liberties that come with these marriages. Are you unaware of the many respectable men whose lives have been made bitter by such entanglements? Yet, people like you refuse to open your eyes; instead, you are dazzled by the fair faces of European women. And yes, I confess this much is true: you are under a certain kind of pressure and feel compelled to act this way. A young man, full of energy, arriving in London for his education and suddenly surrounded by beauty – it is, admittedly, very difficult to control oneself in such circumstances.

Our honourable friend, Syed Akbar Hussain Sahib (better known as Akbar Allahabadi), the Session Judge of Saharanpur, has attempted to address this objection raised by the educated classes and has composed a rather unusual and entertaining poem in response. We found great enjoyment in reading it, and we would not wish to deprive our audience of the same pleasure.

Poem (by Akbar Allahabadi)

'I married a fair-skinned Miss in London . . .'
 And now I hear harsh taunts and bitter scorn.
 Some say I've ruined the purity of our race,
 Some call me immoral and disgraceful.
 No elder shows justice in his judgement.
 Now I am compelled to reveal the truth.
 They told us: go to London, study English,
 Mingle with the English, copy their style,
 Admire their glittering hotels,
 Savour their soup, not just our local stews.
 In following this, I fell under the spell of fairies,
 My youthful heart was smitten and throbbed feverishly.
 Around me were beautiful ladies, magical to behold,
 Here the youthful heart, and there the ladies yearning for
 love.
 On both sides passionate fervour warmed the hearts,

Afterall, it was a heart and not merely a cube of ice.
Her glance was enchanting, her words heart-ravishing,
Her walk incendiary, her eyes like lightning.
In such a state, was it possible that a calamitous flash of
lightening
out-stretched her silken hand and I could say, 'stay away'
to her?
Time and again, Akbar, this thought comes to my heart,
If only someone would go to Sir Syed and convey it:
You've tied me to a plank in the middle of the deep sea,
And still you say: 'Don't get your clothes wet – be
careful!'

The emotions described by Akbar Sahib are familiar to any who have walked that path. And indeed, that last couplet is especially relevant for those heading to London.

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