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A Brief Response to Christina Oesterheld

BEFORE TRYING TO ARTICULATE two of the problems I have with Christina Oesterheld's reading of Kaiser Tamkeen's story, I'd like to make clear some of what I don't have any problems with. Mrs. Oesterheld obviously has a wonderful command of the Urdu language. Her understanding of the subtle connotations of words and phrases, her ability to grapple with nuanced and diffuse rhetorical figures (especially sarcasm, notoriously difficult to read in any language) lend her reading a depth and seriousness not to be overlooked. I am pleased that a non-native speaker of Urdu can produce for herself and others such deep access to the difficulties the story's narrative generates, and so I harbor no objections whatever based on her grasp of the text of the story. My problems, rather, begin at one remove from this basic grasp of the text, when her reading-as-encounter becomes reading-as-reflection, i.e. when it enters the domain of the theoretical and the critical. The first such issue I would like to take up is announced in the title of her article.

The term *deconstruction* is one of those lit-crit "-isms" whose meaning has become so fraught with knotty polyvalence, contention, and polemicism—has become so overdetermined—over the past two decades or so as to render it practically meaningless. Unless, that is, one is either in on the covert system of winks and nods that tend to permeate the discourse of such overdetermination, in which case one trusts in the prior understanding of one's readership regarding a term's meaning, and so doesn't even attempt a precise articulation; or one recognizes the overdetermination at the outset and tries to state precisely what one *does* mean by such-and-such a term. The first alternative is a lazy and vogue-ish kind of terminological fetishism, and since Mrs. Oesterheld's article doesn't even approach such reprehensible insouciance, I will say no more about it. Indeed, to her credit, Mrs. Oesterheld opts for the second alternative, and tries, albeit very briefly, to state what she does mean by

“deconstruction,” saying that it “is employed not in the strict terminological [*sic*] sense but denoting the process of dismantling, unmasking, and questioning structures and concepts” (p. 209).

Unfortunately, this is not enough. To say that the term is not employed in its rigorous sense is simply to beg the question of what that sense is. One gathers from her explanation that this strict sense is somehow different from (perhaps more than?) the dismantling, unmasking, and questioning she alludes to. If this is the case, then I am left to wonder why, amid the usefulness in their own right of such concepts, she chooses to employ the term “deconstruction” at all.

This is compounded by her use of prophylactic scare-quotes in the title. What exactly are these scare-quotes protecting against? Do they somehow indicate to a playfulness with the term? A request of sorts not to be taken *too* seriously? But this seems completely at odds with the seriousness of the “shock and repulsion” (p. *ibid.*) she tells us was her initial emotional response to the story, a response, moreover, she wrote her article in order to “rationalize” (*ibid.*). In any event, “deconstructing” a “deconstructionist” story *cannot* be the same as deconstructing a deconstructionist story. If the rigorous sense of deconstruction is not synonymous with dismantling, unmasking, or questioning (if it were, there would be, by virtue of Mrs. Oesterheld’s brief explanation of her use of the term, no scare-quotes in the title at all), we are left to wonder just what it might be.

My understanding of deconstruction is apparently quite different from Mrs. Oesterheld’s. For proponents of deconstruction it is not an “-ism”; indeed, it is hard to call “it” a thing at all. Many balk at calling it a method, too, since it cleaves closer to strategy than formula. Among the *cogniscenti* one refers to “deconstructive readings.” Such readings are concerned with thinking, or rather with a radical variety of thinking we might for convenience’s sake call capital-T Thinking, which proponents seem to find only rarely. This underlying concern with the radicalization of thought itself renders deconstructive readings operative at the level of *first*—not later—principles, and so deconstructive readings typically look to metaphysics for their basic orientations. Such orientations are staked out with an eye to the operational and structural conditions of concept-based thinking itself, i.e. with an eye to such notions as the relationality of thinking, its programaticity, its articulatedness. Deconstructive readings are thus deeply concerned with grammar, syntax, and idiomaticity, with their limits, boundaries, and pillages. Deconstruction is not synonymous with questioning, but seeks rather to interrogate questioning, as a

program or putting-into-relation of thinking itself. Nor is it synonymous with dismantling, for dismantling simply breaks joinings, whereas deconstructive readings are more concerned with watching those joinings in action, and pointing out the ways in which they undo *themselves*. Deconstruction is thus adamant about paying attention to first principles of thinking, as those principles are revealed (and undone) in the articulated relations of that thinking's expression. Insightful in its own right though it is, Mrs. Oesterheld's article is nowhere concerned with such a reading, and so I wish she had simply chosen not to refer to deconstruction at all.

Putting deconstruction aside, then, I would like to turn to one more issue Mrs. Oesterheld brings up in her reading—the term *gaṅgā-jamni* itself. Mrs. Oesterheld aptly defines it, pointing out its positive connotations, its sense of admixture resulting in a whole greater than the sum of its parts. I am troubled, however, by her assertion that the term “is closely linked to the concept of secularism” (pp. 210). Perhaps in a very broad and uncritical sense it is, but I believe much more is to be gained (in terms of a productive reading of the story) by looking at the *tension* between the two ideas. *Gaṅgā-jamni* as it applies to north Indian Hindu-Muslim amity is a very old idea, and not an overtly (or at least self-consciously) political one. It speaks rather of an age, of an atmosphere, and of the nature of the civilization and culture (*tabẓīb*) that took root and grew up therein. The best discussion of it that I have read is Azad's in the first chapter of *Āb-e Ḥayāt*, entitled “The History of the Urdu Language” (Lakḥna'ū: Uttar Pradēsh Urdū Akādami, 1986 [1907]; pp. 6–25). Although Azad himself does not use the term *gaṅgā-jamni* (he instead refers to *shīro-shakkar*—“milk and sugar”), his proud account of the centuries-long commingling (at least back to the 12th century) of Indic/Hindu and Persianate/Muslim culture clearly paints a picture in which *gaṅgā-jamni*-ness operates not at the level of statecraft and confessional religious affiliation (as does the much younger idea of secularism), but rather at the level of *life* (and all that that entails) as it is lived. For Azad (and me with him), *gaṅgā-jamni*-ness is best observed and understood at the most fundamental level of people living their lives—at the level of the very language(s) they speak, and thereby of the expression of the world they inhabit. The influx of “foreign” Arabo-Persian vocabulary and imagery into the “native” Indic syntaxes and poetics; the synergistic *fit* that this marked over many centuries; whether Hindu or Muslim (or later Sikh), the shared value of the poly-communal erudition substantiating the appellation *Mirzā*—all this speaks of the underlying civilizational sup-

position that it all just goes together, naturally and beautifully. Not so, however, with the idea of secularism. Secularism predicates itself on an initial idea of essential difference and divergence; it is a nervous and controlling idea, always looking over its shoulder, worried lest the latent and ultimately irresolvable differences between communities flare up into a firestorm and destroy everybody. Secularism seeks to quell destructive private impulses by preventing them from entering public view. *Gaṅgā-jamnī*-ness is loath even to acknowledge that such destructive private impulses exist.

If there is a link between *gaṅgā-jamnī*-ness and secularism, it is one born of the cynicism inherent in modern South Asian communal history. With the first stirrings of modern communalism in the latter part of the nineteenth century, it seems secularism and its concern for management and damage control begin to supplant the basic optimism of the now politically naïve idea of *gaṅgā-jamnī*-ness. *Gaṅgā-jamnī* values, lovely though they are, are now the values of a particular kind of nostalgia, of the loss of a particular kind of home. One can identify these values, one hopes to get back to them somehow, but the journey hurts, and there are no guarantees that one will ever arrive. The cast of characters in both the secularist and *gaṅgā-jamnī* epics is the same; their plots, however, are very different. This, then, leads us to the profound and sad irony of the title of Tamkeen's story.

The ironic power of the title resides in the fact that this story is not *gaṅgā-jamnī* at all. For even acts which in a different era *should* be *gaṅgā-jamnī*—Muslims and Hindus living in a single neighborhood, Muslims paying respect to Hindu symbols and vice versa, Muslims and Hindus together at a *mushā'ira*—are here rendered cynical, inept, or empty by the comparatively shallow and self-concerned imperatives of secularism and “balance.” For Tamkeen, the *gaṅgā-jamnī* world is lost, and given the present circumstances, the simple, bald fact of people living their lives in an inter-communal environment can never retrieve it. Indeed, since the fear of conflagration undergirding secularism has supplanted, as a kind of ideology, the natural delight of commingled *gaṅgā-jamnī* existence, it is now impossible *not* to be cynical about inter-communal dealings that may appear to be authentically *gaṅgā-jamnī*. I take this as the basic topos Tamkeen's narrative stakes out. As I read it, Kaisar Tamkeen's story is both a profoundly sad lament for, and a scathing indictment of, a civilization now irretrievably squandered. It seems then that Mrs. Oesterheld's “shock and repulsion” upon reading the story constituted perhaps the most legitimate and understanding reaction she could have had. For

her to castigate Tamkeen for carrying his satire too far or for appearing “to perpetuate the concept of an eternal enmity and confrontation between Hindus and Muslims” (p. 218), for her to “feel embarrassed by the general tone of the story” (*ibid.*), is, for me, to miss the point. Powerful, well-crafted stories elicit strong and difficult reactions; this is their strength, not a defect. □



Christina Oesterheld replies:

Thank you for the response to my comments on Kaiser Tamkeen’s story. The present version of the text is only a first attempt to come to terms with the story. A more elaborate one will probably be published later in a collection of contributions to the 14th European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies. Your thought-provoking remarks will certainly be very helpful in reconsidering my positions and clarifying my intentions.

As regards the term “deconstruction,” the prophylactic scare-quotes in the title do, indeed, indicate a playful use of the term, at least as far as my own analysis is concerned. Though the story is very serious, even grim, it at the same time heavily relies on play with words, their meanings and connotations. It is this playfulness of the story which tempted me to play on words in the title. The story itself, however, may be understood as a deconstructionist text in its own right. This is an aspect I would like to discuss with you in more detail at a later point.

For the time being, let me turn to the relation of *gaṅgā-jamni tabẓīb* and secularism. There is no doubt about the cynicism involved in the present-day use of secularism as a political and cultural ideology. This is exactly what Tamkeen so vividly depicts in his story. In this regard his story can be seen as a contribution to the discourse on secularism and on the secular state taking part in India at present. Tamkeen himself produces the link between the cultural and the political and ideological levels by bringing in community-state (the state being represented by the police and the *Ākāshvānī*) interaction and the manipulations of the literary establishment. He does not use the term “secularism” but the claim to secularism by both the official and a certain literary or cultural ideology are, to my mind, implied in the story by their use of a distinctive vocabulary. Moreover, a link between a *gaṅgā-jamni* culture and secularism (whatever this term may mean) is still being maintained by a not so small

group of Muslim intellectuals, many of whom use Urdu as their medium of expression. It is this line of thinking which comes under attack in Tamkeen's story. Thus, to discuss the concept of secularism in the story is in several ways suggested by the story itself. Besides, Tamkeen right from the outset denies any possibility of a *gaṅgā-jamnī* coexistence between the communities. In his story, I cannot find any tension between the ideas of *gaṅgā-jamnī* culture and secularism because both ideas are shown to be perverted by the realities. In a way my feelings of shock and repulsion were created by my unwillingness to accept this totally negative verdict, certainly a more emotional than rational reaction. Though I am not personally involved, I nevertheless share the nostalgia for the *gaṅgā-jamnī* culture—which may, at least to some degree, be a historical construct rather than a lost reality, a projection of the longing for harmony and peace into a “golden” past. The second reason for my embarrassment was an aesthetic one. The concluding sentences of the story display a rather crude type of satire compared with the very refined linguistic and structural devices employed by the author in parts 1 and 2 of the story. Apart from this, I share your judgment that to feel embarrassed by a text points to its lasting impact, which probably is the best effect an author may achieve. □