

Nazir Ahmad and the Early Urdu Novel: Some Observations

THE modern narrative genres of the novel and short story are often described as “foreign” or “imported” into South Asian literatures because they made their appearance in India in the nineteenth century in the wake of British administration and education. In so far as Urdu literature is concerned, the tradition of the novel is now more than a hundred years old, and that of the short story very nearly a century old. Nevertheless some critics and historians of Urdu literature continue to regard these popular and widely-practiced genres as something alien. In my view the paradox has little to do with the fact of “foreignness” and is more the result of the schism which surfaced towards the end of the nineteenth century between the indigenous narrative tradition and “modern” literature, and which eventually led to a contempt for and neglect of such native forms as the *dāstān* and *qiṣṣa*. Although lately there has been a welcome revival of interest in the study of the *dāstān* and *qiṣṣa*, both on the Subcontinent and beyond, the close link between these indigenous forms and “modern” fiction has yet to be studied extensively and in depth. I do not intend to explore new material in this paper, but only to present some fresh interpretations of certain Urdu classics of the nineteenth century and underscore their relevance to contemporary intellectuals and writers.

Nazir Ahmad (1830–1912) called his stories *qiṣṣas*, and there is general agreement among scholars that elements of traditional storytelling are indeed found in his work. However, these elements are often regarded as outdated, old-fashioned, and inferior to the more sophisticated techniques of the novel, thus positing a relationship of less-developed and more-developed elements in his work which has obvious implications for the evaluation of the respective techniques. My main purpose here is to show how Nazir Ahmad introduced new content into forms which were

current at his time and how this new content transformed the structure of his tales. He didn't import a new/alien form to convey his message as much as develop something entirely new within the existing indigenous forms. What we find in his writings is precisely the "attempt at integration or synthesis" which Frances W. Pritchett finds lacking in his "novel" *Taubatu 'n-Naṣūh*¹ (The Repentance of Naṣūh; 1874; *TN*) to which I will return later.

The second point I'd like to make has to do with the content of his work—viz., the bundle of contradictions which engulfed his time, his society, and his own life—leading him unavoidably toward the development of new forms.

Nazir Ahmad was born into a family of *maulvis* in Bijnor. His education was traditional and he received it from his father and other *maulvis* in his native city and in Delhi, where he also studied at the famous Delhi College for eight years. He started his career as a teacher of Arabic and subsequently became a Deputy Inspector of Schools in the Department of Public Administration. There he also translated the Indian Penal Code into Urdu and rose to the rank of Deputy-Collector in the North-West Provinces. In later life he served in high positions in Hyderabad. After his retirement from administrative service he devoted the rest of his life to writing and teaching. Although one of the most committed followers of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, he was nonetheless critical of certain aspects of the latter's teachings, and even more critical of the blind imitation of the West he discerned in some of his countrymen, mainly as a consequence of their western education. His addresses to the Muhammadan Educational Conference² drew large audiences because of his fine oratorical powers, which surpassed those of his fellow-educators and even those of Sir Syed. Nazir Ahmad propagated ideals of education and reform in his writings and speeches with a missionary zeal. All his tales were the outcome of this commitment and were shaped accordingly.

Nazir Ahmad himself never thought of his books as novels. It was only much later that Urdu literary critics started to discuss the question of how to classify his writings. (Similarly, it was the evaluation of posterity

¹*Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and Its Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 187.

²From 1885 onwards this conference met annually at different places; cf. David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 300–4, 313–6, and 330–5.

that crowned Daniel Defoe as the founder of the English novel. The high literary esteem accorded to his work in the twentieth century was entirely lacking among his own contemporaries. Incidentally, Defoe's *The Family Instructor* (1715) apparently provided the inspiration for Naẓīr Aḥmad's *TN*.) But Naẓīr Aḥmad was well aware of the fact that he wanted to create a completely new type of book—a book that didn't have the supernatural, unrealistic and amorous features which in his view dominated the narrative literature of his time, but instead presented everyday characters in an ordinary setting and was shaped according to a particular didactic intention.

We can leave aside the discussion of whether he wrote his first book for the instruction of his own daughter, as he claimed, or as part of a competition for reward announced by the Lieutenant-Governor of the North-West Provinces in 1868.³ The fact is that in his tales he combined the ideals he wanted to propagate with his own experiences and with his keen sense of observation. He drew inspiration from different English as well as Indian, Arabic and Persian sources, for the most part didactic and edifying literature, and from indigenous narrative and expository forms, such as *qiṣṣa-kahānī* literature, literature on etiquette and ethics (*adab*), religious treatises and disputations, the *dāstān*, etc.

In their outer form his tales bear a striking resemblance to the *dāstān*, in that chapters have abstracts summarizing their content while dialogues are written out in a style closely approximating that of dramas. And just as characters in a *dāstān* have symbolic names which typify them or point to one of their prominent features, so do many of Naẓīr Aḥmad's characters. The action unfolds in episodes that are often highly dramatic, but the narrative between these episodes is presented in a summary-like fashion. Satirical or parodistic digressions provide comic relief. In descriptive passages or where the author lapses into lengthy sermons on questions of religion, virtuous life, etc., all the techniques of traditional oratory (*khiṭābat*) are employed: long sequences of similes and poetic images; the juxtaposition of synonyms or near-synonyms or antonyms; rhythm; sometimes also rhymes and quotations from the Qur'ān and from Persian classics. By way of illustration here is a quote from *TN* in which the

³C.M. Naim, "Prize-Winning Adab: A Study of Five Urdu Books Written in Response to the Allahabad Government Gazette Notification," in *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam*, ed. Barbara D. Metcalf (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 292.

author describes the state of an irreligious (*bē-dīn*) person:

... *fāqa hai tō ṣabr nahīn, kḥānā hai tō sērī nahīn, badī kī sazā nahīn, nekī kī jazā nahīn, bē-dīn ādmī aisā hai jaisē bē-nakēl kā ūnṭ, bē-natḥ kā bail, bē-lagām kā gḥōṛā, bē-mallāḥ kī nā'ō, bē-rīgūlēṭar kī gḥarī, bē-shauhar kī 'aurat, bē-bāp kā bačča, bē-tḥēvē kī aṅgūṭḥī, bē-lālī kī mahīndī, bē-khushbū kā 'iṭṭ, bē-bās kā pḥūl, bē-ṭabīb kā bīmār, bē-ā'inē kā śiṅḥār ...*⁴

... when he starves, he has no endurance, when he eats, he doesn't feel satiated, there is no punishment for the evil and no reward for the good he does. A man without belief is like a camel without a nose-string, a bull without a nose-ring, a horse without rein, a boat without a boatman, a clock without a regulator, a woman without husband, a child without father, a ring without a stone, henna without red color, attar without scent, a flower without fragrance, a patient without physician, toilet without a mirror ...

Or the following sequence in a long list of things for which the members of a pious family should pray every morning:

... *ḥākīm-e vaqt kō taufīq-e 'adl-o-dād, ra'iyat shād, mulk ābād, kyā apnē kyā ghair, kul jahān kī khair.*⁵

... let a ruler practice justice, for the subjects to be happy and the country to prosper, for the welfare of the whole world, be they kinsmen or strangers.

Naẓīr Aḥmad's dialogues are of two types: (1) conversation in the true sense of the word, written in near-colloquial speech, catching much of the flavor of the spoken word; for example, conversation in the family, quarrels between women or between husband and wife, etc., and (2) the more or less one-sided exchange between a pupil/disciple and an instructor/preacher/spiritual master following fixed patterns for this type of didactic and religious discourse. The first type serves to establish the characters and to create suspense, and the second type to underscore the author's didactic mission. Sometimes both types merge when questions of central importance are discussed among the characters. Such passages are especially interesting because they reveal the conflicts and contradictions

⁴Ed. Mālik Rām (New Delhi: Maktaba-e Jāmi'a, 1991), p. 248.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 249.

underlying Naẓīr Aḥmad's writings. It is precisely here that he introduces a new element into Urdu storytelling. Here, again, Naẓīr Aḥmad the orator and Naẓīr Aḥmad the storyteller join together, and one can well imagine the impact his eloquence must have had on an audience educated to appreciate ornamentation, the exhaustive use of images and similes, rhyme and rhythm, plays on words, etc.

His writing resembles the oral tradition in other respects as well. He often turns to his readers as would-be listeners. His book *Ru'yā'-e Ṣādiqa* (A Truthful Dream; 1893; RS) opens as if in the middle of a conversation:

*Lā ḥaul va lā quvvata illā bi 'l-Lāhi 'l-'alī 'l-'azīm! Kyā dhōkā hu'ā hai. Ham muddat tak isī kھیāl mēn rahē ke Ṣādiqa aur Yūsufi dō sagī bahinēn thīn ...*⁶

There is no strength or power but in God, the Almighty! How I have been deceived! I took Ṣādiqa and Yusufi to be two [blood] sisters for such a long time ...

This style comes very close to the colloquial tone with which many of Ghālib's letters open and creates a similar atmosphere of face-to-face conversation. Furthermore Naẓīr Aḥmad's command over the formal, elaborate style dictated by the older literary canon also resembles, as Ralph Russell has aptly pointed out, the power of Ghālib's Persian prose,⁷ and, in my view, also of Ghālib's Urdu letters. For instance, Naẓīr Aḥmad's description of the town in the grip of a cholera epidemic is as moving and powerful as Ghālib's description of the devastation of Delhi during and after the Mutiny of 1857:

*Ēk bāzār-e maut tō albatta garm thā, varna jid'ar jā'ō sannāṭā aur vīrānī, jis taraf nigāh karō vaḥshat-o-parēshānī. Jin bāzārōn mēn ādhī rāt tak khavē sē khavā ḥbiltā thā, aisē ujṛē payē thē ke din dōpahar jāṭē hū'ē dar ma'lūm hōtā thā. Kaṭōrōn kī j'han'kār mauqūf, saudē-vālōn kī pukār band, milnā julnā, ikhtilāṭ-o-mulāqāt, āmad-o-shud, bīmār pursī aur 'iyādat, bāz did-o-ziyārat, mehmāndāri-o-ziyāfat, kul rasmēn lōgōn nē uṭhā dīn.*⁸

The bazaar of death, however, was in full swing; otherwise, wherever one went, silence and desolation; wherever one looked, fright and fear. The

⁶(n.p.: n.p., n.d.), p. 5.

⁷Cf. Ralph Russell, *The Pursuit of Urdu Literature* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 98.

⁸*Taubatu 'n-Naṣūb*, p. 25.

markets which used to be full of jostling and shoving [crowds] until midnight were so deserted that one was afraid to cross them even at noon. No rattling of cups, no shouting of vendors, all meeting and mingling, all visits and encounters, all traffic, all inquiring and looking after others, all visits to the sick, all gatherings and festivities suspended.

There is a certain calm resignation in these sentences reminiscent of Ghālib. The sentences are short, often elliptical; they have rhythm, occasionally also rhyme. Their structure follows a pattern that creates the effect of brevity, precision, and even a sense of understatement. Note the complete absence of adjectives. The tone is matter-of-fact and is devoid of emotion. A pairing of synonyms on the one hand, and the creation of contrasting images on the other is yet another noteworthy feature of this style. And this language has not lost its impact with the passage of time. The young Pakistani writer, Āṣif Farrukhī, stresses that while he has no objection at all to how *TN* is written, he cannot help being upset by what is written in it.⁹

The widespread characterization of Naẓīr Aḥmad's use of such rhetorical devices as outdated, and as a fault, defect (*'aiḥ*), deficiency (*khāmī*), weakness (*kamzōrī*), or shortcoming (*kōṭāhī*) of his work is, in my opinion, totally out of place. While inconsistency, repetition, and the inordinate length of certain passages may perhaps be regarded as detrimental to the overall impact of his work, considering their inner logic, the tendency to dismiss every deviation from the colloquial style as a "fault" or "deficiency" betrays a myopic as well as biased perspective. We would do well to remind ourselves that both kinds of styles are also found in the short stories of Munshi Premchand which were written a good forty years after Naẓīr Aḥmad. For a telling example of this usage all one need do is examine Premchand's story "Vikramādīt kā Tēghā" (Vikramadit's Dagger) in Part 1 of his collection *Prēm Paḥḥīsī* (1915).

Despite such unfavorable comments, most critics agree on Naẓīr Aḥmad's outstanding skills as a storyteller and on his mastery of language. By combining the best of the different but parallel traditions of storytelling, discursive writing, and oratory that were current at his time, he succeeded in creating something entirely new. Close scrutiny of his works does not support the contention that he consciously followed western

⁹See his "Naṣūḥ—Haiṣē sē Kitāb-Sōzī Tak," in *Saughāt* 2 (March 1992), p. 267.

models. Rather, the spirit of his time, the social conditions in which he grew up, his worldview and his sense of mission shaped his writing. These were precisely the areas in which the challenge of western education and western ideas played a central role. And it was exactly his didactic aim in particular, his commitment as an educator—so often branded as “artistic failure”—that inexorably drove him to introduce realism in all its facets into his work. Through “negative” characters and the questions and doubts they raise, as well as through some virtuous characters, he manages to broaden his vision until it is able to transcend any preconceived and narrow ideological position. Thus the sense of mission which impelled Naẓīr Aḥmad to write his books and to make them as interesting and captivating as he possibly could was, in fact, a precondition for his stories to adopt certain features of the novel.

What, exactly, are the central concerns addressed by his books? I shall focus mainly on two of them: *TN* and *RS*. *TN* has generally been considered the author’s masterpiece and a milestone in the history of the Urdu novel. Although the plot is based on Defoe’s *The Family Instructor*, Part I, the two works have little in common except perhaps the basic outline of the story. Naẓīr Aḥmad presents, in my view successfully, a convincing Indian setting, with Indian Muslim characters speaking in their own idiom. The protagonist, Naṣūḥ, is a *sharif* Muslim of Delhi who becomes ill with cholera. In his delirious state he dreams of the Day of Judgment and decides to “reform the ways and manners of his family members by inculcating in them a deep respect for their religion, its rituals as well as its ethics.”¹⁰ Only his grown-up children, Na‘īma and Kalīm, oppose his reforming mission. Eventually, Na‘īma mends her ways thanks to the influence of her pious aunt, but Kalīm would rather leave the house than surrender to his father. His attempts to defy his father, which result in his defeat and eventual death, constitute the central conflict in the novel. The book was extremely successful and has remained in print ever since. For decades it has been part of the Urdu syllabus in schools, and an extract from it—the very popular episode of Kalīm’s visit to his friend Zāhirdār Bēg’s house after he has run away from home—is still included in the Urdu textbooks published by the National Council for Educational Research and Training, New Delhi.¹¹ This highly entertaining and comic

¹⁰Naim, p. 309.

¹¹The same episode also appears in the anthology *Modern Indian Literature*, ed. K.M. George (Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1993), vol. 2, pp. 1126–31.

episode exposes Zāhirdār Bēg as the type of braggadocio and fraud one might meet in any society.

But this is only a peripheral episode. Why it is repeatedly reproduced is as much due to the pleasure it provides as to its comparatively less controversial character. Controversies involving the interpretation of *TN* and its characters developed in the second half of the twentieth century. The initial reception of the novel was quite enthusiastic. It may have served as a kind of guide for middle-class Muslims in times of disorientation and disruption. The invasion of new, culturally-alien ideas which colonial rule and western education had unleashed on the Muslims of India had “inaugurated a long period of disequilibrium.”¹² In such a situation Naṣūh’s clear-cut rules—for a pious life lived in accordance with the injunctions of Islam, for moral conduct, and for the development of a “Protestant” ethos of labor and work—must have provided an anchor and moral support for the rising Muslim middle class. Since religious education was lacking in government schools and colleges, parents had to assume that responsibility, not just by teaching and preaching, but also, and to a far greater extent, by setting themselves up as role models. Strict adherence to the commandments of Islam—ritual prayer, fasting, pilgrimage to Mecca, and payment of *zakāt*—along with a typically Muslim attire would preserve Muslim identity both inwardly and outwardly and also prepare one for the hereafter, while learning and hard work would guarantee success in this world. *TN* and Naẓīr Aḥmad’s earlier novels, as Naim puts it,

are just the right kind of success stories that the Muslims of India needed to hear in the trying years after the failure of the mutiny and the dissolution of all symbols of their temporal power. Separating the world of God from the world of Caesar—in effect though not, perhaps, in intention—and suggestive of an Islamic version of the Protestant ethics of success, these novels are precisely the kind of *adab* that both the rulers and the ruled seem to have desired at that particular time in history. This explains their success.¹³

In a way the success of Naẓīr Aḥmad’s books may be compared to the success of today’s popular self-help books which provide advice on diverse aspects of life. Intellectually, however, his books attempted not only to

¹²S.R. Faruqi, in *ibid.*, vol. I, p. 422.

¹³Naim, p. 314.

articulate the nature of the confusion and disquietude that had swept across Subcontinental Muslims but also to recreate a semblance of order in the prevailing chaos.

“It must have left an indelible mark on the minds of many generations,” Naim remarks about *TN* earlier in the same article, “for nearly seventy years went by before anyone found fault with Naṣūḥ and saw Kalīm as a victim of circumstances, as a ‘strange mixture of good and evil.’”¹⁴ The sharpest attacks on Naṣūḥ concern his burning of the books—among them many classics of Persian and Urdu poetry—he finds in Kalīm’s library. Naim suggests that this “may be one of the most horrifying scenes in Urdu novels.”¹⁵ Pritchett views this scene as the rejection of the old poetry (and prose) “enacted in a literal form as well: as a gesture of violent, deliberate, physical destruction. And by no coincidence, the books were burned as part of a larger fire that included Kalīm’s whole archetypically aristocratic world.”¹⁶ So then, it is the fire of missionary zeal run amok. Pritchett puts it into the context of the new, utilitarian concept of literature propagated by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan (1817–98), Ḥālī and Āzād, and remarks, “The book-burning scene is only a bit more extreme and shocking than Azad’s call for a whole new Anglicized, Victorian poetry and poetics.”¹⁷ Āṣif Farrukhī’s interpretation of the scene connects this act of cultural destruction directly to the burning of books in Nazi Germany and the suppression of dissent in contemporary Pakistani society. The most dangerous aspect of Naṣūḥ’s behavior, he feels, is his conviction that he is ideologically right in his actions.¹⁸ When reproached by his wife, Naṣūḥ justifies his actions by declaring that the books were full of “irreligion and idolatry and discourtesy and shamelessness and obscenity and slander and lies.”¹⁹ Indeed, “obscenity” is one of the labels sufficient to get any book or other work of art banned in Pakistan, and the criteria for defining “obscenity” may not differ very much from those established by Naṣūḥ either.

The creation of a character like Naṣūḥ and his triumph in the story seem to validate those who contend that Naẓīr Aḥmad was a veritable

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

¹⁶ P. 186.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

¹⁸ P. 275.

¹⁹ Pritchett, p. 186.

orthodox priest (*kaṭḥ-mullā*) or a “theologian of the old type with a modicum of modern ideas”²⁰ as well as those who see him as opposed to the “liberal” type of Islam represented, as Farrukhi claims,²¹ by Kalīm. However, we shouldn’t forget, that Naṣūḥ hesitates for quite some time before he actually sets fire to the books (missing his lunch in the meantime!). The author gives us an outward reason for this hesitation, viz., the material value of the books, their beautiful calligraphy, and their excellent bindings. But there may well be a lot more than this behind his hesitation. Naṣūḥ, after all, has been brought up in the same tradition he now wants to banish from his household, and he has even had his wife read—albeit after a good deal of censorship—Sa’dī’s *Gulistān*—one of the books earmarked for burning.

We do not get any further hints at this inner conflict in the novel itself, but there is incontrovertible evidence to suggest that Naẓīr Aḥmad was as much a connoisseur of good poetry as he was a critic of the “frivolous” aspects of classical poetry. In his later work, *RS*, he frequently uses quotations from classical Persian and Urdu poets to support his point, a practice common among Urdu speakers up to this day. His love of poetry is also amply illustrated by incidents which his pupil, Farḥatu ’l-Lāh Bēg, has related in his *Ḍāḳṭar Naẓīr Aḥmad kī Kahānī: Kuṣḥ Mērī aur Kuṣḥ Unkī Zubānī*. For instance, once, when one of Naẓīr Aḥmad’s pupils recited verses without any feeling for their rhythm, Naẓīr Aḥmad told him to go to a courtesan’s parlor and get some real training, declaring, “*bhā’ī mujḥ sē tō she’rōñ kē galē par ḥurī pḥirtē dēkḥā nahīñ jātā*” (“Brother, I cannot bear the spectacle of poetic lines being slaughtered [in this way]”).²² Another time he was so upset about the way his pupils were “murdering” classical poetry that he just threw them out.²³ In class, Naẓīr Aḥmad and Farḥatu ’l-Lāh Bēg spent hours reciting couplets and competing in the number of couplets on a given subject each knew by heart.²⁴

It would thus appear that the wholesale dismissal of classical literature voiced so radically in *TN* represents only one side of it’s author’s person-

²⁰Muhammad Sadiq, *A History of Urdu Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 416.

²¹P. 271.

²²Ed. Rashīd Ḥasan Khān (Delhi: Anjuman-e Taraqqī-e Urdū Hind, 1992) p. 49.

²³*Ibid.*, pp. 49–50.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 51.

ality. Naẓīr Aḥmad was certainly able to appreciate good poetry, but he adopted a strictly puritanical and utilitarian outlook in his didactic and edifying books. The state of his mind must have been similar to that of Ḥālī who propagated the “new” literature but nonetheless wrote an enthusiastic account of Ghālīb’s life and work in *Yādgar-e Ghālīb* (1892). One point must be conceded in this context: there really were no Urdu textbooks for children, and Naẓīr Aḥmad was right in stressing that most of the classics were unsuitable for their education.

His emphasis on religious instruction in the family had grown directly from the conviction that the modern education being provided by the government was seriously lacking in it and this could only lead to the gradual spread of unbelief and to a deterioration of morals in the younger generation. He saw this religious instruction as complementary to modern education, not as an alternative to it. When Farḥatu ’l-Lāh Bēg and one of his friends asked if Naẓīr Aḥmad would teach them Arabic, he advised them to study “science” instead, which the Muslims needed far more than Arabic, adding, “*fārsī paṛḥ kar tēl bēč lōgē, ’arabī paṛḥ kar tēl bēčnā bhī nahīn ā’ēgā*” (“If you studied Persian, you’d at least be able to sell oil; but if you study Arabic, you won’t learn how to sell even oil”).²⁵

In his other work, *RS*, Saiyid Ṣādiq takes up courses in law and engineering to prepare for a career independent of government service. Time and again Naẓīr Aḥmad advocates the advancement of Indian Muslims in the material world, as professionals, entrepreneurs, or businessmen. This was not mere talk on his part; he actually acted on it himself. With his enormous earnings from the Nizam’s Hyderabad State, he helped many Muslims to start their own businesses. He tried to show a practical way to separate the world of God from the world of Caesar. In *RS*, he outlines the separate fields of reason (*’aqḥ*) and religion (*maẓhab*) as follows: (1) The Sphere of Religion, which is made up of belief in God, divine attributes, injunctions of the Shari’a (Islamic law), the hereafter, and the nature of the soul; (2) The Sphere of Reason, which has to do with all aspects of mundane life (=the world of Caesar); and (3) The Sphere of Reason and Religion, which involves ethics and morality.²⁶ Yet the limitations of his approach become immediately obvious when, in the same work, he tries to present a rational, logical proof for the existence of God. Let us have a closer look at his work, which has been largely ignored by critics, perhaps

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

²⁶ Pp. 283–4.

because it is less of a story than a religious treatise.

RS (Şādiqā's dream/a truthful dream) was published in 1893. It came at a point when Naẓīr Aḥmad had just begun to move away from fictional stories to strictly theological works. Hence the story is reduced to a mere frame for the elaborate religious instruction of a searching young man, Şādiq, by an elderly wise man (*buzurg*)—an unmistakable mouthpiece for the author. The frame story—Şādiq marrying Şādiqā, who has many dreams, which all turn out to be true; her last dream being that of the *buzurg* resolving Şādiq's doubts about religion—sets the stage for the long discourse on religion. Perhaps Naẓīr Aḥmad devised it to give his own voice a heightened sense of authority because Şādiqā's dreams are regarded as something like a voice from on high. The advice for the everyday life of a good Muslim imparted in this book closely parallels that of *TN*. And yet in many ways *RS*, written nearly twenty years later, is a much more unorthodox work than *TN*. Opposition to his views from the group of the orthodox Muslims, the futile disputes between Christian missionaries and Muslim theologians, religious strife in India—all these seem to have forced Naẓīr Aḥmad to reconsider the place of religion in life. He writes, as a preface to the book:

*Tamhīd kē taur par jō kahnā manzūr hai ye hai ke ādmī kē sāt^h sāt^h mazhab aur mazhab kē sāt^h sāt^h ikhtilāf paidā hū'ā, aur is ikhtilāf nē dunyā kō kab^{hī} čain sē na rahnē diyā. In dinōn mazhabī čarčē baṛē zōrōn par haiñ, aur is kē zārūrī natījē b^{hī} hōtē hī rahtē haiñ. Is risālē kē tašnīf karnē sē gharz ye hai ke musalmān jihādī nahīn balke ijtihādī musalmān hōn, aur āp b^{hī} amn-o-čain sē baiṭ^hēñ aur dūsroñ kō b^{hī} amn-o-čain sē baiṭ^hēñ dēñ.*²⁷

As a preamble I would like to say that religion was created together with man and together with religion developed discord, and this discord never let the world live in peace. These days religious disputations are in full swing, and the unavoidable consequences are there for all to see. My purpose in writing this treatise is to stress that Muslims do not practice holy war (*jihād*) but rather independent judgment (*ijtihād*) and that they may not only live in peace themselves but let others live in peace as well.

The portrait of the pious Muslim painted here is not significantly different from the portrait Naẓīr Aḥmad had drawn in his earlier works. What is different, however, is his repeated insistence on keeping faith as a

²⁷Pp. 3–4.

strictly personal affair between the believer and his God—an affair in which no third party should interfere. Interestingly, this is also the point made by Ibnu 'l-Vaqt in the eponymous novel²⁸ and coincides with the view of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. But that does not stop Naẓīr Aḥmad—neither in the person of Ibnu 'l-Vaqt's adversary Ḥujjatu 'l-Islām, nor in the person of the elderly wise man of *RS*—from preaching to his readers how absolutely right his views are. However, it should be mentioned that his preaching never degenerates into derogatory remarks about other religious communities and their practices. His critique of different Muslim sects, especially of a particular brand of Ṣūfis, of the Sunnī-Shī'a schism, and of the rationalistic approach adopted by the “*nēčari*” school of Sir Syed, cannot be discussed here in any detail, although it does deserve a closer study, not only in the context of the debates of the late nineteenth century, but also in the context of Muslim reform movements dating back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Ṣādiq, on the other hand, seems to be something of a blending of Ibnu 'l-Vaqt and the writer as a young man. His Aligarh education, his rational approach and his insistence on personal freedom bring him very close to Ibnu 'l-Vaqt; on the other hand, his questions and doubts regarding the place and meaning of religion remind us of Naẓīr Aḥmad's own search for the true faith during his years at the Delhi College.²⁹

Farrukhī draws a straight line from Kalīm to Ibnu 'l-Vaqt, inasmuch as the latter finds in western education and government service an outlet for his individuality.³⁰ Ṣādiq is an even more successful continuation of this character. Kalīm failed because his pursuit of individual freedom was undercut by a lack of adequate education and job opportunities. And while his insistence on individual choices may sound distinctly modern, his upbringing and qualifications remain completely traditional. It is this contradiction which destroys him. In a way he is as much torn between two worlds and two ways of life as Ibnu 'l-Vaqt is. In Ṣādiq, however, we finally find an attempt to portray a harmonious synthesis of both Kalīm and Ibnu 'l-Vaqt, as an aim or ideal at any rate: modern education, economic self-reliance, success and, yes, a distinct Muslim identity in matters of religion, ethics, and social organization. Ṣādiq is a man of the new

²⁸Naẓīr Aḥmad, *Ibnu 'l-Vaqt* (Lahore: Majlis-e Taraqqī-e Adab, 1972), p. 101.

²⁹Cf. Russell, p. 112.

³⁰P. 272.

order: pragmatic, self-supporting, and rational in mundane affairs, exercising his right of free choice in his personal affairs. He is allowed to get away with disobedience toward his elders (i.e., marrying a girl of his own choice) because he is successful in the world. He doesn't rely on the family property, but instead chooses to live on his own earnings—like his creator, he is every bit a self-made man. (Nazīr Aḥmad was rightfully proud of his achievements and of the fact that he was entirely a “self-made man.”³¹) On the other hand, Kalīm is portrayed as idle and “useless.” He symbolizes the leisurely ways of the old feudal class. Nazīr Aḥmad's sharp criticism of idleness was not only in keeping with the spirit of the new times, but also perfectly understandable in light of his own experience. From his boyhood on, he had to earn his living. Thus, apart from his conviction that only activity (in education, services, commerce and business, etc.) could save his community, there may also have been an element of personal contempt for the rich and the idle in his repeated attacks on good-for-nothing idlers.

To sum up, it can be said that many features of the “villains” of Nazīr Aḥmad's earlier books turn up again in the character of Ṣādiq, but this time they appear to be controlled or contained by the spiritual guidance of the *buzurg*. Biographical information suggests that many of Ṣādiq's tribulations and doubts reflect what the author, as a young man, had to go through himself. In the book this experience is ascribed to the *buzurg* in his student days. For instance, “*gharaḡ main kisi vaqt 'isā'ī thā kisi vaqt musalmān kisi vaqt kuḡb bhī nahīn*”³² (“In short, sometimes I was a Christian, sometimes a Muslim, and sometimes nothing at all”).

As Nazīr Aḥmad has himself mentioned, he was finally able to overcome his doubts, but only after much contemplation and hard thinking, without any help from the religious books.

But the *buzurg* is not free of contradictions, either. He calls all religious disputations (*munāzara*) altogether futile, but what he presents is itself nothing but a *munāzara*. He stresses the inner aspects of religious faith, but at the same time advocates strict adherence to religious norms in ritual, dress, etc. Where Ṣādiq insists on asking questions the *buzurg* is not able or willing to answer, such questions are simply dismissed as unimportant or harmful. The *buzurg*'s most striking contradiction, however, is perhaps his argumentation that religious faith conforms to reason.

³¹Cf. Farḡatu 'l-Lāh Bēg. Ed. Rashīd Ḥasan Khān, p. 21.

³²P. 215.

Another apparent contradiction the *buzurg* is unable to resolve is that between human free will and predestination.

The book is full of harsh criticism of the biased and bigoted Muslims of Delhi. *Mullas* and *maulvīs* also come in for a fair amount of tongue-lashing, though, interestingly enough, in *TN* ridiculing *maulvīs* was considered one of the most negative aspects of Urdu poetry. *Ibnu 'l-Vaqt* also has a scene in which *maulvīs* are held up for ridicule, but in *RS* this aspect really becomes much more pronounced. What worried Naẓīr Aḥmad most about the *maulvīs* was their habit of sowing seeds of discord among Muslims of different affiliations and their almost pathological aversion to any kind of reform.

As I have mentioned, Naẓīr Aḥmad devoted the last years of his writing career exclusively to producing theological treatises. His role as an important religious thinker has yet to be studied. This much, however, can be stated without any reservation: his preaching of tolerance toward different religious communities, so dominant in *RS*, has lost none of its relevance today.

Conclusion

In his long career as a writer Naẓīr Aḥmad produced seven books labeled as “tales” or “novels” as well as a considerable number of theological treatises. His didactic tales/novels should be studied as parts of a series to obtain a fuller picture of their author’s interest in almost all aspects of life and of the complexity of his vision. It would be wrong to apply a notion of literary or stylistic “development” to his books, as some critics have done. It appears rather each tale is constructed according to the requirements of the subject/s dealt with and the tale’s intended/expected readership. It is for this reason that Naẓīr Aḥmad has called—and in my opinion, rightly—the last of his didactic tales, *RS*, a *risāla* (treatise). It is by far the most abstract and non-fictional of his books. We may even take it as a forerunner of the theological books that followed.

The balance between the different narrative and discursive techniques employed by Naẓīr Aḥmad varies from book to book. We would, however, be doing him an injustice by judging these techniques to be more developed or less developed. A statement like Annemarie Schimmel’s that

“the realistic contents contrast with the naïve artistic forms”³³ clearly misses the point. Naẓīr Aḥmad was one of the most sophisticated writers of his time. He exercised full control over the styles and techniques of his prose writing and was often not only up-to-date but, actually, ahead of his time. His different styles were in response to different needs. Here we might well remind ourselves that his career as a writer coincided with the unprecedented popularity of the written *dāstān*, and his books and the *dāstāns* were transmitted through the same channels to more or less the same readership. What makes his books readable right down to this day is not only the vivid language—fascinating and persuasive even in the much-abused long sermons—but also the atmosphere of troubled times, of unresolved conflicts which they faithfully preserve.

Naẓīr Aḥmad’s books ushered in a period of enormous popularity for the novel in Urdu literature. It would certainly be worthwhile to study the novels written by his successors, his epigones if you will, more closely than has hitherto been done. The thought-provoking treatment of social, political and religious questions, so apparent throughout Naẓīr Aḥmad’s works, seems, however, to be lacking in his contemporaries. □

³³See her *Classical Urdu Literature from the Beginning to Iqbal* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1975), p. 233.