

NAZIR AHMAD

## Nazir Ahmad's Letter to His Son\*

YOU'VE OFTEN HEARD me sing the praises of English education, because I wanted you to be taught English. Now that you've learnt English to the extent that every good subject of our Empress Queen Victoria should, let me now tell you the faults of the English, because everything has its good and bad aspects.

*Naf'-e mai jumla ba-gufti zararash nīz begū*  
You've told me all the benefits of wine  
Now tell me all the harm it does you too

It's not only my opinion, but that of most people, and the English themselves make the same complaint, that Indians who learn English become haughty and insolent and conceited. The thing is that when God gives a nation sovereignty, which is the equivalent of paradise on earth, the prestige attached to sovereignty enters into everything associated with that nation, and language is no exception. The scope of English is such that if you sit down to translate any book on the science of agriculture or chemistry, or medicine, or anatomy or *natural philosophy* or any other *science* there will be in every line three or four words that are outside the scope of Urdu, poor language that it is.<sup>1</sup>

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\*From Nazir Ahmad, *Mau'iza-e Hasana* [A Good Counsel], ed. Iftikhar Ahmad Siddiqi (Lahore: Majlis-e Taraqqi-e Adab, 1963), pp. 210–28. The letter bears the number 106. It uses a good many English words. I have italicized these in my translation. —Tr.

<sup>1</sup>Here he quotes a Persian phrase, "*ke āmadī, ke pīr shudī*," which literally means, "When did you come? And when did you become old?"—i.e., "You are only a child and you are trying to explain things which are far beyond the capabilities of anyone who is not an old man." Khālid Ḥasan Qādīri tells me that in

Arabic, which is our *classical language* has no equivalent words. So you are compelled either to coin new words or leave the English words exactly as they are—and both methods are awkward. And it is because of these difficulties that we are deprived of modern knowledge. Look at the Arabic and Persian newspapers of Egypt and Constantinople and you'll find confirmation of my statement. No one who doesn't know the technical terms of *French* or English can understand a single article in these papers. The same is true of the travel diary of the King of Iran's travel to England. English words are entering all the time into our own language too. And it is the inevitable result of British rule that their language is coming to prevail over all other languages. So what I've said is true, that when God gives a nation sovereignty the reflection of its prestige attaches itself to everything associated with it.

Another thing is that English has no room for cheap expressions or flattery or exaggeration or lying. With us we have to wade through scores of proper forms of address and greeting, of asking after health, and formal expression of a desire to meet. So "O camel, which of your limbs is straight?"<sup>2</sup> This has deformed our letter-writing to such an extent that these bad conventions affect us from childhood onwards. We lose all awareness of it, but half of what we write is lies and the other half pointless self-abasement and undeserved praises of our addressees. I always say that Persian literature has been our ruin. But now English has begun to make an impact on Urdu, and our language has to a considerable extent purged itself of these faults of exaggeration and cheapness. People have begun to appreciate clear, straightforward language. In the law courts even the humblest Muslim clerk no longer wants to call himself "your born slave" who "eats your salt" or call his superior "lord of lords," "my spiritual guide" and "he to whom the world turns in worship." In short English has whispered to him that he too is a man, who lives his own life and has his own property and sense of honor. All his rights are safeguarded. He is Empress Queen Victoria's subject and to some extent subordinate to those who at present govern him, but he is nobody's slave. It is incumbent upon him to respect his superior officer, but not to worship him. He gladly salutes him, but he does not prostrate himself before him.

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Urdu "*jum'a jum'a āṭḥ dīn*" has the same sense. The meaning here is, Urdu is trying to do something far beyond its capacity. This and the following notes are added by me.

<sup>2</sup>"*ūṇṭ bē* [also, *rē*] *ūṇṭ, tērī kaunsī kal sīdhī*"—an Urdu proverb.

He answers his questions respectfully, but doesn't grovel or stand there with folded hands. If he is at fault, he willingly accepts his duly prescribed punishment, but he won't on any account put up with being called a *damn fool*.

[It is] not only the English from whom we hear complaints of this arrogance of our English speakers. [...] We see many manifestations of this arrogance of our English speakers, and you yourself if you study their ways critically will agree that our English speakers—not all, but for the most part—begin to regard our society with contempt. I don't say that our society is without its faults. Only God is faultless. But we have two things to say to our English-speaking fellow countrymen. First, is everything which English speakers regard as a fault really so or not? Learning English inevitably makes a man *prejudiced* to some extent. That is, the idea of the excellence of everything English enters into his mentality to a greater extent than it should. Of course, the fact that the English are our rulers makes all of us to some extent approve of their ways, and if not today, then tomorrow, and if not tomorrow then the day after we shall find that [as the Arabic phrase has it] “people follow the creed of their rulers” (“*an-nāsu ‘alā dīni mulūkihim*”). And do these English speakers, poor fellows, think they know these faults of our society better than we do? Shall we ourselves list them? Our first fault is poverty, and that too of a kind which there is perhaps no prospect of ridding ourselves of for ten generations to come. On top of that is prejudice, ignorance, incompetence, irresoluteness, idleness, short-sightedness, selfishness, disunity—that is, all the attributes which make for our fallen fortunes. But most regrettable of all is the fact that it is not for these reasons that our English-speaking brothers, who are considered to be the flower of our country, despise us. How can they, when every one of these has faults and even more are to be found in them too? If there is a speck in our eye there is a cataract in theirs. [Or, in biblical language, If there is a mote in our eye there is a beam in theirs.] If we are one-eyed, they are blind. If we stutter, they are dumb. If our English speakers had had the capacity for high-thinking, things would have been better than they are. They see only one fault in us—that we don't adopt the civilized ways of the English, don't live in homes like theirs, don't wear clothes like theirs, don't eat and drink what they eat and drink, don't allow our women the freedom to rove around freely. As though these wise men of ours thought that the worldly ascendancy of the English is the result of their civilized way of life.

*Fikr-e har-kas ba qadr-e himmat-e ūst*

Everyone thinks to the extent of his  
capacity.

Oh you enemies of reason, it is altogether different qualities which account for the progress they have made—hard work, endurance, the desire to discover, steadfastness, punctuality, interest in the modern sciences, national solidarity.

I have never in my life lived in English society. Nor have I ever wanted to. So I know very little about English society. But what I do know about it, I don't like. I ask you, why would any foreigner want to live in a society where people keep themselves so much aloof from others that two of them, members of the same nation, can live for long periods in the same hotel or travel on the same ship or eat every meal at the same table without being able to get to know each other?

You know that amongst the English women don't observe purdah? Not only that. Men and women publicly dance together. And their dancing is not like ours. The man and the woman dance in a sort of embrace. Well, [as the Persian phrase has it,] "*har mulkē va har rasmē*" ("every country has its own customs"). At this point I want to say something else. If, for example, James and Mary dance as a couple, this doesn't mean that they really meet each other. They are still complete strangers to each other. These people send their little children to England for their education. You too must have thought of how these people, even if they are on their own, generally live in a separate bungalow. All these things suggest that the English temperament is not one that encourages much familiarity. We are considered to be half savages. If we had been so cool towards one another we'd have been not just full savages but full savages and a half or full savages and three quarters.

As for civilized living, the position of women comes into the picture. And why not? They too are members of society. It is over the position of women that we and the English are in strong disagreement. Who is going to pronounce on which society treats its women more appropriately? At this point I'm reminded of a story. A respected friend of mine used to say, "Our whole family is Shī'a. When I grew up I went into the differences between Shī'a and Sunnī and came to the conclusion that the Sunnīs were in the right. So I became a Sunnī. I argued constantly with the members of my family, urging every one of them to become a Sunnī. One of them was a lady older than me, and I kept urging her too to become a Sunnī. Of course, she couldn't answer my arguments and so said nothing. One

day I said to her, ‘At any rate tell me why you hesitate to become a Sunni.’ She said, ‘Son, the thing is this, that I hate the very names of those accursed ones’—meaning the first three caliphs.” It’s true. Human beings are such weak creatures that their opinion is sure to be influenced to some extent by the society they live in. Our English speakers have only one thing to say to us,<sup>3</sup> namely, that we should make our way of life the English way. Well, leave aside other things that arise in social intercourse; if in the presence of others anyone is impertinent enough to ask [any of them] “How is your wife?” or to praise her beauty to his face, isn’t it certain that this would make them break out in a sweat from top to toe?

The whole moral structure of our society is founded upon purdah. The day there is the slightest weakening of the restrictions of purdah it will be shaken to its foundations.

I have already said that this is a matter in which no Englishman’s and no Indian’s opinion can be regarded as the right one, because everyone is constrained, not by anyone’s contrivance but by temperament, to defend his own society. But I want to prove to you, speaking as fairly as I can, that our way of life doesn’t merit the adverse criticism that is leveled at it.

[The above is the equivalent of six and a half pages of the Urdu text. There follow four pages of discussion of the position of women in English and Indian Muslim society.]

Now for English dress. Take their women’s “*full dress*.” If *that* is a superior kind of dress then one can say without exaggeration that it is so only in the sense of the couplet:

*Tan-e ‘uryānī sē behtar nahīn duniyā mēn libās*  
*Yeh voh jāma hai keh jis-kā nahīn sidhā ulṭā*  
 There is no dress in the world superior to  
 the body’s nakedness  
 That is a dress which has no inside-out.

And a fine name for it “full dress” is!<sup>4</sup> In short you can form a good idea of English taste in dress from this “full dress” and from its name. What need to elaborate further? How well the [Persian] poet has said:

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<sup>3</sup>Here Naẓīr Aḥmad uses the Arabic phrase “*zālīka qauluhum bi-afvāhim*.” The idea is that our Indian lovers of English ways merely talk like this but actually conduct themselves quite traditionally in some respects.

<sup>4</sup>Here Naẓīr Aḥmad uses the Persian line “*bar-‘aks nehand nām-e zaṅgī kāfūr*” (like “calling a Negro camphor,” which is a brilliant white).

*Har yakē nāṣiḥ barā'ē digarān*  
*Nāṣiḥ-e khud yāfiām kam dar jahān*  
 Everyone is ready to advise others:  
 I have found few in this world ready to  
 advise themselves.

They are very ready to call others names—“animals” and “savages” and “uncivilized”; they should look at themselves; the fact is they do not even know how to keep their bodies covered. No doubt English style in men’s clothes has come to have a certain honor and dignity attached to it because the English are the ruling power; if it were not for that, their tightly-fitting clothes have in themselves a sort of absurdity about them; and I have seen Englishmen who in the hot weather go nearly frantic; they cannot bear to wear their national dress, and in their homes at certain times always wear loose-fitting clothes like ours. I do not agree that they are free from the restrictions of customs and convention. If they find a certain style of dress more comfortable, then why are they ashamed to adopt it?

In my opinion it is the Englishman’s dress which has compelled him to slump about on chairs and couches morning noon and night, for if all obstinacy be put aside it must be admitted that sitting on a chair or a couch is not one-tenth so comfortable as sitting on the floor. If you sit in a chair you can adopt only one position. At the most you can only lean back, or, if you are alone, stretch your legs out and put them on the table. But then your posture is a sight worth seeing. There is one more way: you can press your feet on the floor and straighten out your body, taking the chair back with you. If you lose your center of gravity your legs go up in the air and your head down. You lie there in your tightly-fitting trousers shouting for a man to come and pick you up and set you on your feet. On the floor you can sit in postures more than one can count, and from the medical point of view sitting on the floor is very good for your health. But who pays any attention to comfort or health? The ways of our rulers take precedence. Thousands of people are suffering from this mania for imitating the British in every way they can, in season and out of season, not understanding that in every country people become accustomed to passing their lives in a particular way dictated by the particular characteristics of that country. For them only that particular way is comfortable, and to change that way without any strong ground is bound to be troublesome to them.

When people are in love with English ways, dress like the English and follow English etiquette, how can they help eating like the English too? Eating like the English can mean two things: first, having chairs and tables and knives and forks—that is, eating Indian food in the English way; and secondly, it can mean that the food too should be English. One of our new *reformers* has got very angry with us. He has reviled us Indians beyond all measure because we eat with our hand. (Don't run away with the idea that he eats with his mouth like a dog, or with his feet, like a crow—he uses a knife and fork.) But all his nonsense amounts to this, that to eat with your hand is dirty. No doubt about it, when you eat with your hand you cannot help getting it dirty to a greater or lesser extent, but I still say that likes and dislikes are not universal; they depend on what you are used to. There are many English things, *sardines* for example, which we find absolutely repulsive. Not to rinse the mouth after eating makes us feel sick; some people cannot feel at ease until they have taken something to change the taste in their mouth. In short, *standards* of personal cleanliness differ from nation to nation, and even from individual to individual; there is no call for anyone to condemn, or be sarcastic about, anyone else.

I once saw in a shop a special kind of teacup. There was a sort of balcony jutting out from the rim over the inside of the cup. I found that the idea of this was to protect the moustaches. I at once recalled the Arabic words “Wear your moustaches short and your beard long,” and thought how well the Lawgiver had provided for our convenience. Then I thought what a bad thing it is to be bound by convention. They can make all these arrangements but they can't do a small thing like getting their moustaches trimmed. To eat with the hand no doubt seems disgusting to the English, but it has this one clear advantage, that it is quite impossible to pick up a mouthful of food with a knife and fork so easily as you can with your hand. And secondly, even their own doctors have now admitted that there is a magnetic power in the hand which is transmitted through the hand to the food, that this is an aid to digestion.

And in the first place whatever relish is there in English food? Dishes of boiled, stale-smelling, half-cooked meat; peas; boiled potatoes; dry rice with all the water poured off; bread, instead of chapatis or parathas; one little cup of salt and one of black pepper. Perhaps you have heard the tale of the town dog who invited the country dog to visit him. He took him along and sat him down at a *kabābī's* shop. When the *kabābī* had closed his shop and gone away, the country dog began sniffing all around, and came across a leaf cup full of pepper which had been left lying there. As

soon as he put his nose into it the pepper went up into his head. He coughed and coughed and sneezed and sneezed until he was nearly frantic. When he complained his city friend replied, "My dear fellow, it's only for these relishes that we go on living in town!" In short, we people have developed a taste for spices, so how can we appreciate English food? One more story, and *our English dinner is over*. Before the Mutiny, one of the nobles of the royal court invited the Principal of Delhi College to dinner. [...] The food had been set out on the table in English fashion, and a man went to tell the Sahib that dinner was served. The royal chefs had prepared all kinds of dishes, both sweet and savory, and since a guest had been invited you may be sure the food must have been prepared with great care. Its delicious savor was beyond description: from the time the food was brought in the whole house was pervaded by it. But it was later learned that as soon as the Englishman set foot in the dining room and caught the whiff of musk and saffron and rosewater and *kēvyā*, he turned on his heel and left the room. Let alone eating, he never so much as took a good look at the food.

In short, those people who shout about "English civilization, English civilization" don't get to the bottom of things, which is that different tastes are natural, and can't be changed. What I say is that everyone likes his own ways. It is these that give him pleasure and he is likely to continue in them to the end. We know that the English are making striking progress in every field, and are not unmindful of the need to reform their way of life either. All the same, to imagine that their civilization has reached the highest stage of refinement would be a mistake. Matters of food and dress are minor ones. There are things, very important things in their society that offend us. I have already spoken in passing of the position of women there. Now look at their drinking. [...]

[He continues for another three and a half pages—speaking of English excessive drinking, of "*high-life*," and "*the last though not the least*" English irreligiousness before concluding. His letter ends:]

[Our English speakers] expect that if we adopt English ways the English will accept us and welcome us into their society. They certainly won't. As long as the English and we are rulers and ruled, victors and vanquished, dominant and subordinate we shall be like oil and water, which have never mixed and never will.

I have written at great length, but you can see that this theme was a very important one. There are physical ailments which sometimes spread widely. My opinion is that our time is one of the wide spread of irreligiousness. There are very few heads empty of the irrational craze for imita-



tion of the English. I have told you what I think. *Mā 'alainā illā al-balāgh!*  
[“And my task is simply to present (it)!”] □

—*Translated by Ralph Russell*