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# The Sahib in Late Eighteenth-Century Mughal India

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To the Western consumer of romances about the Raj, whether in print or in cinematic form, the sahib is more often than not a sun-embrowned European male in a solar hat who acquiesces to that appellation bestowed on him by the natives. The *OED* definition is quite revealing: "Sahib" is a "respectful title used by the natives of India in addressing an Englishman or other European (= 'Sir'); in native use, an Englishman, a European." The apparent ideological neutrality of the *OED* definition belies the highly contested structure of feeling the sahib constitutes in the making of the Indian elite nationalist discourse of the nineteenth century. Ashis Nandy has pointed out the homology between the rise of heterosexual male dominance over other forms of sexuality in the larger Western culture in the early modern era and the growing British political and economic dominance over the conquered Indians in the nineteenth century:

> It [nineteenth-century British colonial discourse] saw British rule as an agent of progress and as a mission. Many Indians in turn saw their salvation in becoming more like the British, in friendship or in enmity. They may not have fully shared the British idea of the martial races—the hyper-masculine, manifestly courageous, superbly loyal Indian castes and subcultures mirroring the British middle-class sexual stereotypes—but they did resurrect the ideology of the martial races latent in the traditional Indian concept of statecraft.[1]

1. Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), 7.

In other words, the English-educated elite Indian nationalists of the nineteenth century did indeed "respect" the official image of the hyper-masculine sahib that the British foisted on them, albeit grudgingly, because in their perception this sahib had conquered India by dint of this very masculinist ideology. Regarding the Indian nationalists in the early twentieth century who led armed resurrections against British rule, Nandy writes: "they sought to redeem the Indians' masculinity by defeating the British, often fighting against hopeless odds, to free the former once and for all from the historical memory of their own humiliating defeat."[2] There were also those who eschewed violent means but still sought to reform Indian religions and society and, above all, subjectivity along British Protestant, utilitarian lines. Nandy's summation of the work of such important nineteenth-century Hindu nationalist thinkers as Vivekanand and Dayananda amply illustrates the need felt by many Indians to be like the sahibs:

> They identified the West with power and hegemony, which in turn they identified with a superior civilization. Then they tried to 'list' the differences between the West and India and attributed the former's superiority to these differences. The rest of their lives they spent exhorting the hapless Hindus to pursue these cultural differentiae of the West.[3]

Consequently, Indian nationalism attempted to assimilate the "manliness" of the conquering sahib in order to reinvigorate what it perceived to be an effeminate, emasculated, and infantilized Indian identity as much it strove to revive a pristine pre-colonial one.[4] As Ruth Vanita puts it, "Drawing on Victorian values of earnestness, thrift, and industry, and their own religious orthodoxies, they [the elite nationalists] tended to advocate that every activity have a moral or social purpose."[5] Before the advent of the high British imperialism of the late nineteenth century, informed in equal measures by the utilitarian reformism and Protestant zeal of the preceding decades of the century and the concomitant rise of reactionary elite Indian nationalism, the sahib used to

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2. Nandy, *Intimate Enemy*, 9.

3. Nandy, *Intimate Enemy*, 25.

4. Nandy, *Intimate Enemy*, 11–18. In addition to the use of the trope of sexual domination, Ashis Nandy points out infantilization as an important strategy used by British colonialism to construct the Indians as docile subjects.

5. Ruth Vanita, *Gender, Sex and the City: Urdu Rekhti Poetry in India*, 1780–1870 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 27.

be a very different creature altogether. As I shall illustrate in my ensuing discussion of *The Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan* (1810), an account of the travels of a Mughal aristocrat, Mirza Abu Talib Khan (1752–1805) in Britain, France, and in the Ottoman Empire between 1799 and 1803, the sahib at this time was primarily an Indian of high birth even though the appellation was also sometimes applied to Europeans who lived among the native sahibs.[6] The *OED* adds that "sahib" is "also affixed as a title (equivalent to 'Mr.' prefixed) to the name or office of a European and to Indian and Bangladeshi titles and names."

Sahibs in the late Mughal Empire belonged to different ranks, not all of which were hereditary, nor was the ranking system in the Mughal Empire as rigidly codified as in the British system. The Nawab (or the "Nabobs" in the Anglicized version common in the eighteenth century) sahibs, who were originally the military governors of the Mughal provinces, had become virtually autonomous rulers after the reign of the last Great Mughal Aurangzeb [r. 1658–1707] and gradually lost that autonomy during the increasing ascendancy of the East India Company.[7] The Mirza sahibs were originally courtiers in the Mughal court. The original Mirza was a rather exclusive concept, because in the early days of the Mughal Empire only males of aristocratic Turco-Mongol descent were allowed to use the title. However, by the eighteenth century, belonging to a certain ethnicity was no longer a prerequisite for being a Mirza sahib. According to the *Mirzanama*, a seventeenth-century conduct book, a Mirza sahib's life is characterized not by the pursuit of wealth and power, but by living a life governed by exemplary generosity and good taste. The wine he drinks must be scented so as not to give offence to the company. He must study poetry and patronize music but must refrain from singing himself lest he give

6. Mirza Abu Talib wrote the account in Persian upon his return to India in 1803 and called it *Masir-i-Talibi*. Charles Stewart, one of his pupils, later translated *Masir-i-Talibi* into English under the title *The Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan* and it was published in 1810. See Daniel O'Quinn, "A Brief Chronology," *Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan* (1810), by Mirza Abu Talib, trans. Charles Stewart, ed. Daniel O'Quinn (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2012), 49–53.

7. For a succinct history of the rise and fall of the Nawabs, see Michael H. Fisher, "The World of Eighteenth-Century India," in *The Travels of Dean Mahomet: An Eighteenth-Century Journey Through India*, ed. Michael H. Fisher (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 1–7.

offence to his guests. The Mirza should recite the *Qur'an* and have some knowledge of the *Shari'a* but should refrain from engaging his company in weighty discussions about free will and predestination.[8] Sometimes professionals who attained the favour of the imperial court or the regional Nawabi courts were addressed as sahibs. For instance, renowned physicians who practiced Galenic medicine in the Mughal Empire were called Hakim sahibs. Similarly, in the cosmopolitan world of the Mughals the scribe well-versed in Persian, the court language, was respectfully called a Munshi sahib. In the late Mughal India, sahib was much more than a mere suffix; it constituted a world view distinctly different from the one brought by the British sahibs as they came to India in search of fortune and such was its potency that even some European sahibs embraced it.

I argue that in *The Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan* the native sahib is an Indian cosmopolitan who critically examines and rejects the reformed sexual and socio-economic mores of the increasingly assertive metropole which were beginning to shape the British governance of its newly acquired territories in the weakening Mughal Empire. Mirza Abu Talib Khan sahib, who is addressed as such by none other than his hostess in Capetown, Lady Anne Barnard,[9] displays the two main characteristics of the native sahib at this time: a sexuality undaunted by the metropolitan sexuality increasingly policed by compulsory heterosexuality and monogamy and reflected in his frank admiration for beautiful and accomplished courtesans and good-looking young men; and an aristocratic concept of social organization informed by the mutual dependence of the various elite castes and the service castes in Mughal India that sustained each other through the exchange of carefully crafted luxury goods, entertainments, and patronage rather than

8. For a summary of the *Mirzanama*, see Annemarie Schimmel, *The Empire of the Great Mughals: History, Art and Culture*, trans. Corinne Attwood, ed. Burzine K. Waghmar (London: Reaktion Books, 2004), 225–27.

9. Note that Lady Anne Barnard transcribes the Indo-Persian word once as "Sayb" and again as "Saijb" but it is still recognizable: "I have sent a few letters of Introduction with Capt. Richardson & Khan Sayb [Mirza Abu Talib Khan] the first is man of learning and intelligence who returns for heath chiefly after 20 years spent in India he is much esteemed, and is of the party with Khan Saijb, a Persian chief, a clever, agreeable & good man, a man of letters also, and far superior to most of the Grandees of Indostan." See Daniel O'Quinn, Introduction, *The Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan*, 9.

by the one based on increasingly reified human relationships in a rapidly industrializing British society.

The Mughal Empire, itself an heir to the older Muslim Sultanates of North India, inherited the cosmopolitanism of the Abbaside caliphate whose destruction by the Mongols had caused a great diaspora of intellectuals and professionals to the farthest reaches of the Islamic world. Saleem Kidwai, while pointing out the surprising visibility and neutral representations of homoerotically inclined men in medieval Muslim writing, later inherited by the Mughal Perso-Urdu tradition, writes:

> One important reason for this visibility is the cosmopolitanism of urban Islamic culture. The ruling elite [of India after the first Muslim conquests of the late tenth century CE] had inherited the sophisticated mores of the Abbasside caliphate. Although the original conquerors of North India were slave troops or mercenaries from the fringes of the caliphate, the Muslim population was constantly supplemented by the migration of scholars, poets, and administrators from other kingdoms.[10]

In the Mughal or Mughal-inspired courts and cities of India in the eighteenth century, this centuries-old openness to strangers and fortune-seekers continued unabated and resulted in a unique urban culture which was marked by the coexistence of the profane and the sacred, and the worldly and the ascetic. Religious scholars and holy men of various ilks were as welcome as courtesans of great beauty and accomplishments, poets of great renown, and artisans of great skill. In this twilight world of the Mughals, the boundaries between luxury and thrift or the profane and the sacred were often indistinct. The economies and societies in late Mughal India were sustained by a unique world view based on a complex network of interdependence marked by the exchange of gifts and patronage between various groups of people, rather than on a modern capitalistic one. The Mughal empire was, as John R. McLane has pointed out, "a segmented society with political communities fragmented at the higher levels" in the eighteenth century. As such, the ritual aspects of the giving and receiving of gifts played a significant symbolic function in creating

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10. Saleem Kidwai, "Introduction: Medieval Materials in the Perso-Urdu Tradition," in *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*, eds. Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 107–8.

order and establishing hierarchy in the absence of any coherent notion of nationhood in the Mughal Empire.[11] C. A. Bayly has pointed out that this uniquely "Indian social philosophy was acted out in forms of relationships between orders of people, and gift-giving, feasting and display were the outward expression of this philosophy."[12] The ascendancy of the East India Company over the native rulers in the late eighteenth century hastened the demise of this pre-modern economy, he adds. What appeared as luxury to outsiders, a dreaded word in the vocabulary of the British observers brought up on Protestant parsimony and work ethic, sustained this economy of the sahib-patron and entertainers and artisans. According to Bayly, "Luxury production and consumption were the life-blood of the pre-colonial order and they had a social and ritual value which cannot be conveyed by the glib term 'Luxury.'"[13] After the defeat of the Mughal Emperor in the Battle of Buxar in 1764, the East India Company made the courts of Delhi and Awadh pay a heavy monetary price for the privilege of retaining a nominal hold on their respective thrones.[14] Ruth Vanita points out that, as a result, "Nawab Asaf-ud-Daula (r. 1775–95) initiated a policy of lavish expenditure and building, generous giving, and patronage of arts and crafts, which endeared him to his subjects. His successors continued his policy because they knew they were living on borrowed time and also that the British would grab any surplus." Vanita adds that "they [the Nawabs] became more flexible in relations with subordinates, including women."[15] This loosening of hierarchies in the cosmopolitan late Mughal world in its turn contributed to a cultural environment more conducive to the occurrences of heterosexual as wells as homoerotic bonds between patrons and entertainers, masters and servants. The very discourse of divine love in Sufi poetry

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11. John R. McLane, *Land and Local Kingship in Eighteenth-Century Bengal* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 97. For a similar account of the significance of public display of wealth and consumption in the Mughal imperial power structure, see Andrea Hintze, *The Mughal Empire and Its Decline: An Interpretation of the Sources of Social Power* (Brookfield: Ashgate, 1997), 50–57.

12. C. A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen, and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 266.

13. Bayly, *Rulers*, 266.

14. Michael Herbert Fisher, *A Clash of Cultures: Awadh, the British, and the Mughals* (Riverdale: Riverdale Company, 1987), 162–87.

15. Vanita, *Gender*, 14.

was often indistinguishable from that of profane love in the secular Mughal poetry. Annemarie Schimmel has pointed out that Sufi Islam borrowed many of the standard tropes of pre-Islamic Arab and Persian poetry in order to capture the indescribable essence of God and the human yearning for the divine in human terms, and later the same reappeared in a growing body of secular love poetry.[16] Although the sharia-minded legalistic schools of Islamic scholars sounded the alarm early about the dangers of idolatry in Sufism, it gained considerable following in non-Arab parts of the Islamic world, especially in Ottoman Turkey, Safavid Iran, and Mughal India. The beloved described in stylized language by the male speaker in the traditional Persian ghazal or the love lyric is derived from the controversial Sufi custom of *shahid-bazi* (literally, witness-playing) by means of which the Sufi lover found the essence of God in contemplating and sometimes by literally gazing upon the exquisite physical beauty of a young male whose beauty and virtues witness God's magnificence.[17] According Kidwai, "most of the poetry [written in Urdu and Persian in Mughal India] was produced by writers influenced by the Sufis. In this poetry, the *shahid* [beloved] was invariably male." Building on Annemarie Schimmel's summation of the ideal beloved in Persian love poetry, Kidwai adds: "The beloved was described as a young male with the stature of a cypress, wayward tresses, and cap awry."[18] The Mughal sahib, then, was steeped in this culture in which the lines between the luxurious and the ascetic, and the erotic and the divine were still fluid. Prominent Mughal poets such as Abru and Mir Taqi Mir wrote about male-male relationship and sometimes took male lovers in real life.[19] Prominent Nawabs such as Shuja-ud-Daula (r. 1754–75) and Sa'adat Ali Khan (r. 1798–1814) married courtesans and endowed them with great wealth and influence over public matters.[20] I do not wish to imply that late Mughal India was a Camelot of sexual freedom and social egalitarianism. A conservative

16. Annemarie Schimmel, *Pain and Grace: A Study of Two Mystical Writers of Eighteenth-Century Muslim India* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976), 106.

17. Jim Wafer, "Vision and Passion: The Symbolism of Male Love in Islamic Mystical Literature," *Islamic Homosexualities: Culture, History, and Literature*, eds. Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 107–9.

18. Kidwai, "Introduction," *Same-Sex Love*, 116.

19. Kidwai, "Introduction," *Same-Sex Love*, 119–22.

20. Vanita, *Gender*, 16.

reaction to Mughal cosmopolitanism had always been present within the elite circle itself. The last Great Mughal Aurangzeb banished singing and dancing from the courts and attempted to impose some form of sharia rule. Indian Muslim historians routinely condemned what they believed to be a betrayal of the true religion and the corruption of the body politic. Ruth Vanita cites Indian Muslim historians such as Khalil Ahmad Siddiqui as using the Perso-Urdu term "*aurat parasti*," literally "woman worship," to denounce what they perceived to be an alarming feminization of elite culture in the late eighteenth century.[21] Stephen O' Murray has pointed out the use of *amrad*, meaning "beardless," as code word for young male lovers in Persian and Turkish influenced cultures in the traditional Islamic world of which the Mughal Empire was an integral part.[22] The love of a usually older man for a young man was referred to as *amrad parasti*. Side by side with the culture of woman and boy worship and conspicuous consumption of luxury goods, there existed voices that called for a return to an austere and puritanical Islamic way of life. However, Mirza Abu Talib, the late-Mughal sahib who is the subject of my essay, seemed to have seen little or no contradiction between his worldliness and his adherence to the outward forms of Islamic piety.

Mirza Abu Talib Khan sahib, then, negotiates his experiences in various cities in Ireland, England, and France with considerable ease by dint of this Mughal cosmopolitanism with its long tradition of seeking urban ease and diversions. Daniel O'Quinn, in his invaluable introduction to the recent Broadview edition of *The Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan*, points out that "Abu Talib is fascinated by the space of the city itself and gives careful descriptions of its technological modernity"[23] (17). Talib frequently compares and contrasts the amenities and entertainments provided by a city with those of ones he has already visited or lived in in the past. He finds Cork, which he visits before Dublin, mostly unpleasant owing to its canal system with its "stagnant water, and the filth which is thrown into them." Talib adds, "The situation of the city is also so low, that you scarcely discover it till

21. Vanita, *Gender*, 15.

22. Stephen O. Murray, "The Will Not to Know: Islamic Accommodations of Male Homosexuality," in *Islamic Homosexualites*, 31.

23. Daniel O'Quinn, Introduction," *The Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan*, 17.

you come close to it.[24] Of Dublin, a city rendered especially significant in Abu Talib's highly status-conscious itinerary by the fact that Lord Cornwallis, the late Governor General of India, "having quelled the rebellion which had disturbed this country [Ireland] for several years," was settled in Dublin (96), Abu Talib waxes particularly eloquent. Ever the consummate consumer of luxuries, he describes the opulent shops:

> These shops are at night brilliantly lighted up, and have a handsome effect. In them is to be found whatever is curious or valuable in the world. My attention was particularly attracted by the jewellers' and milliners' repositories; nor were the fruiterers' or pastry cooks' shops without their attractions. I generally spent an hour between breakfast and dinner in some one of these places. (103)

The street lighting reminds Abu Talib of Lucknow, one of the most opulent cities of late Mughal India: "One of the streets thus lighted up . . . put me in mind of the Imam Bareh (Mausoleum) at Lucknow, when illuminated, during the reign of the late Nabob Assuf ad Dowleh." The first sight of a European city lighted at night "impressed [Talib] with a great idea of its grandeur, nor did it afterwards suffer in [his] estimation with a comparison with London" (104).

Of the English penchant for mechanisms and for improvements upon existing ways of doing things, such as the factory system for mass-producing cheap goods or large scale enclosures to increase agricultural productivity, Abu Talib has much to say but little of it actually reveals the wholehearted enthusiasm of a convert. Despite acknowledging the overwhelming evidence of the technological superiority of British arms over various Indian as well as over rival European armies, he boils down Tipu Sultan's [the independent ruler of the South Indian state of Hyderabad] defeat at the hands of the English Company to personal failings: "But he had too much pride to leave his family and wealth in a fortress invested by the enemy, and resolved rather to die in defense of what he considered his honour" (234). Although he praises Warren Hastings's pursuit of rural retirement after "the toils and anxieties of a public life, amusing himself in rural occupations, enjoying that happiness in his domestic society which is unattainable by the

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24. Mirza Abu Talib, *The Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan* (1810), trans. Charles Stewart, ed. Daniel O'Quinn (Peterborough: Broadview Press). All subsequent citations from *The Travels* will appear in the text.

monarchs of the world," Abu Talib is circumspectly critical of a sahib's unseemly engagement in farming: "I was particularly struck with the arrangement and economy of his farmyard and dairy. As the latter surpasses anything of the kind I have ever seen, and is an office unknown in a gentleman's family in the East I shall attempt a description of it" (129). What follows is a meticulous description of the application of scientific methods to dairy farming under the close supervision of Hastings sahib himself. Abu Talib, however, pre-emptively undercuts the effect of the technological marvels by asserting that such an intimate involvement in the production of milk and cheese does not become a sahib or a gentlemen in the East.

It is worth remembering that Warren Hastings was vilified by Edmund Burke as an Eastern despot during the highly publicized impeachment. Srinivas Aravamudan has pointed out how Edmund Burke used the Orientalist trope to the advantage of his conservative political ideology:

> Despotism in India is no longer the perceived tyranny of the Orient over its subjects. Rather it is the principle of British political tyranny, bred at home in England, honed abroad on convenient victims in the colonies, and capable of returning home, as the corrupt nabob who enters parliament by his newfound money and influence.[25]

Above and beyond the metropolitan obsession with the Orientalist trope of the sensuous and despotic Islamic rulers, many important East India Company functionaries in Mughal India did indeed go native by adopting the life style of the Mughal ruling elite. Ashis Nandy observes that"the first two governor-generals [of India under East India Company rule], renowned for their rapaciousness, were also known for their commitment to things Indian, Under them, the traditional Indian life style dominated the culture of British Indian politics."[26] William Dalrymple, who has written extensively about such Britons-turned-sahibs in India, writes that "[the sahibs] inhabited a world that was far more hybrid, and with far less clearly defined ethnic, national, and religious borders, than we have been conditioned to expect, either by the conventional history books . . . or by the nationalistic historiog-

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25. Srinivas Aravamudan, *Tropicopolitans: Colonialism and Agency, 1688–1804* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 224–25.

26. Nandy, *Intimate Enemy*, 5.

raphy of post-independence India."[27] Perhaps it would not be too far-fetched to detect a note of scorn and disappointment in Abu Talib's observations about Hastings' rural amusements after a flamboyant career of military adventures and diplomatic intrigues among the highest circles in Mughal India.

Abu Talib's observations about the effects of nascent industrialization upon the English character are penetrating to say the least. The third and seventh "defects" of the English national character, "a passion for acquiring money, and their attachment to worldly affairs" (209) and their "luxurious manner of living" (211), are antithetical to the concept of mutual dependence among various castes and classes that the Indian sahibs like Abu Talib were used to. The English are acquisitive hoarders rather than generous gift givers: "observe their kitchens, filled with various utensils; their rooms, fitted up with costly furniture; their sideboards covered with plate; their tables, loaded with expensive glass and china" (211). The objects in this extensive list are placed outside human interaction and society and, consequently, English luxury becomes the joyless acquisitiveness. Not surprisingly, Abu Talib faults the English gentlemen for lacking the patience and the inclination to entertain guests and listen to their suppliants and subordinates: "if the suppliant calls in the morning, and is by chance admitted to the master of the house, before he can tell half his story he is informed, that it is now the hour of business, and a particular engagement in the city requires the gentleman's attendance" (210). Abu Talib is condemning the vices of the Londoners for whom time is increasingly money to the detriment of the patron-suppliant, master-servant relationship that a Mughal Indian would have been accustomed to. Admittedly, Abu Talib leavens his astute critique of the increasingly bourgeois English mores with a generous helping of the familiar Orientalist trope of "luxury leading to imperial decline." Given his familiarity with and rather low esteem for the work of British Orientalists such as William Jones, the following passage sounds rather glib: "If the English will take the trouble of reading ancient history, they will find that luxury and prodigality have caused the ruin of more governments than was ever effected by an invading enemy: they generate envy, discord, and

27. William Dalrymple, *White Mughals: Love and Betrayal in Eighteenth-Century India* (New York: Viking, 2003), xiv.

animosity, and render the people either effeminate, or desirous of change" (217). One recalls that earlier in the narrative Talib resentfully mentions the English "who reproach the nobility of Hindoostan with wearing gold and silver ornaments like women" (105). Those who advocated the reform of British governance in India during the Hastings trials would have found in the following a choice morsel, "To these vices may be ascribed the subversion of the Roman Empire in Europe, and the annihilation of the Moghul government in India" (217). As O'Quinn has pointed out,

> For British readers committed to colonization and, most importantly, for the company officials publishing Abu Talib's narrative, many aspects of his discussion of British rule, including those that critique past excesses, have the virtue of placing the reformist objectives of colonial rulers in the mouth of a native informant.[28]

However, the peculiar bourgeois luxury Talib condemns is a selfish monopolization of time and resources for individualistic acquisition and consumption and one that reifies human relationships. Consequently, when he enumerates the virtues of the English, his attempt to transmute the vice of selfish acquisition into "a strong desire to improve the situations of the common people" ends in a revealing jibe: "it may be said, that in so doing they are not perfectly disinterested; for the benefits of many of these institutions and inventions revert to themselves" (220). Not surprisingly, the "spinning engine" he admires for its ability to increase production and save labour costs cannot produce cloth "equal to that sent from India. It neither wears nor washes so well, which is perhaps owing to the thread being over twisted" (166). This comes, on the one hand, from a life-long consumer of some of the finest hand-spun fabrics available in the world at the time, on the other, from a member of the Indian elite who patronized the traditional weavers and the domestic cotton and silk industries being rapidly destroyed by the British.

When he is not observing and commenting on British technological wonders, we find the Mirza sahib surrounded by the British fair in social gatherings. He is meticulous in the praise of particular aspects of the beauty of each variety: "The Irish women have not such elegance

28. O'Quinn, "Introduction," *Travels*, 34.

of manners, nor the handsome eyes and hairs of the English; neither are they as tall nor so good figures as the Scotch; but they have much finer complexions, are warm in their affections, lively, and agreeable" (114). A certain Colonel Wombell, an old India hand Abu Talib knew in India, takes him to dine several times at the regimental mess of the Norfolk Militia, "where he introduced me to some of the finest looking young men I ever saw in my life" (117). The Mirza sahib goes on to add rather unflatteringly, "Norfolk is celebrated above all the countries in England for fine poultry, abundance of game, and handsome women" (117). Coming from a urban culture with its own tradition of *aurat parasti* as wells as *amrad parasti*, Abu Talib would not have been faced with "the social dilemma posed by the circulation of women in public for a visitor used to the sequestration of women from view."[29] In the Nawabi cities of late eighteenth-century India, women as courtesans and public entertainers were highly visible, especially in the circles frequented by sahibs like Abu Talib. Moreover, he came from a culture in which a wealthy and well-connected male was free to pursue his desires and inclinations outside the house as long as he married according to Islamic law and maintained an establishment. Consequently, Abu Talib is more likely to be scandalized by the fact that the wives and daughters of the English circulate as objects of desire instead of courtesans who in Mughal India underwent years of training to please powerful men. According to Vanita,

> Many [of these courtesans] were highly educated, reading both Urdu and Persian. They also heard and recited poetry in informal conversation with educated men, almost all of whom dabbled in versifying. This was true not only of Lucknow but of other cities such as Banaras and of Hindu as well as Muslim courtesans.[30]

My claim is designed to further O'Quinn's brilliant reading of Abu Talib's subversive use of Persian poetry to conflate the reification of metropolitan women with the growing imperial fantasy in British society. Abu Talib finds that the "wrong" kind of women are being promoted in public by the British, and it is not "the sensual attraction of women" in general that is "explicitly linked at various moments in the text to the unstable future of the British empire" (29). Hence the

29. O'Quinn, Introduction, *Travels*, 22.
30. Vanita, *Gender*, 5.

Mirza sahib's astonishment at the deference paid by the Prince of Wales to his *mehmandar* or hostess at the annual entertainment given by the Duchess of Devonshire: "I was quite lost in amazement; but Lady Elizabeth laughed, and said, 'His Royal Highness would not for the world take precedence of any lady: and as my arm was under yours, he would by no means allow that we should separate, to make way for him'" (190). As O'Quinn points out, this happened during a "series of events celebrating the introduction of the Duchess's daughter Georgiana to society." Although Abu Talib would have found "the very notion of publicly presenting a marriageable girl to the fashionable world," as O'Quinn observes, "exceedingly strange" (28), his class would have been familiar with the ritual among Indian courtesans of welcoming their daughters into the trade. According to Qurratulain Hyder, "The day a courtesan's virgin daughter was initiated into the profession, she was dressed like a bride. Her first patron removed her nose-ring and replaced it with a 'nose-flower.' The ceremony was celebrated like a wedding, to which all members of the courtesan's caste were invited for an all-night feast of music and dance."[31] "The key question" is, indeed, "what distinguishes this social custom from the behavior of courtesans" (28). Abu Talib answers this question by eliding the difference between English ladies and the courtesans in the metropole: "Not only was I visited there [the apartments he rents at Rathbone Place, notorious for the English courtesans who also live there] by the first characters in London, but even ladies of rank" (122). That Abu Talib does not seek the approval of his metropolitan hosts in choosing a neighbourhood to live in is amply broadcast in his second choice of abode in London: "I hired apartments in Upper Berkeley Street. The mistress of this house was an Irish woman, and was employed . . . . . ." In spite of using the elisions, he is completely non-judgemental about the land lady's profession and goes on to add candidly, "Although I was much gratified by seeing a number of beautiful women, who frequently visited at the house, I could not agree with the temper of my landlady, and once more changed my residence, removing to Rathbone Place" (122). While Abu Talib's apparently risqué choice of neighbourhoods to reside in might have been partially

31. Syed Hasan Shah, *The Nautch Girl: A Novel*, trans. Qurratulain Hyder (New Delhi: Sterling Press, 1992), 54, n1.

influenced by limited funds, it is certainly not out of any puritanical separation in his mind between the profane and the sacred. As a Muslim he does observe his faith, at least the outward rituals such as performing the prescribed ablution before the mandatory prayers: "I therefore again removed to a house in that neighbourhood, where there were both hot and cold baths, and where I enjoyed the luxury of daily ablutions" (122). However, it does not prevent him from enjoying the proximity of beautiful women, whether courtesans or respectable ladies, or from publicly drinking wine at least on two occasions: "having been frequently challenged by some beautiful young women to replenish my glass, I drank more wine that night than I had ever done at one time in the course of my life" (147). Evidently, he is apologetic about excessive drinking that leads to intoxication but not about the habit of drinking itself. Abu Talib is after all a Mughal cosmopolitan and does not feel compelled to resort to mimicry in order to subvert the Orientalist script that some of his British hosts do try to foist on him. What he really expresses in the elision of the English ladies and courtesans is an aristocratic contempt for bourgeois English morality and its policing of sexuality and social circulation by means of "character" and "reputation," which are, according to O'Quinn, "ultimately insufficient limits on social circulation" in Abu Talib's mind (24). In his disquisition on the status of English women, he ostensibly praises the philosophical foundations of the socio-economic and legal regimen developed by the English to keep their women in check: division of labour allows women of lower classes to find suitable employment that "keeps their minds from wandering after improper desires;" constant surveillance when they are in public allow them "seldom an opportunity of acting improperly" (173). The legal means available to an offended English husband seem to impress Abu Talib most of all: "Her [the recalcitrant wife] husband is authorized by law to take away all her property and ornaments, to debar her from the sight of her children, and even to turn her out of the house; and if proof can be produced of her misconduct, he may obtain a divorce, by which she is entirely separated from him, and loses all her dower, and even her marriage portion" (174). Immediately after this passage Abu Talib observes, as had Lady Mary Wortley Montagu before him, that Muslim women in purdah enjoy more freedom than their English sisters:

> On the contrary, the Mohammedan women, who are prohibited from mixing in society, and are kept concealed behind curtains, but are allowed to walk out in veils, and go to the baths (in Turkey), and to visit their fathers and mothers and female acquaintances, and to sleep abroad for several nights together, are much more mistresses of their own conduct, and much more liable to fall into the paths of error. (174)

Abu Talib clearly disapproves of respectable women of his own society who "fall into the paths of error," although his own sexuality is quite fluid and unrestrained, as evidenced by his roving gaze. However, whether he is seriously advocating social reforms in his own society along English lines is highly contestable. It would have been unthinkable for a Mughal aristocrat to abandon one of his many wives or concubines without generous settlements. Of the two Indian women Abu Talib encounters in London, he mentions a Noor Begum who married the French General in India and came to the metropolis with him and bore him two children (149). Abu Talib writes, "When General De Boigne thought proper to marry a young French woman, he made a settlement on the Begum, and gave her the house in which he resides" (150). This French general married Noor Begum according to Islamic rites and treats her according to Islamic law when he thinks "proper" to marry a French woman. The policing of sexuality has evidently caught up with this General sahib who felt pressured to conform to bourgeois Christian monogamy upon his return to the metropolis; but he still adheres to the norms of *aurat parasti* he was exposed to in Mughal India, a fact Abu Talib takes the pains to record. He also mentions that Noor Begum requested him to "take charge of a letter for her mother, who resides in Lucknow" (149), one of the Mughal cities renowned for the worship of women. One cannot help speculate as to whether Noor Begum lied to her mother about her ambiguous status in London society, the separated "wife" of a sahib who was not deemed a wife to begin with in this increasingly racist, monogamous culture. Not surprisingly, Abu Talib defends the Mughal Emperors against their English detractors who point at the bloody wars of succession in the Mughal Empire apparently caused by the practice of polygamy: "I replied, that princes were not to be judged of by the same rules as other men" (181).

It is, perhaps, a testimony to the Mirza sahib's still intact sense of cultural superiority derived from late Mughal cosmopolitanism that

he seriously believed that he could establish an academy in London to teach Persian, not only the official language of Mughal India but also one of the bearers of the very cosmopolitanism he asserts over British reformism. The very forces of socio-economic reform reshaping British institutions he comments on were soon to drive the elite urban Urdu-Persian culture of the late Mughal India underground by implementing what O'Quinn has described as "utilitarian and proto-sociological knowledge practices" (16). With the implementation of Macaulay's "Minute on Indian Education" (1835), the era of elite Indian nationalism was ushered in and the image of the sahib became reified as that of the masculinist conqueror. This essay has been an attempt to restore the older native sahib to not only the Western readers but also to those in the Indian subcontinent who have come to accept the conquering version as the norm.