

Dubrow, Jennifer: *Cosmopolitan Dreams: The Making of Modern Urdu Literary Culture in Colonial South Asia*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2018, 180 pp., ISBN 978-0-8248-7270-0.

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How to define *modernity* in Urdu literature? This is the subject explored in *Cosmopolitan Dreams: The Making of Modern Urdu Literary Culture in Colonial South Asia*, the work of Jennifer Dubrow, Professor of Urdu at the University of Washington. Through two nineteenth-century Lakhnavi Urdu newspapers in rivalry – *Avadh Akhbar* and *Avadh Punch* – Jennifer Dubrow highlights the central role of periodicals played in the making of a modern Urdu cosmopolitanism. In associating “Urdu,” “modern”, and “cosmopolitanism”, Dubrow stresses how a global network of exchanges – created by new print technology – produced a “shared critical idiom and bonds of affection created through [Urdu] language.”¹ *Cosmopolitan Dreams* reveals the richness of unexplored Urdu archives and therefore, sheds light on characteristic features of Urdu as a language of modernity. Turning away from a conventional vision of Urdu as the refined language of classical poetry, characterized by elegance and sensibility, Dubrow depicts Urdu as a modern language that laughs at itself and casts a critical eye on contemporary Indian society. Through her sharp analysis of the literary content published in *Avadh Akhbar* and *Avadh Punch*, Dubrow underlines a turn in Urdu literary traditions linked to the reorientation of Urdu language in the second half of the nineteenth century. As a result, she defines the Urdu literary modernity as an ironic and satirical worldview that probes traditional literary forms and uses new literary genres – such as the novel and the short story– to challenge Indian colonial society. Dubrow’s significant contribution lies in the emphasis on readership’s participation in the world-making activity of literature. This entry point is particularly relevant to apprehend the formation of a globally imagined community shaped by Urdu-language speakers. Analyzing various forms of intertextuality, built upon a modern print culture, Dubrow argues that periodicals’ culture transformed the Urdu public sphere in shaping a common imaginary between Urdu-speakers that went beyond regional borders. Consequently, Dubrow asserts that Urdu periodicals created a discursive space – promoting literary

¹ Dubrow 2018: 11.

experimentation, fostering debates and intertextual connections – in which Urdu-speakers defined themselves anew as an Urdu cosmopolitan community.

The intense involvement of readers in periodicals led to a radical transformation of Urdu literary styles and composition. This in turn produced a self-reflexive literature that mingled humor and critical voices. In this perspective, *Cosmopolitan Dreams* offers a knowledgeable overview of this emerging literary culture that participated in the creation of the Urdu *cosmopolis*. This permits scholars to broaden the understanding of the making of Urdu literary modernity as it was produced in Urdu journals in the Lucknow region. The first chapter “Printing the Cosmopolis: Authors and Journals in the Age of Print” lays out the impacts of print-capitalism on authorship and on shaping the public sphere and the literary space through Urdu periodicals. It demonstrates how Urdu journals created new communities in print by making spaces for debating and sharing experience of religious festivals. In “The Novel in Installments: *Fasana-e Azad* and Literary Modernity” (chapter two), Dubrow traces the development of the novel through a study of *Fasana-e Azad*, an early Urdu novel written by Ratan Nath Sarshar and published serially in the Urdu newspaper *Avadh Akhbar* between 1878 and 1883. She points to how Sarshar, by joining *mazaq* (humor) and *akhlaq* (ethics), “reframed the practice of wit into an edificatory and patriotic act.”² Furthermore, she underlines the importance of satirical vignettes as sources for the development of the novel in Colonial India. By examining readers’ comments published in the readers’ letters section of *Avadh Akhbar*, she illustrates the active participation of readers in the making of *Fasana-e Azad* and displays the importance of the novel as a didactic mode to debate about contemporary issues. Chapter three “Experiments with form: *Avadh Punch*, Satirical Journalism, and Colonial Critique” focuses on *Avadh Punch*, a satirical literary journal published in Lucknow from 1877 to 1936 edited by Munshi Sajjad Hussain. In establishing this new form of political satire in India which included caricatures, *Avadh Punch* distinguished itself as a visual art form. Furthermore, *Avadh Punch* was an experimental space for innovative literary genres. With examples of short prose and poetry, Dubrow sheds light on writers’ genres experimentations – dictionaries, medical prescriptions, news reports – that parodied British colonial rhetoric or ridiculed mimicry of Western behavior by natives. In chapter four “Reading the World: The Urdu Print Public Sphere and the Hindi/Urdu divide,” Dubrow describes the manner Urdu print culture participated in reconfigurations of language and religious identity in the nineteenth century. As journals create news through the amplification of controversies, Dubrow turns her eye to debates that pitted *Avadh Akhbar* against *Avadh Punch*.³ *Avadh Punch*’s

² Dubrow 2018: 38.

³ Orsini 2010.

attacks against Ratan Nath Sarshar and Munshi Naval Kishore, the founder of *Avadh Akhbar*, were personal and aimed at their religious and ethnic identity, both Kashmiri Brahmins. These attacks set out to discredit their ability to write Urdu as individuals who did not belong to *ahl-e zaban* or “native” language speakers. This rivalry pushed the journal into the Hindi/Urdu controversy and therefore, participated in the redefinition of Urdu as a Muslim language. By discussing readers’ letters published in *Avadh Akhbar* and in *Avadh Punch*, this last chapter sheds light on the formation of a critical public that defined a new, democratic and modern Urdu public sphere.

The title of Dubrow’s study, *Cosmopolitan Dreams*, reflects Benedict’s Anderson’s concept of “imagined communities” which is a theorization of the relationship between nationalism and print as an efficient *medium* in shaping a global imaginative space where identities are defined.⁴ The advent of print technology transformed the literary landscape of colonial India. Cheaper than books, periodicals established themselves on the Urdu cultural scene in developing new literary genres, such as the vignette, short stories, political cartoons, and serial novels. Even more significant, journals in vernacular languages created new discursive spaces, allowing readers to participate in debates and thus, providing “an ongoing, reoccurring relationship between writers and readers.”⁵ In this perspective, Dubrow’s *Cosmopolitan Dreams* moves beyond *Imagined Communities* by considering the creation of a common imaginary that exists beyond national borders. The notion of *cosmopolitanism* at the core of this book echoes several notable studies. Not only to mention the Sanskrit *cosmopolis* described by Sheldon Pollock, but also the more recent *Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire* by Seema Alavi.⁶ There the making of Muslim cosmopolitan sensitivity was aided by an assemblage of individuals who traveled in British and Ottoman imperial contexts that were sustained by international trade, economic relations and new communication modes that stretched across the Indian Ocean. According to Alavi, Muslim cosmopolitanism stands at the intersections of British and Ottoman empires, and rests on “a cultural and civilizational view: a universalist Muslim conduct based on a consensus in matter of belief, ritual, and forms of devotion.”⁷ Hence, it is dependent on a global and shared sensitivity to religious dogma and practices, an Islamic interconnectedness. On the contrary, according to Dubrow, Urdu cosmopolitanism rejected these religious bonds of affiliation, and “acts to

4 Anderson 1991.

5 Dubrow 2018: 14.

6 Pollock 2006; Alavi 2015.

7 Alavi 2015: 6.

resist the identification of identity with religion.”⁸ Rather, Dubrow emphasizes the use of Urdu as a language emerging from a secular ethos, a critical and subversive means to compete with the colonial rule.

Dubrow envisages the notion of modernity from an inner outlook based on a literary critical perspective. This innovative approach to Urdu modernity is different from studies that consider modernity as originating in the West, relegating South Asian literary innovation to European influence, or others that designate the formation of all-India Progressive Writers’ Association in 1936 as the beginning of modernism in South Asia. Underlining a rupture in aesthetics, narrative consciousness or narrative composition, *Cosmopolitan Dreams* presents the self-critical and satirical voices that arose in this period as a characteristic of modernity in colonial India. Humor, witticism and irony set the tone of this self-reflexive literature not only in content, but in form. From the satirical vignette to the “picaresque tale” – authors mixed several literary Indo-Persian traditions, mainly the *dastan* and *zarifanah mazamin* and activated intertextual references. As mentioned previously, Sarshar combined the two parallel traditions of *akhlaq* and *mazaq* into a hybrid genre. In periodicals, authors reinvented forms, genres and style to criticize Indian society. *Cosmopolitan Dreams* plunges readers into a changing literary world where authors do not hesitate to ridicule and criticize modernity which is a refreshing and stimulating perspective.

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⁸ Dubrow 2018: 11.