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Nechariya Poetics*: Oudh Punch* (1877-1938) and the Natural Poetry Movement

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Nechariya Poetics: *Oudh Punch* (1877-1938) and the Natural Poetry Movement[1]

Maryam Sikander

Abstract

This paper examines the nineteenth-century Urdu weekly *Oudh Punch* (1877-1936) vis-à-vis its opposition to the Muslim reformer Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and the allied reformist movement in Urdu poetry called the Natural Poetry Movement spearheaded by Muhammad Husain Azad (1834-1910) and Altaf Husain Hali (1837-1914) authors of *Āb-e Hayāt* (1880) and *Musaddas* (1893) respectively. These two quintessential works of Urdu literary criticism sought to cleanse Urdu poetry of supposedly Persianate elements of ornamentation and otherworldliness. *Oudh Punch* lamented modernization and Anglicization in both Urdu language and society. Other than relentlessly pillorying Natural Poetry movement and its storm-troopers, it mocked Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan who had earned the label of "nechari" following his naturalistic exegesis of the Quran. This paper shows how *Oudh Punch* frequently parodied not only specific poetic texts (such as those of Hali) but also the plebian and putatively "realistic" themes of natural poetry. This ridicule coalesced in a genre creativity where "nechar"—in its many forms and usages— became not only a condensed byword for colonial modernity but also a theme or *mazmun* for *Oudh Punch* which created new genres and mock-genres for the pleasure of its readers.

Keywords: Parody, South Asian Islam, Nineteenth-Century, Urdu, Periodicals

Introduction or What was Punch?

Punch; or, *The London Charivari* (1844-2002) was a British weekly magazine of humour and satire established in 1841 by Henry Mayhew and wood-engraver Ebenezer Landells. With its text and illustrations of humour mixed with social criticism, within two years of its publication, this three-penny newspaper of wit and satire became a national icon of British identity with a dedicated fan-following in a host of Victorian British politicians, famous writers, luminaries, parliamentarians, even Queen Victoria herself. With its support of financially stable printer and publishers, its canniness at self-promotion as a marketable brand, its retention of successful cartoonists and its unique brand of comicality that captured the everyday life in early Victorian

[1]This paper is a revised version of the talk delivered at the Centre for Contemporary Studies, PMML, Teen Murti House, New Delhi on14 May, 2024.

England, punch not only redefined comic journalism but also coined the word "cartoon" as we know it today to mean a humorous illustration. At the pinnacle of its celebrity in Britain, *Punch* also inspired a range of satiric offshoots in geographies as disparate as China, Japan, Ottoman Empire and British India. In India, by the late nineteenth century, there were some seventy or so vernacular Punches that had cropped up in emulation of the British *Punch*, half of them in Urdu alone with titles like *Bundelkhand Punch, Rewari Punch, Dehli Punch, Punch Bahadur, Gaya Punch, Bihar Punch, Sir Punch Hind* and the list goes on. Other than sharing the appellation "Punch", all of them featured the jester Mr Punch varyingly called "Maulvi Punch", "Pandit Punch", "Panch Bahadur" depending on the context.

What made *Punch* so popular in India? What do we know about its circulation in India?
"Letters, ledgers and records of the *Punch* archive show that the colonies were an important business proposition for the magazine's proprietors. *Punch* got enquiries and requests for its magazine and subsidiary products from readers worldwide, including the Indian subcontinent. The military officers in the colonies formed a major constituency of *Punch*'s readers and consumers."[2] Even though *Punch* proprietors could not find a profitable market in India, at the height of its popularity in England, Punch was the inspiring source behind many satirical newspapers in places as far off as Shanghai and Istanbul, Calcutta and Cairo with hundreds of Punches in India alone.

***Punch* in India**

Regarding *Punch's* circulation in India, empirical records and sales figures for its initial circulation, market and readership are hard to come by, though its enduring appeal in India is testified by a range of literary and non-literary sources pertaining to the Anglo-Indian community. In *Something of Myself* (1937), Rudyard Kipling speaks of *Punch* as "an institution [he] always respected for its continuity and its utter Englishdom and from whose files [he] drew [his] modern working history"[3] . Orwell's Englishmen in Service Clubs in Burma are seen harking back in nostalgia to "Dear old Punch" in *Burmese Days* (1934). Memoirs of Anglo-Indian children growing up in India refer to *Punch* as an object of nostalgia and solace. For example, George Dunbar, son of an American Presbyterian Missionary in Fatehgarh recalls his father finding escape in *Punch* to get away from some missionaries who were suspicious

[2] Ritu G Khanduri, 'Vernacular Punches: Cartoons and Politics in Colonial India', *History and Anthropology* 20, no. 4 (2009), p.463.
[3] Rudyard Kipling, *Something of Myself: For My Friends Known and Unknown*, (Penguin, 1992), p.130.

of his “strange British way of life.”[4] . Similarly, Robert Matthews remembers his days of being bullied in Lawrence College in Murree Hills, where the only solace for him was “devouring ancient, yellowing copies of *Punch*”. While these accounts point towards the symbolic value of *Punch* as a site of expatriate nostalgia, Punch also features quite strongly in the Indian imagination. In his memoir *My Days*, for instance, RK Narayan tries to impress his future father-in-law by gloating that one of his articles on “How to Write an Indian Novel” was accepted by Punch and *brought* him six guineas.[5]

A roaring success in Britain, *Punch* had a phenomenal staying power that outlasted its time and geography. In India, too, *Punch* was available largely in the form of its weekly and monthly bound volumes and acquired a venerable status amongst editor-journalists. For instance, one of the earliest references to *Punch's* popularity in India is to be found in Bharatendu Harishchandra’s satirical piece *Mushāirā* (1870), in which a nouveau-riche merchant who is also an aspiring poet, says, and this is the translation

> No paper so far could supersede the Punch
> That it has established its dominance is a matter of fact. [6]

In another paragraph, the socially-aspiring wife of the same merchant wants to get her poem published in *Punch:*

> I pray to you my mischievous husband
> Why don’t you get it published in the Punch?

One of the most memorable Indian Punches was *Oudh Punch* (1877-1938). Founded and edited by Munshi Sajjad Husain, *Oudh Punch* first appeared on 16th January 1877 in eight pages, folio size. Husain first published the newspaper from Kayasth Samachar Press in Gola Ganj, Lucknow, but within a couple of months he established his own press called Sham-e-Avadh. The annual subscription rate of the newspaper was Rs 12 while a single copy costed

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[4] Laurence Fleming, *Last Children of the Raj: British Childhoods in India 1919-1939*, (Radcliffe, 2004), p.201.
[5] R K Narayan, *My Days: A Memoir* (1973) (The Ecco Press, 1999), p.116.
[6] Bābū Rāmldīn Siṃh, ed., *Śrīhariścandrakalā athlvā goloklvāsī bhāratlbhūṣaṇ bhārltenduhariścandra kā jīvansarvasva*, vol. 6, part 1 (Baṅkīpur: Khaḍgavilāspres, 1889), p.62. Quoted in Prabhat Kumar, ‘Satire, Modernity, Transculturality in late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century North India’ (Diss. U of Heidelberg, 2015), p.159.

four annas. Beginning with 250 copies, by 1880s, the newspaper sold twice as many, 200 less than Munshi Naval Kishore's *Avadh Akhbar*, one of Lucknow's most influential newspapers.[7] Munshi Sajjad Husain joined the Indian National Congress in 1887 and maintained this allegiance throughout his life. Sajjad Husain and his associates saw themselves as custodians of the Indian way of life and expressed the anxiety of Western influence or *maghribi* tehzeb in their parodies, caricatures and sketches in *Oudh Punch.* Notable contributors to this newspaper included Tribhuwanath Hijr (1853-1892), Jwala Parshad Barq (1863-1911), the famous poet Akbar Allahabadi (1846-1921), the novelist Abdul Halim Sharar (1860-1926) and Pandit Ratan Nath Sarshar (1846-1943). Other noted "Punchis" were Munshi Ahmad Ali Shauq Kidwai (1852-1925), a poet writer employed by the Raja of Ayodhya and Nawab Syed Muhammad Azad (1846-1917), the author *Nawabi Darbar* (1878), one of the first Urdu plays. *Oudh Punch* was published for over sixty years in two different "eras" (*daur*). Most of its poetry and articles were either published anonymously or under humorous pseudonyms. Other than Mushirul Hasan's tantalizingly brief reproduction of images and commentary on *Oudh Punch* drawn largely from a compilation of *Oudh Punch* cartoons for the British government, there is no scholarship that has attended to this remarkable newspaper that experimented so spiritedly with form, thumbed its nose at orthodoxy, ridiculed the colonial rhetoric as caustically as it lampooned the pretensions of the Anglicized elite.[8]

The Aligarh Movement and *Oudh Punch*

One of the most cherished themes of *Oudh Punch* was its relentless and rather creative criticism of the Aligarh Movement, and the Muslim reformer Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898). The Aligarh Movement represented the interests of the Urdu speaking gentry in late nineteenth-century India. Its task was to enable this group to adjust to the new realities of British power in India after 1857 and to reconcile traditional modes of life and literature with new, Western ones. The key architect of Aligarh Movement and Islamic modernism in India at large, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan was a Muslim educator, jurist and philosopher of nineteenth century who founded the Anglo-Mohammedan Oriental College at Aligarh, Uttar Pradesh, India. He was also a prolific writer whose literary works played a crucial role in shaping Muslim thought in nineteenth-century India. Sayyid Ahmad Khan composed, among many other works, *Tabyin-al Kalam*, a *Mohammedan Commentary on the Bible* (1862-5), and *Tafsir-al Quran* (1880-95).

[7] Mushirul Hasan, *Wit and Humour in Colonial North India* (Niyogi Books, 2007),p.10.
[8] *Wit and Humour in Colonial North India* (Niyogi Books, 2007).

Based on a scientific and rational approach, his *tafsir* sought to interpret the scripture through a naturalist (*nechari*) lens showing Quran, or the word of God, to be reconcilable with the laws of nature (*qanūn-e fitrat*) or the work of God. This naturalistic speculation on religion drew a lot of criticism from many of Sir Sayyid's contemporaries. *Oudh Punch* was known to open fire at not only Sir Sayyid and his "creed of nature" but also the parallel reformist movement in Urdu poetry—the Natural Poetry or the Natural Shairi Movement which insisted on ousting Persianate elements from Urdu ghazal, the key figure being Altaf Husain Hali (1837-1914). Sayyid Ahmad Khan's most notable biographer and compatriot, Hali became the poet of the Aligarh movement, with his poetic meditation on the rise and fall of Islamic civilization, *Musaddas Madd-o Jazr-e Islam* (1879) and his *Muqaddama-e She'r o Shā'irī*(1890), critical compendium on Urdu poetry. Uncharitably dubbed "Ḳhālī" (Empty) and "Ḳhayālī" (Imaginary), Hali's sombre poetry especially his passionate *Musaddas* were parodied endlessly by *Oudh Punch.* Rapid Anglicization of the Indian society—both in life and literature—was one of the most prominent themes of *Oudh Punch*'s social satire. Therefore, for *Oudh Punch*, both Hali and Sir Sayyid became emblems of Western modernity and the newspaper delighted in their routine dressing-down.

*Oudh Punch*also occasionally literalized the East-West, tradition-modernity debates on the axis of Nayi and Purani Roshni which had become prominent tropes in Urdu journalism. To this end, *Oudh Punch* played out the tussle between Old and New Light habitually flying in defense of Old Light or tradition but also at times implicating moments of self-irony not only due to the social circumstance of its being but also because in satirizing innovation, it was in itself doing something quite new. *Oudh Punch* displayed this awareness in its many Genres of Newness publishing poetry under titles like "Naye fashion ki ghazal", "Naye qism ki gap", "Nayigarhat ka saqinama" and so on.[9] While innovating with traditional genres like the ghazal and saqinama, *Oudh Punch* also formulated its own genres by parodying Western genres like mock dictionary entries (much like Ambrose Bierce's serialized satirical dictionary, *The Devil's Dictionary,* which was later compiled and published as *The Cynic's Word Book* (1906) humorously redefining popular English words like "Thanks", "Rights", "Policy" and so on. One such example of genre innovation was what I choose to call "nechariya poetics" as it were or *Oudh Punch's* use of the English word nature to mean a range of things it thought were worth ridiculing namely: colonial "modernity", Sir Sayyid, Hali, the Natural Shairi movement, its Western pretenses and so on.

[9]*Oudh Punch* 10:1(May 6, 1886); 30: 2 (June 19, 1906); 11:1 (Feb 24, 1887).

Nechariya Poetics

The word "nechar" transcribed phonetically into Urdu, attesting perhaps to its European context became common currency in the Urdu public sphere primarily after Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's naturalistic commentary on the Quran in which he sought to read the scripture in light of nineteenth-century natural sciences. While this modern and somewhat controversial exegesis notoriously earned Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan the uncharitable label of being "nechri", the other subject of ridicule was the poet of the Aligarh movement Altaf Husain Hali who in his *Muqaddama* (1890) sought to reform Urdu poetry by linking reason with nature and expelling hyperbole or *mubalgha* from the rhetorical tropes of Urdu poetry. This paper explores how *nechar*, this modern yet ambivalent catchword with its shifting meanings was seized upon as a poetic conceit for the satirists of *Oudh Punch* and how it unleashed a new set of satiric genres to critique colonial modernity.

Sayyid Ahmad's *Tafsir-al Quran* read the Quran through the lens of modern sciences or *ulum-e-jadida,* but for him modern sciences corroborated a theistic perspective on the world.[10] Scientific findings like microscopes and telescopes and new scientific discourses justified "the world as a rule-based and beneficent order designed, created, and maintained by an all-powerful and all-seeing God."[11] For instance, in his commentary on Surah Yusuf in the Quran, Sayyid Ahmad propounded that dreams could be explained by the modern sciences of psychology and physiology and that Prophet Yusuf's ability, for instance, was no more than a special aptitude. Similarly, he argued that miracles (*mo'jizāt*) did not exist, and ever since the time of the Prophet whatever seemed to be deviating from factual reality could be explained in terms of metaphors, allegories, or Arabic idioms. It is interesting to note, however, that Sayyid Ahmad first used the English word "nature" in Urdu not in his *Tafsir* of the Quran but in his commentary on the Bible where he employed nature as a criterion for interpreting the Book of Genesis. He says, "We acknowledge that Nature is the Work of God and Revelation [wahi] is the Word [kalam]; that no discrepancy should ever occur between them for as much as both proceed from the same Source." In his later writings and translations, "nechar" is used synonymously with Urdu words like *qudrat*, *fitrat* and *tabiat*. Urdu historiographers like Muhammad Sadiq have commented that Sir Sayyid' did not "use nature in the sense of the

[10] David Lelyveld, 'Naicari Nature: Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and the Reconciliation of Science, Technology, and Religion' in *The Cambridge Companion to Sayyid Ahmad Khan,* edited by Yasmin Saikia and M. Raisur Rahman, 69-85 (Cambridge University Press, 2019), p.80.

[11] Ibid., pp.70-85.

simple and primitive as opposed to the cultured and sophisticated, as used by Rousseau. Nor does he interfuse it with any spiritual significance like Wordsworth. In his use of it, he is more akin to the English writers who use it as the opposite of whatever is far-fetched, remote or unreal."[12]

Be that as it may, Sayyid Ahmad's attempt to divest Islam of its mystical and magical accretions did not go down well with many Muslim intellectuals who labelled him a "nechri" or naturalist. Other than the satirists of *Oudh Punch*, these intellectuals included the conservative ulema of the Deoband School who opposed not only his Quran interpretation but also the pro-British ethos of the Aligarh movement. Many vernacular Punches labelled Sir Sayyid a loyalist to British culture and a corruptor of traditional Muslim values. The *Delhi Punch* of Lahore, for instance, published Persian verses ridiculing Sayyid Ahmad Khan and called him: "Satan, an apostate, a betrayer of mankind, and a ringleader of thieves" (*Delhi Punch* [Dec 13, 1880] [13]. Just before the Aligarh College was founded in 1875, Maulvi Ali Bakhsh wrote to Sayyid Mehdi Ali (the future Nawab Mohsin-ul Mulk) that he did not oppose the establishment of an institution per se but opposed only Sayyid Ahmad's "*millat-e-nechariya*" or "community of nature." [14]

Similarly, in 1884, the Pan-Islamist Islamic ideologist Jamal ud din Afghani (1838-1897) attacked Sir Sayyid in Cairo stating that "he called openly for the abandonment of all religions and cried "nature, nature" in order to convince people that Europe only progressed in civilization, science and industry". Three years later, while in Hyderabad, al-Afghani published a Persian discourse portraying mazhab-e naichari as atheistic, materialistic and Satanic. [15]

For *Oudh Punch,* too "*millat-e-nechariya"* or "*mazhab-e nechar"* became a favorite subject of ridicule. It routinely published parodic proceedings of the Aligarh Movement under titles such as *("Necharīyā Kānfreñskākhaka"* [A Sketch of Naturalist Conference], *"NecharīIspīch*" [Naturalist Speech], *"Nechar aur Poliṭikal Maḳhmas*" (Nature and Political Pentastich), "*Tū Paṛ Namāz Necharal*" (Offer a Natural Namaz) and so on.[16]

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[12] Muhammad Sadiq, *A History of Urdu Literature,* 2nd revised and ed. (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), p.341. Quoted in Valerie Ritter, *Kama's Flowers: Nature in Hindi Poetry and Criticism, 1885-1925* (Albany: Suny Press, 2011), p.51.

[13] *Kohinoor*, Lahore, March13, 1880, p.194. Quoted in Ayesha Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam since 1850* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p.77.

[14] Yusuf Husain Khan (ed.), *Selected Documents from the Aligarh Archives* (Aligarh: Published for the Department of History, Aligarh Muslim University [by] Asia Pub. House, 1967), p.212; Āl-i-Aḥmad Surūr, 'Sar Sayyid ke ek mukhālif', in *Na'e aur puranecaragh* (Lucknow: Idarah-e Farogh-e Urdu, 1963), pp.120-9 Quoted in Lelyveld, p.79.

[15] Ibid., p.83.

[16] *Oudh Punch* 15:5 (March 12, 1891); 30: n.p. (Aug 2, 1906); 10:5 (March 30, 1886).

In his Lahore tour, while mobilizing Muslims for worldly success under rapidly changing circumstances, Sir Sayyid responded to his critics saying, "Call me what you like, infidel, heretic, naichari. I am not asking you to intercede for me before God…Whatever I say is for the benefit of your own children." The same year, *Oudh Punch* had published this famous cartoon titled "Naichari Jogi" depicting Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan as a snake-charmer (See Fig.1). The snakes that gather around him are labelled "Chandah" or donation and refer to the monetary donations Sir Sayyid was collecting for the Muhammedan Anglo-Indian College.[17]

The question of modernity was tied, undeniably, with modern Urdu poetry and poetics. Therefore, as I mentioned earlier, the other figure to receive bad press was Altaf Husain Hali, a stalwart of the Necharal Sha'iri (Poetry) Movement. What was the Natural Poetry movement? After 1857, intellectuals associated with the Aligarh movement felt that Urdu literature needed to be more realistic and educational. Emerging in the late nineteenth century, therefore, Natural Poetry or Necharal Sha'iri was a reformist movement that sought to redeem Urdu poetry from the abstract exercise of metaphysical contemplation and "artificial" metaphors. His *Muqaddama-e-Sher-o-Shai'ri* or *Introduction to Urdu Poetry* (1890) linked reason with nature and banished, among other Persianate poetic tropes, hyperbole (*mubālġha*) from Urdu poetry. Instead, he advocated a mimetic realist mode for literature, insisting that the poet's "examination of nature" should be a firm principle of poetic practice[18]. In the chapter "*Zamāna-e nāsāzgār*" (Unsuitable times) in his *Muqaddama*, Hali viewed Urdu poetry as threatened by "science" and "civilization" (*sāins uskī jaṛkāṭrahīhai aur sivilāizeshan* [civilization] *uskātilismtoṛrahīhai*). [19] The ghazal, deeply embedded in its courtly context and elite epicurean clientele, was found to be too far removed from the everyday, material, and common concerns of people and needed to be reformed accordingly.

While *Oudh Punch*'s engagement with the Aligarh School can be a subject of a separate study, Hali's naturalist poetics that ousted Persianate *mazmūns* or topics from Urdu poetry and advocated for new metaphors itself became something of a "new *mazmūn"* or "*mazmūn* of newness" for *Oudh Punch.* Not only did *Oudh Punch* treat *nechar* itself as a metaphor to

[17]*Oudh Punch* 5:4 (Aug 4, 1881).

[18] Hali, *Yādgar-e Ghalib*, p.138.Quoted in Frances Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and its Critics* (University of California Press, 1994), p.165.

[19] Hali, *Muqaddama*, p.179. Quoted in Javed Majeed, 'Nature, Hyperbole and the Colonial State' in *Islam and Modernity: Muslim Intellectuals Respond*, edited by John Cooper, Ronald Nettler and Mohamed Mahmoud (I.B Tauris, 2009), p.23.

embellish, it also took the "plebeian", "common" quality of *necharalsha'irī* to the extreme of burlesque.

The principles of *necharalsha'irī* were developed under the aegis of the association Anjuman-i-Punjab in Lahore, started in 1865 by the Principal of the Government College (est. 1864), Dr G W Leitner. The aim of the Anjuman was "the revival of ancient oriental learning, the advancement of popular knowledge through vernaculars, the discussion of social, literary, scientific, and political questions of interest, and the association of the learned and influential classes with the officers of the government."[20]The other prominent figure associated with Natural Poetry Movement was Muhammad Husain Azad (1830-1910), lecturer at Government College, Lahore and author of the seminal commentary on Urdu poetry, *Āb-e Ḥayāt* [Water of Life] (1880). Born in Delhi, Azad was the son of Maulvi Muhammad Baqir (1780-1857) who published of the first Urdu newspaper in north India, *Delhi Urdu Akhbar* (1837) and was executed by the British after the 1857 Uprising. Muhammad Husain Azad expressed his dissatisfaction with popular taste in Urdu poetry. On 9th May 1874, Azad gave his famous lecture on the reform of Urdu poetry: "New kinds of jewelry and robes of honor, suited to the conditions of the present day, are shut up in the storage-trunks of English which are lying right here beside us, but we don't realize it."[21]

Azad's speech was followed by the remarks of Colonel W. R. M. Holroyd, the Director of Public Instruction, who proposed that verses from poets like Mir, Ghalib and Zauq should be compiled, "aiming at moral instruction, and presenting a natural picture of our feelings and thoughts." Holroyd also suggested a "new *mushairah*" series that would forego the formal pattern line (*misra-e tarāh*) and would instead revolve around a given theme. Holroyd believed that if the proposal succeeded, 1874 would turn out to be a "landmark year in the history of India."[22].

The meeting turned out to be controversial as Azad was accused by his contemporaries of writing in a language "outwardly Urdu and inwardly English, such as the present rulers want to create", and was exhorted to honour Zauq and Ghalib and to stop trying to "ruin Urdu poetry by remaking it in the English style". Hali instead welcomed the *mushairah* and even contributed four *masnavis* to it, proclaiming that, "Asian poetry which has become entirely the domain of love and exaggeration, might be broadened as much as possible, and that its

[20] Pritchett, p.32.
[21] Ibid., p.34.
[22] Ibid., p.35.

foundation might be laid on realities and events."[23] The new mushairahs enforced strict generic codes, and satire (*hajv*) was forbidden. The new mushairahs ended in less than a year, but both Hali and Azad remained surrounded by a storm of literary controversy.

Sayyid Ahmad Khan encouraged Azad and Hali. He advised Azad to ignore the critics and recommended a strong and simple literary creed: "Bring your work even closer to nature (*nechar*). The extent to which a work comes close to nature is the extent to which it gives pleasure."[24] Sayyid Ahmad wrote something similar in *Tahzib-ul-Aḳhlaq* in 1875, where he praised Hali, invoked Milton and Shakespeare, and called for "natural poetry" (*necharal po'iṭri*). Another journal under his influence lamented the dearth of poetry "with a feeling for nature"' in Urdu, maintained that the date of the first "*nechural mushairah*" marked "the beginning of the improvement of Urdu", and urged Urdu poets to "turn at last toward natural subjects and seek inspiration from the ideas of Milton and Shakespeare" to write not just about "love and the imagination" but about "real events" and "visible objects". [25]

Oudh Punch routinely caricatured this creed of natural poetry, dubbing Altaf Husain Hali as "ḳhālī" (empty) or "ḳhayālī" (imaginary) publishing parodies with titles such as "Go Away Teacher Empty: In Imitation of Hali" [*Jā'yeUstādḲhālībataqlīd-e Hālī*] [26] and using the phrase "Musaddas-e Ḳhālī" as a byword for any insubstantial piece of poetry. In 1893, *Oudh Punch* published a parody of Hali's "Munāẓrah-e-Raḥam-o-Inṣāf" (1874)(Dialogue between Mercy and Justice) entitled "Khaṭmal aur Machhar ka Munāẓarah" (Dialogue between a Mosquito and a Bedbug).[27] Written in a *masnavi* meter, Hali's *munāẓrah* was originally an allegorical verse dialogue in which *Raḥam* (Mercy) and *Inṣāf* (Justice) compete to argue who between them is more beneficial for the *qaum*. Mercy accuses Justice of lacking mercy in its dealings, while Justice accuses Mercy of lacking justice. In the end, Intelligence (*'Aql*) intervenes and makes them both understand that they depend on each other "like flower and dew beautify each other" (*gul-o shabnamkītarah ek se hī ek ko zeb*). Intelligence argues that to hear the cry of the helpless is the job of Justice yet the one who hears the cry of the helpless is also by default merciful. But mercy to the oppressor would be unjust to the oppressed. Hence Mercy and Justice cannot exist independent of each other. The original *munāẓrah* ends with Intelligence's long speech and Hali's *shahādat* or testimony. As a result, Mercy and Justice

[23] Ibid., p.36.
[24] Ibid., p.38.
[25] Ibid.
[26] *Oudh Punch*28: n.p. (March 3, 1904); 35:10 (March 30, 1911).
[27] *Oudh Punch*17:6-7 (Sep 14, 1893).

embrace each other and become one like the confluence of two rivers (*Baṛkephir mile donoñaiseke the goyā ek /milke ho jāyeñjaiseke do darīya ek*).[28]

The parody version of this munazara in *Oudh Punch* is prefaced with an oblique reference to the original text as a "*Munazara* by a poet from Panipat". The preface lists the differences between the parody and the original: "the original is a *masnavī*, this is a *qasīda*; that is dry (*ḳhushk),* this is humorous (*ẓarāfatāmez*); this is concise (*lafẓan muḳhtaṣir*), that is the size of novel of *Avadh Aḳhbār*[a reference to the serialised multi-volume novel *Fasāna-e Azād* serialised in *Avadh Aḳhbār*], or the tail of Indian badger or the length of a ghagra". In this parodic *munāẓrah,* Khaṭmal (Bedbug) and Machhar (Mosquito) try to out-do each other in lethality and capacity for annoyance. Bedbug proclaims:

Mabadaulatvohhaiñshahanshāh e mulk e īza
Apne nīche se ko'ī nek ho ya bad na bacha
Mujh se haiñ jwar o sitam donoñ kī āñkheñ roshan
Maiñ huñ nūr e nigāh e ta'addi o jafa"

Yours truly is the Emperor of the Kingdom of Annoyance
Good or evil, I spare no one
I light up the eyes of both Fever and Misery
I am the light in the eyes of Tyranny and Oppression

The Bedbug calls himself "the sinews of India" (*quvvat-e bazū-e hind*) and boasts that its world-conquering (*ālamgīr*) capacity of annoyance has earned him the title of "Jahāngir", and such is its passion and derring-do (*josh-e shujā't*) that the moment it approaches a bed, "sleeping wretchedness" (*mardamfitnāh*) wakes up and people start running around with sticks and lamps: "Women turn over the mattresses/Men upend the beds/I camouflage like a chameleon/And am nowhere to be found". Hearing this the Mosquito brags that it can bite and split into two the likes of bedbugs. As far as bravery is concerned, it has the audacity to announce its time of attack (*jañg kā waqtbatā deteñ haiñpehle se ham/yeh shuja't bhī hai ek ḳhās hamārahissa*). The Bedbug accepts that the mosquito might be a daredevil but coquettishly adds that, in terms of beauty, it is indeed a "red fairy"—it bites but once and blood

[28] Hali, *Majmua*, pp.34-40.

spills out (*lāl pari, husnkebābmeñyaktā/ chuṭkikāṭu jo kahīñḳhūnnikal āye wahīñ*). Mosquito registers the provocation and makes eyes at the Bedbug: “True, your body is carved out of light/ But I am also a dusky God if you are causing a stir/ I have my eyes on for you”. In Hali’s *Munāẓrah,* Mercy and Justice reconcile their differences and unite, figuratively speaking, like the merging of two rivers. The climax of this burlesque munazara is reached when Mosquito suggests a quick fling with Bedbug for producing a mixed-race child (*ablaq baccha*) that would embody the wretchedness of both its progenitors. While the original munazara personifies the abstract qualities of Mercy and Justice, weaves in references to characters from Islamic history (Namrūd, Yusuf, the Pharaoh) and Indian mythology, *Oudh Punch’s* burlesque rendition anthropomorphises two pests found everywhere in Indian houses.

While this is an example of a textual parody, *Oudh Punch* was especially prolific in genre parodies i.e. parodying the call of the *Necharal Sha’irī* movement to reform and “renew” stultified Urdu poetry. *Oudh Punch* used the identifiable vocabulary of “newness” and “nature” to produce many a parodic-*necharal* ghazal or poem. In 1888, for example, it publishes a *nazm* titled “Necharkāasar, Tehzibkā Jauhar” (Nature’s Effect, Civilization’s Prowess), and invokes the catchwords of the day “Nechar” and “Tehzib” and places them jokingly in opposition to Islam. The poem is as follows:

jo chhoṛmazhab Islam necharī ho jā’ye
ma’ad jāye pe duniya meñ behtarī ho jā’ye
kamiṭīyoñ meñ muqarrara secretary ho jā’ye
jalīl ohda mile yā ki mimbarī ho jā’ye
‘ajab nahīñ khar-e Īsa se hamsarī ho jā’ye
jo kare jacket-o patlūn-o-coat zeb-e badan
hoñ jiske khāne ke auqāt hāziri-o-ṭiffan
jaji mile use varna kamishnar ho jā’ye
bulāy’eñ leḍiyān use keh kar kī “Kam yū hīy’ar”
miseñ milāyeñg hāth us se keh kar “Māi ḍīy’ar”
tujhe bhī jān leñ lachar nahiñ hai yeh nechar
biṭhāȳeñ ānkhoñ pe aur shauq se sune lekchar
hamesha ke lī’ye phir tujhko bartari ho jā’ye

He who gives up Islam and 'Nechari' becomes
Believes the world will fare better without a life to come
In committees, an appointed secretary he becomes
Gets a lofty post or only a member he becomes
No wonder the donkey of Christ he becomes
Jacket and pants and coat, his dress so fine
Haziri and Tiffin are his times to dine
Becomes a Judge or Commissioner he becomes
Ladies summon him with "Come you here"
Misses shake his hands, saying: "My dear"
Acquainted thus, they know feeble is not Nature
In high esteem they hold him, hearing his lecture
Always and for ever, big-headed he becomes.[29]

For *Oudh Punch*, being a "nechari" was synonymous with being *mohazzab* or civilized by which *Oudh Punch* almost always meant being Westernized. The poem sarcastically inventorizes the objectionable consequences of adopting the *nechariya* or *mohazzab* mode of life—Western attire, European style dining, going for Sayyid Ahmad's assemblies (*jalsa*) and committees, mixing with ladies and so on. Nechar and Tehzib become oversimplified maẓmūns or themes around which *Oudh Punch* styled a bulk of its parodic dressing-downs. Ironically, while for Sayyid Ahmad *nechar* was the fulcrum on which he sought to balance, no matter how inconsistently, science and religion, the poem posits *nechar* as diametrically opposed to Islam.

David Lelyveld argues that "For Sayyid Ahmad as well as well for Hali, the authority of 'nature' was more a matter of religious emotion than scientific observation. Speaking in Lahore during his 1884, Punjab tour, Sayyid Ahmad declared that the uneducated who 'from their hearts believe in Islam without knowing the proofs for its truth according to the principles of logic and philosophy were, *ahl-e-jannat* [dwellers of heaven] and better Muslims than he was."[30] Similarly, for Hali the category of nature was a redemptive one that sought to revive both Muslims and Urdu poetry. If, as Frances Pritchett points out, Hali was "haunted by the invisible presence of Wordsworth in his poetics", this would hardly be a celebration of technology. [31] Javed Majeed contends that what stands behind Hali's poetics was less

[29]*Oudh Punch*12: 5 (March 22, 1888).
[30] Lelyveld, p.82.
[31] Pritchett, p.166.

Wordsworth but more a valorization of nineteenth-century natural sciences. In the section on natural poetry in the *Muqaddamah*, Hali argued that science and mechanics have ushered in a treasury of metaphors and similes (*tashbīhāt aur tamsilāt*) and with the increase in people's knowledge and information (*m'alumāt aur'ittila*), new poetic ideas (*ḳhayālāt-e jadīd*) are made available. [32] Hali's contention is for poets to cultivate scientific ways of observation. The same is applied to the Indian Muslim community, on the whole, in the *Musaddas,* where Muslims are pushed to travel and to learn to distinguish between legendary places and geographical facts.[33] The *Musaddas* repackages a model of classical Islam fusing an "imagined past" with an "imagined future". However, detailing the intellectual achievements of past Islam, Hali is at pains to point out the debt that Europe owes to the achievements of classical Islam[34]. In the words of Majeed, both Sayyid Ahmad and Hali "were not just deeply intimate with the world they sought to reform…but they [also] carried this world within themselves." [35] In one instance, Hali describes progress as a "carrion bitch" and in places in the *Musaddas* the languid Indian Muslims are almost preferable to the racing European peoples.[36]

In its parodies of Sayyid Ahmad and Hali, *Oudh Punch* flattens the nuances, ambiguities and ambivalences that were very much a part of their attitude towards science, Islam, and civilization and posits *nechar* and *tehzib* as antagonistic to Islam. Like a burlesque spin on the Persian poetic technique of *ma'ani afrini* or meaning creation, or the multivalency of a poetic meaning, *Oudh Punch* plays with the titles of its parodic necharal poetry. In the poem just cited "Nechar ka Asar, Tehzīb ka Jauhar", the word "*jauhar*" can mean "jewel" but also "essence", a fundamental term of Islamic philosophy that signifies the ineffable nature of a thing, or all that exists in reality, all bodies and parts of bodies—in short, all things of the visible world. The title therefore can read either "The Effects of Nature, Jewels of Civilization", or "The Effect of Nature, Essence of Civilization". With the latter meaning, the poem lists what constitutes or what is, paradoxically, the "essence" of tehzib—abandoning Islam and ideas of Afterlife (ma'ad), becoming secretary/members in committees, adopting European dressing and dining, socialising with ladies, lecturing on nature and so on. The last line of the poem suggests that having done these things, one is bound to assume an air of superiority (*bartari*) for the rest of one's life.

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[32] Hali, *Muqaddamah*, pp.109-10.
[33] Majeed, p.18.
[34] Ibid., p.30.
[35] Ibid.,p.31.
[36] Ibid., p.32.

In another example, published in *Oudh Punch* in 1909, the signifier '*nechar*' assumes a concretized presence as a poetic *mazmūn* in a "Sa-necharal *qita.*"[37] The word "*sanīchar*"—which is a creative spin on the word "*nechar"*—literally means "saturnine", and presages something malefic to follow in the *qita'*.

The poem sees Satan being asked if outside hell (*dozaḳh*) he has any abode in the world (*batākī dunīya me tū rehtākahāñhai/ko'ikunjhaiyāko'ibostāñhai*). Satan replies that he used to live in Necharabad (*kahāpehlemaiñnecharabād me thārehtā /par ab kyā batāuñkīthikānakahāñhai*) but Necharabad has lost its liveliness (*voh zindāhdilīhainā voh zindagī hai*). Moreover, he says that now a "Pīr-e nechar" has taken up his job and therefore he is happy to leave Necharabad:

karūn kya agar jāye nechar na chhuta
mera kām jab bin mere vahān ravāñ hai
vahāñ jab se ek pīr e nechar hai nāzim
har ek paudha nechar ka pīr e mughān hai"

Why should I rue losing Nature
When my job is done even without me
A Pir of Nature governs there now
Every sapling is a worshipper of Nature.

In the vein of *mazmūnāfrini* or theme-creation or in the words of Pritchett a "metaphorical-equation creation", this and other parodic poems let loose an "extended, proliferating, freewheeling, use of metaphor, one that generates a constant supply of new images, thoughts, and propositions about the ghazal universe." [38] Literalizing the metaphor of *nechar* as the enemy of Islam, here Satan is the ex-resident of Necharabad, now made redundant by the Pir-e Nature—a reference to Sayyid Ahmad Khan. Following this logic, Sayyid Ahmad Khan is verily called Satan, now that he is fulfilling Satan's job, and "*mazhab-e nechari*" is seen as a Satanic creed. Nechar itself, as a *maẓmūn,* is fleshed out as an actual place called Necharabad, imagined as a garden whose dwellers are saplings, each a "*pir-e mughan"* (tavern keeper or worshipper) of Nature thanks to the new *nāzim* or governor.

If *nechar* becomes a poetic trope, *Oudh Punch* also delights in taking to a comic

[37]*Oudh Punch* 33:2 (Feb 25, 1909).
[38] Pritchett, p.93.

extreme *necharalshairi's* commitment to reorient and instrumentalize the other-worldly ghazal to real, (*aṣal*), common (*rozmarrah*) and plebeian concerns. In 1902, we have a "Naye fashion ki ghazal" that comically registers the changing poetic sensibilities. The poet is an unnamed student from Benares (*tālib-e 'ilm banāras*) who bemoans that he has been transformed into a "*pīr-e nechar*" by a "*jallād"* or an executioner. [39] The poem is as follows:

khūbjallād ne diya charka
kar dīy'a mujhko pīrnechar ka
ek masīha ki sakhtchhāti ne
kar diya hai kaleja patthar ka
ābrū par meriphira pāni
āshna ho gaya maiñgauhar ka
tār par nāma yār ka āya
kām ab kya raha kabūtar ka
ḍām fūl [damn fool] hua ab suḳhan-e takiya
tar se mūnh bhar gaya hai misṭar ka
hai brānḍi me ab dil-e sozāñ
pāni ghar ban gaya samundar ka
tājposhi meñ ek khitāb mile
bol bāla ho shah e bartar ka
sī-es-āi [CSI] gar bano bazzāz
kyoñ na ho phir kaleja gaz bhar ka
ek bandariya ke sāth nācheñge
bhar līya rūp ham ne bandar ka
shauq rakhte heñ ab pīyāno se
tān desi hai rāg machhar ka
sar phirāta hai pālki yakka
dhyān hai bāisikal ke chakkar ka
itr-e anbār se nāk meñ dam hai
lāo kantar koi lavendar ka
de do mujhko milākar gangajal
tār wāla woh pehle nambar ka

[39] *Oudh Punch* 26:2 (June 19, 1902).

pūj āteñ haiñ dāl ki mandi
kam darshan kare basheshar ka
khāse gud ḍām ban gaye tālib
kyathikāna ab is gayeghar ka.

With the accrued familiarity of the *mazmūn*, readers would know that "pir-e nechar" was a reference to Sayyid Ahmad. The Muslim reformer is then sardonically called a "messiah with a chest of steel" (*masīhākīsaḳhtchhāti*) who has hardened the poet and his sensibilities (*kar dīy'ākalejāpathharkā*) and shamed the student-poet (*ābrū par merī phirāpānī*). In these new times, the beloved's letter is delivered by telegram, not pigeons (*tār par nāmahyār ka āya/kām ab kyā rahākabūtarkā*). The nom de plume of poets is now "Damn Fool" (*ḍāmfūl hu'ā suḳhan-e takiyah*) and brandy makes a heart full. On being crowned as CSI (Companion of Star of India), misters puff up with pride, dance around like monkeys with females, play the piano with Indian notes and the raga of mosquitos, complain that the palanquin makes their heads reel and want bicycles instead, prefer lavender instead to *itr*, visit brothels instead of temples (*pūjāteñhaiñdālkīmanḍi, kam darshan kareñbasheshаrkā*), and students have become quite "Good damn" (*ḳhāseguḍḍām ban ga'yetālib*). The final line of the last couplet of the ghazal is quite telling: "What is home to this lost home?" (*kyā ṭhikānā is ga'yegharkā*) The poem captures the changing times and changing poetic conceits and comically shows new similes (*tasbhihāt*) replacing old ones, using the upwardly mobile native gentleman or Mister as the battering ram. These new similes (telegram, bicycle, lavender, piano) are out of place in the ghazal universe.

In its metafictional overtones, the ghazal captures not just the mannerisms of the Anglicized Mister but also the newly Anglicized world of Urdu letters, where new noms de plume are: "Damn you", and civilized misters are called "Good Damn". It is precisely this anachronism of ghazal in an unsuitable time or "*zamāna-e nasāzgār"* that Hali had used as the chief force behind his advocacy of "*tarz- e jadīdkīshā'iri"* or new fashion of poetry [40]. By contrast, *Oudh Punch* derives pleasure from this anachronism by using the asymmetries engendered by colonial contact under the liberating leeway of parody—which, by the logic of its functioning, itself "makes new" or rewrites. In ridiculing "Newness", it is worth reiterating that *Oudh Punch* itself does something quite new.

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[40] Hali, *Muqaddama*, p.265.

While *Oudh Punch* seems to feistily attack innovation, in reality, things were not so black and white. For instance, although *Oudh Punch*'s parodies of *necharalsha'irī* ridicule the committee-going shenanigans of the *mohazzab* crowd, in *Ab-e Hayat* Muhammad Husain Azad, a proponent of necharalshā'iri, himself bemoaned that the world of the "New Light people'"—a world in which *mushairahs* have been replaced by "committees"—is darkness to him, and he wanders in it as a stranger in a foreign country. [41]. Therefore, one might say that *Oudh Punch* used newness as a *mazmun* often in the spirit of playful parody more than personal invective. Sayyid Ahmad Khan, promoting cultural and educational reform, as he did, became a condensed leitmotif signifying newness and modernity. Although *Oudh Punch'*s relentless mocking of Aligarh Movement has been attributed to Munshi Sajjad Husain's Congress affiliation by Urdu historiographers [42], the parody of Sayyid Ahmad Khan was often hard to distinguish from the mockery of the *mohazzab* gentleman. Sir Sayyid's mockery also appeared in the extra-literary minutiae of the newspaper which was comprised of a range of mock-genres that ridiculed elements of newspaper writing itself such as parody-advertisements, humorous obituaries and facetious reports that parodied and undermined official print culture and the newspaper's own enterprise. Needless to say, Sir Sayyid made an appearance in these as well. For example, on the occasion of the death of the British Prime Minister William Gladstone (May 19, 1898) closely following the death of Sayyid Ahmad Khan (March 27, 1898), *Oudh Punch* published an imaginary advertisement purportedly put out by Sayyid Ahmad Khan or an "Indian G.O.M. [Grand Old Man]" ("HindustānīJī O Em"). [43]The advertisement required the services of an experienced and hard-working scholar well versed in Western sciences or *maġhribī 'ulūm* for massaging the head and feet of Sayyid Ahmad after his long journey from this world to the next (*adamābād*). The advertisement was responded to at once by a "European Grand Old Man" or the lately deceased Mr Gladstone who offered himself as a candidate for the post. In yet another correspondence, the readers learned that the application of the European candidate was readily accepted, and he was accordingly called to heaven to fulfil his duties, causing sorrow and grief on Earth. Besides calling out Sayyid Ahmad's perceived Anglophilia, it is worth pointing out that this parody of newspaper genres also undermines the sanctimonious medium of the newspaper as a morally superior voice of the English-educated Muslim elite in Lucknow in an age when poets like Akbar Allahabadi would go on to quip that, (*tamāmqaumediṭar banī haiyalīḍar/ sabab yeh hai ki koī aur dillagīnarahī"* "The country

[41] Pritchett, p.50.
[42] Jalibi, p.453.
[43]*Oudh Punch* 22:1(May 26, 1898).

swarms with editors and leaders/ Who cannot find any other game to play.” [44]

Conclusion

To conclude then, under the auspices of the literary resources of parody, we can say that *Oudh Punch*, had given a new theme or *mazmun* for the ghazal universe of Urdu newspaper editors who now used each other as models of emulation. It is doubtful and perhaps even irrelevant whether these Punch-writers had actually read Sir Sayyid’s writings. What is important is how Sir Sayyid’s ambivalent and somewhat inconsistent conceptualization of “nature” became a freewheeling poetic trope that floated freely amongst satirical newspapers to draw comic mileage from. Coming back to *Oudh Punch*, for a newspaper, whose journalistic policy revolved around pleasure, it is difficult to pin down a clearly demarcated politics of ridicule. *Oudh Punch’s* criticism of Islamic modernism and poetic reform cannot be taken without a degree of self-irony. In parodying Newness or Nayi Roshni, *Oudh Punch* was itself doing something quite new and unprecedented, not just by the functional logic of parody, which “makes new”, but also in its lively experimentation with genres, it blazed the trail for literary modernity in Urdu that bore fruition, most evidently, in the early Urdu novel. Still, the quintessential contradiction of *Oudh Punch* remained with its ridicule of the literary innovation that crystallised into the Naturalist Poetry movement. One of the central tenets of Hali’s *Muqaddamah* was a suspension of the *ustād-shāgird* relationship and the breaking free from imitation of ancients or *qudāmakītaqlīd* and their circle of imagining (*ḳhhayālātkā dai’ra*). Hali exhorted poets of the new fashion to use themselves, or Nature as their teacher (*nechar ka mutā’ala*). Similarly, Sayyid Ahmad Khan released the Quran from pre-existing networks of exegesis and reinterpreted it anew in the light of nature, progress, and other precepts of European modernity.[45] This infinite interpretation made the sacred mundane for some and although Sayyid Ahmad dismissed the charge that Quran would have become a “khilona” or a “plaything” in the hands of people, it did indeed seem like a blank screen onto which modern discourses could be projected.[46] Though, at times indeed, Sir Sayyid’s treatment of scriptures straddled between sacred singularity and transcendence, and mundane plurality ushered by “the secularizing and historicizing imperatives of modernity.”[47] It is ironic that *Oudh Punch*’s relentless and freewheeling parody of New Light and all that it entailed, its hostility to the putatively un-Islamic creed of *nechar*, and finally its parody of itself, mimicked the creative

[44]Allahabadi, p.156.
[45] Majeed, p.27.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid., p.29.

and intellectual impulse of those that it parodied, Altaf Husain Hali and Sayyid Ahmad Khan—namely the impulse to break free out of a limited single source and delight in the creative richness of relativism, the impulse to defer the last word.

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Fig. 1. Cartoon featuring Sir Syed Ahmad Khan as “Nechari Jogi” or Naturalist Yogi. He is seen as a snake charmer with the fangs of the snakes labelled “chandāh” or donation (*Oudh Punch* 5:4 [Aug 4, 1881]).