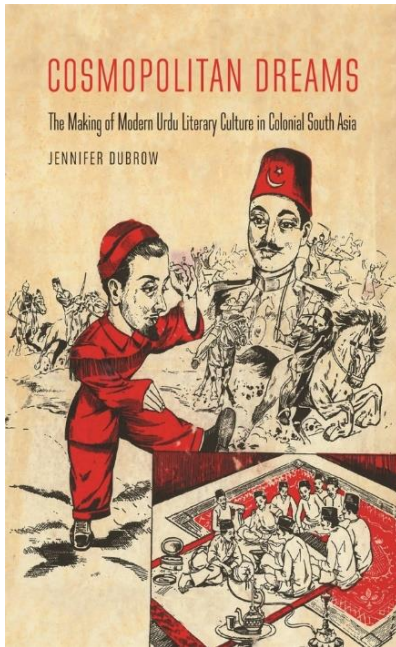




## ***Cosmopolitan Dreams: The Making of Modern Urdu Literary Culture in Colonial South Asia by Jennifer Dubrow***

Reviewed by *Ayesha Abrar*



**COSMOPOLITAN DREAMS: THE MAKING OF MODERN URDU LITERARY CULTURE IN COLONIAL SOUTH ASIA.** by Jennifer Dubrow. University of Hawaii Press USA 2018; pp. 192. \$62. ISBN: 9780824876692.

Among the diverse vernacular literary cultures of the Indian subcontinent, Urdu as a language stands out for its ability to reveal as much about the colonial past as about the globalized present. Jennifer Dubrow, an associate professor of Urdu at the Washington University, presents an incisive account of Urdu literary cultures of nineteenth century colonial India in

*Cosmopolitan Dreams: The Making of Modern Urdu Literary Culture in Colonial South Asia*. In the introduction to her book Dubrow states, “Through print, Urdu readers and writers created a transregional, transnational language community that eschewed identities of religion, caste, and class” (2). While her perspective circumvents the route taken by other scholars like Kavita Datla (*The Language of Secular Islam: Urdu Nationalism and Colonial India*, 2013), who places Urdu pedagogy at the centre stage of the Indian nationalist struggle, Dubrow chooses for her study a stage in the history of Urdu print when its novelty and accessibility made it immensely popular. This era, i.e., the second half of the nineteenth century, was the defining period for Urdu not just as a popular language but also as a means to assert new identities. Her study of Urdu print culture provides unprecedented insights into the modern sensibilities of the milieu.

Theorists of nationalism, postcoloniality, and vernacular modernities—Frances Pritchett, Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, C. M. Naim, and Gail Minault—have come up with frameworks for locating Urdu within the matrices of linguistic cultures and aesthetic sensibilities that grappled with colonial modernity. In the last two decades especially, there has been a growing interest in the study of both the subversive potential of vernacular modernities and the role of Urdu in South Asian modernity. Popular satirical literature like the ‘Punch’ magazines have drawn the attention of scholars like Mushirul Hasan (*The Avadh Punch: Wit and Humour in Colonial North India*, 2007) and Barbara Mittler (*Asian Punches: A Transcultural Affair*, co-authored with Hans Harder, 2013) who have studied these genres as crucial players in vernacular print modernity. Dubrow’s work adds to this tradition of scholarship. Her archival research, being a significant intervention in the tradition by virtue of its rigorous methodology, into periodicals and punches of the era give her access to the writers and readers of the age. Moreover, her analysis encompasses previously untranslated articles, ‘satirical vignettes,’ and classic as well as topical literary works to provide a comprehensive view of Urdu print production.

Dubrow’s succinct and lucid writing engages with the interactive, self-reflexive (and therefore ‘modern’) Urdu print culture. In the first chapter, “Printing the Cosmopolis: Authors and Journals in the Age of Print,” she argues that with the coming of print technology a new class of capitalist entrepreneurs, authors, and readers rose, transforming the nature of previously patron-sponsored literary activity to a more heterogenous and democratic reading public. This influence is visible in the letters to the editors (which she quotes generously to support her arguments) published in periodicals as much as in the responses to the serialized novel *Fasana-e-Azad* published in the *Awadh Akhbar* in 1880. The second chapter “The Novel in Instalments: *Fasana-e-Azad* and Literary Modernity,” extends the argument to the serialized novel which, like the Punch format, sought to bring together entertainment and *akhlaq* or cultural etiquette. The serialized novel was experimental, influenced by topical concerns and responses from the readers. An example of the readers’ interaction with the writer is indicated in the excerpt taken from a letter to the writer of *Fasana-e-Azad*, which begins with “I agree with the opinions you gave in your September 15 article called Dastan-e-Azad [...] You should publish this as a book so it will be preserved, and our fellow countrymen [*hamvatan*] will keep benefitting from it [...]” (86). She draws from a comprehensive sweep of references ranging from nineteenth century Japanese novels to Chinese print culture, from Korean periodicals to Arab cosmopolitanism. The context of Urdu modernity is firmly located

in print capitalism and the way it opened the world to the readers' scrutiny. Furthermore, the interactions between authors/editors and readers not only shaped the literature of the time but also built a cosmopolitan community of Urdu speakers who contested accepted social values and norms.

The notion of cosmopolitanism that Dubrow formulates is distinct from national, communal, or regional communities. The nineteenth century Urdu readers belonged to different religions, communities, classes, regions, and political beliefs. The sheer revolutionary potential of satirical journals as spaces for dissent couched in aesthetic idiom is apparent in Dubrow's critique of the 'Punch' magazine in the third chapter, "Experiments with Form: *Avadh Punch*, Satirical Journalism, and Colonial Critique." Coded language, lampoons, and visual modes such as topical cartoons about contemporary issues targeted the colonial establishment and their cultural as well as literary practices. An example from the *Avadh Punch*, that Dubrow gives, is Navab Sayyid Muhammad Azad's recurring segment 'Mr. Azad's New Dictionary' where he parodies the modern dictionary. He attacks terms like 'policy,' calling it the "[...] showing off of one's imagined power rather than political negotiation or diplomacy" (70). He also censures the popular term of the time 'civilization' defining it as sycophancy and mimicry of English ways (71).

Dubrow dedicates the entire fourth chapter "Reading the World: The Urdu Print Public Sphere and Hindi/Urdu Divide," to the politics of the Hindi-Urdu divide, where she locates this division firmly in the 1860s when partisans began to argue for the Devnagiri script and the Hindi language as the language of Hindus. The 'modern' bourgeois audiences and readerships of these times were not as secular as one would believe looking at the general picture. What precisely led to the crystallization of Urdu as a Muslim language? Dubrow hints at a possible answer in the rivalry between *Awadh Akhbar* and *Awadh Punch*, when the latter targeted the editor of the former (Ratan Nath 'Sarshar') for not knowing the proper Urdu idiom because he is a Kashmiri Hindu. This was perhaps but one of the blows to which the 'cosmopolis' eventually succumbed. It could indeed be one of the factors contributing to the build-up to the eventual ideological split between Urdu and Hindi languages in the later decades. Scholars like Francesca Orsini (in *Before the Divide: Hindi and Urdu Literary Culture*, 2010) have undertaken more nuanced studies to reveal the overlapping genres and influences that both the languages have shared throughout. The association with religious communities do not make for a convincing argument because Urdu was never a pan-Islamic language.

It was born in and it flourished in the subcontinent as a result of social, political, and cultural changes. Dubrow's explanation is nevertheless a useful insight with respect to the development of rivalries and competition among punch magazines and periodicals in their pursuit of linguistic superiority.

Dubrow draws a concluding chapter that concerns itself with contemporary globalized Urdu cosmopolis in cinema, television, and digital media. Through instances from Pakistani 'drama' genre of serialized TV shows, she presents a critique of contemporary author/director and viewer interactivity. She discusses blogs and online forums that passionately review each episode of serials like *Humsafar* (aired in Pakistan from 2011 to 2012) connecting audiences from across the subcontinent to the UK and UAE. In some instances, the directors/scriptwriters also participate in these discussions and address audience's concerns regarding character and plot development. This process is reminiscent of the 'letters to the editor' in the print periodicals of the previous century, thus forming a connection between the seemingly disparate formats of periodical, novel, and television drama through the idea of author-audience interactivity and the diversity of cosmopolitan audiences. The concluding chapter may initially seem like a discontinuous leap in the chronology of the argument, but Dubrow seamlessly sews the two contexts together with the thread of common elements and shared modes of operation in the universe of Urdu speakers, writers, and audiences. Readers will connect to this chapter because it makes the trajectory of the evolution of print media relatable to the visually and virtually oriented audiences of today.

Dubrow's research is thorough and well argued. There are however a few gaps in her story that surface upon closer scrutiny. In her exploration of the 'community of language' in question, she begins tracing Urdu literary modes from the 1830s to roughly the turn of the century. It is precisely at this juncture that a watershed moment appeared—Mirza Hadi Ruswa's *Umrao Jan Ada* (1899). This novel and the changes in literary trends that followed, would have carried Dubrow's argument further to include a new dimension of readership and stylistic modes. To her credit, she does address the Progressive Writer's Movement and its commitment to secularism and social realism. But one gets a sense of a delicate skirting of the issue of nationalism in her study, which becomes all the more glaring when one reads it in the political climate of today, where nationalist ideals have become a hot topic of debate. Rather than the note of lament for the crumbling of the Urdu cosmopolis from the 1860s onwards, a focus upon the different formulations of national consciousness by poets,

writers, and audiences at this time would give a richer perspective upon the Urdu cosmopolis of the nineteenth century.

The book bears testimony to Dubrow's genuine interest in archival material, her novel methodology, and commitment to painstakingly thorough research. The expectations sown in the introduction find fruition in the discussions in the following chapters, and edifyingly so. It ought to be mentioned here that *Cosmopolitan Dreams* is written entirely in lucid English, and wherever quotes have been borrowed from Urdu, they have been aptly translated into English; therefore, this book does not require prior knowledge of the *nastaliq* script or of Urdu literature. Accompanied by her accessible and eloquent writing style, *Cosmopolitan Dreams* stands out among its peers as an engaging and insightful read. These factors make Dubrow's book eligible for recommendation to not just enthusiasts of colonial literary history and Urdu literary history but it will also interest the lay reader who can enjoy the witty factual anecdotes and translated pieces from nineteenth century periodicals. The re-printed illustrations are an added bonus. The visual text, be it in the illustrated punch magazines that lent a humorous and satirical edge to the narratives or the television shows in contemporary times that enjoy a far wider audience across the world than print, makes Urdu a truly cosmopolitan medium. As Dubrow's concluding sentence in this book states, "Especially now, we must continue to recognize the power of literature and the arts to allow us to think and dream anew" (120).

