

Timely Disguises

Fantasizing Civility on the Frontier Between India and Europe

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A person present at the incident when Mr Lawrence was slain said that he was pretending to be a mendicant (*faqir*) when the soldiers killed him. But when the soldiers saw the marks of two bullets on his back, which he was known to have suffered in the battle of Kabul, they recognized him convincingly and he had no answer but silence. The difference between the sources is confounding and one feels flustered, fearing that, tomorrow, another reporter may give a different name for this European (*firangi*).

—‘The Death of Mr Lawrence’,
Dehli Urdu Akhbar, 31 May 1857

THE RECOGNIZABILITY OF a human body as a particular person is a concern as crucial as it is fraught with uncertainty. Implicating materiality as well as cognition, it is central to matters as widely divergent as personal identity and the science of forensics. Conceptualized as a process, recognition shows the human body as a layered object, including natal characteristics of skin colour, gender, and distinguishing features, and marks of times and places such

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as injury, attire, cultural and social residues, and habitual movement that indicate the ease or otherwise of interacting with other bodies. For all the ways we can parse it, recognition is a profoundly fragile affair, apt to congealment or dissolution in an instant and consequential to the point of death. The question of recognition is also, I believe, critical to the politics of civilization and civility. In this essay, I would like to highlight the place of bodily recognition as a critical mediating point in questions pertaining to civilizational hierarchies, civilizing missions, and the exercise of interpersonal civility. Recognition is central to these issues because it encapsulates the process of going from apprehending the human body as a material object to comprehending its metaphysical significance as well as its place in sociocultural hierarchies. The last two of these procedures determine the recognized body's status as a counterpart to the observing body, seen either as of a higher or equal status and thereby to be treated civilly, or as of lower status, subject to disparagement, exclusion from interaction, or the civilizing mission. I suggest that, in the colonial context, the rhetoric of civilization and the practice of civility functioned necessarily at cross-purposes with each other. Civilization posed a universal scale by which individuals and groups were to be judged. Civility was conditioned first and foremost by the power differential that defined the colonial situation, presumed as the norm between those of European origin and denied to the Indians as unequals. In the final analysis, this led to a cultural situation in which both Indians and Europeans occupied positions that were ambiguous and contradictory rather than rationalizable when it came to civil matters.¹

The Rebellion of 1857: Fact and Fiction

Broadcast in the feverish atmosphere of Delhi during the great Indian uprising of 1857, the report cited in the epigraph is a poignant case of misrecognition. It concerns Sir Henry Lawrence, a famous veteran of the East India Company's Burmese, Sikh, and Afghan wars who had been appointed Chief Commissioner in Lucknow soon after the annexation of Awadh by the Company in 1856. Lawrence was very much alive and in command of the Company garrison on 31 May, although he did eventually perish on 4 July during the siege of Lucknow.² In the report above, the identification of the body conveys more hope than certainty, indexing the sentiment of the Urdu newspaper's anti-British editor.³ The report also reflects a moment of inversion in India's colonial history, when

white rather than brown bodies, and European rather than Indian forms of attire and manners, had become subject to the exercise of power in parts of northern and central India. English men and women trying to survive by pretending to be Indians appear numerous times in reports concerned with the uprising. In later years and decades, this idea would become a trope common to Indian writing on the uprising and British triumphalist fiction penned in the wake of its military failure.⁴

The mutiny of Indians and the vengefulness of the British that followed together constitute perhaps the most thoroughly uncivil episode in Europe's colonial encounter with India. It marks the intensely bloody end of a status quo and the beginning of direct British suzerainty over the subcontinent. The uprising is thus an advantageous chronological fulcrum around which to discuss the issue of civility across Indian-European hyphenations. The uprising caused an eruption of issues long in the making, and it cast an extended shadow on the remaining 90 years of British rule in India. I believe it can be seen as the denouement that exposed the possibilities and contradictions of interaction between the British and their Indian subjects during the colonial period. I am interested in exploring sociohistorical conditions that frame these interactions, particularly those that illuminate political and ethical choices faced by nineteenth-century Indians of a particular social location. Contrary to the viewpoint of most scholarship to date, these choices were concerned more with psychosomatic recognition and rejection rather than simple ideological positioning across the divide separating the colonizer from the colonized. It was, in the end, much easier to adopt ideas of European origin than to rationalize the wearing of European clothes or the eating of European food.

In this paper the argument follows from the observation that, during the nineteenth century, Indians were compelled to address a contradiction regarding Europeans that they could neither accept as rational nor reject as an absurdity. European arguments about their superiority in the colonial context were rooted in an evolutionary paradigm that placed Europeans at the head of the species as *universal* human subjects capable of civilizing others. In direct opposition to this, however, European authority in the colonies was maintained through a highly deliberate cultivation of *particulars* of dress, food, language, and so on, that made the rulers stand apart from the ruled. This placed Indians in an impossible position since European ways of being were, on one hand, defined as civilization, and on the other, unavailable as vehicles for full recognition

as equals. Was there any way to resolve this incongruity? What was it about European particularities that endowed them with universality? Could adopting European bodily practices make an Indian civilized in European eyes and be treated with full civility? Was it possible to recover or create Indian particularities that could claim universality and compel civility on the part of Europeans? Buffeted by implications of ideas on one side and the effects of coercive power on the other, Indian navigations aimed at answering these questions symptomize the fact that colonial civility demanded that Indians become 'civilized' while, at the same time, denying them social and political equality concomitant with such civilization.⁵

Nazir Ahmad's *Ibnulvaqt*

In the remainder of this essay, I try to dig further into the fraught nexus between civilization, civility and recognition. My muse for these reflections is a work of historical fiction: Nazir Ahmad's novel *Ibnulvaqt*, which was first published in 1888 and is still in print in both India and Pakistan. Nazir Ahmad is generally regarded as the first novelist in Urdu, writing 'realistic' stories about ordinary life rather than indulging in the fantastical excesses characteristic of earlier prose genres (*dastan* and *qissa*). The novel goes back three decades to the uprising, telling the story of a Delhi Muslim man who adopts English ways after he saves an Englishman from death during the carnage and is rewarded handsomely by the colonial government. The novel is usually read as a didactic tract because of its dry and moralistic tone, although as a whole, it provides no final opinion on whether Indians (particularly Muslims) ought to Europeanize or cultivate a nativist lifestyle. I explore the novel's ambivalence about cultural dilemmas that loomed large in the second half of the nineteenth century. While the language and narrative framing are resolutely anti-fantastic, I suggest that its depiction of unlimited Indian access to the European social and cultural world constitutes a fantasy within the historical context of the late nineteenth century. The fantasy enables a thought experiment aimed at working through the relationships between civilization, civility, and recognition in the colonial context. Over the course of the novel, the idea is dramatized in ever-longer opposing monologues delivered by two protagonists who argue for and against the adoption of European customs. The indecisive and abrupt end affirms the contradictions rather than resolving them.⁶

Nazir Ahmad's novels represent Indian-European encounters in both form and content. Urdu was a new medium for literary expression, rapidly gaining significance in the nineteenth century at the expense of Persian. The author knew English and was self-consciously aware of the European antecedents of the novel as a genre. The story he tells involves close encounters between Indians and Europeans, as seen from the perspectives of such Indians who are acutely conscious of the fact that Europeans occupy a privileged political and cultural position in the world. Consequently, the narrative is not simply a case of Indians and Europeans facing each other. It represents, instead, the predicaments of Indians who were transformed by colonial contact and were trying to make sense of European persons and ideas in the late nineteenth century.

Nazir Ahmad the Novelist

The substantial literature available on Nazir Ahmad (1830–1912) shows that he 'was quite a character. Honorifics attached to his name connote the spectrum of his affiliations and competencies: 'dipti' for being a deputy collector and a deputy inspector of schools in the colonial administration; 'mawlvi' for coming from a family of Islamic religious professionals and for his specialization in Arabic literature; and 'doctor' for his degrees from Universities. A translator of the Indian penal code from English into Urdu, he was equally known for his fiery oratory at public events, advocating new pathways for Indian Muslims, during the period 1890–1910. While he provided moral and financial support to Sir Syed Ahmad Khan's educational endeavours, he referred to Sir Syed's Quran commentary as a work that attempts to 'knot ears to the buttocks', writing also that it is easier to believe the Quran not to be the word of God than to accept Sir Syed's glosses on the scripture.⁷ He boasted to his acquaintances about having arranged his own marriage by charming the daughter of his teacher. A man careful about earning and saving money and charging high interest for informal loans, he nevertheless seems to have bridled at being called a miser. Greatly mindful of the dignity of his attire in public, he is described by a frequent visitor as a sloppy, corpulent old man who lounged around at home draped in a sarong (*tehmad*) unencumbered by any form of knotting at the waist. All in all, then, a competent and energetic man, full of the usual contradictions of human life.⁸ Nazir Ahmad's fiction is usually seen to offer solutions for the conflicted cultural situation of the Muslims, this reading being

advocated and encouraged in his own non-fictional works, directly as well as by implication. While privileging authorial intention is certainly a fine way to read fiction, I believe the critical assessment of Nazir Ahmad's work to date has not done justice to the internal complexity of his narratives. In this essay, I wish to read Nazir Ahmad's work as a symptom of cultural patterns that are not articulated directly but seem to permeate the form as well as the content of his novels.

Ibnulvaqt gives us a view of Indian and British interaction at a time when separation and intermingling appear to have been seen as both attractive and abhorrent in equal measure. What we see here, I suggest, is an emphatic exemplification of the fact that colonial modernity turned Europeans into self-authenticating universal subjects no matter what their external aspects. This occurred at the same time as Indians became aliens to their pasts, presents, and futures, their identities becoming predicated on European presence or knowledge, irrespective of whether they shunned or assimilated European manners and ideas. The result was civilizational liminality and new, hybrid identities that appeared inauthentic when compared to the pre-colonial past and graceless imitations in front of European manners.

The effects of the new cultural situation are evident in Nazir Ahmad's use of languages in his novels. The Urdu narrative of *Ibnulvaqt* contains interjections in Persian, Arabic, and English. Persian is never translated, suggesting that it is to be taken as wholly readable by the intended audience. Arabic and English are glossed in Urdu, marking their place as universal languages whose status is derived at least in part from their origins outside of India. In other places in his work, Nazir Ahmad advocates the extensive use of Arabic as a counterbalance to the hegemony of English since he sees Muslims' specialness vis-à-vis non-Muslim Indians as being heavily tied to their possession of Arabic.⁹ However, in the novel, a major character appears on stage first upon his return from Mecca and has no kind words to say about the Arabs or the Turks. Unlike the situatedness of English in powerful England, the homeland of Arabic is in shambles and the language remains a vehicle for an alternative universality only in theory rather than an achievable reality. The civilizational advantage of Arabic is severely compromised by the fact that those who are deemed its primary possessors seem even worse off than Indian Muslims.

Whatever their internal contradictions, by Nazir Ahmad's time Indian particularities had begun to refashion themselves into universalities in the European image to give rise to competing models of civilization.

In doing so, however, they became beset with the same problems that pertained to European ideas: how was one to claim universality when insisting on maintaining particularities of external forms? If civilization was to be understood as forming a single universal scale, then what was to be done with the corporeal habitus that had compelled civility in the times of one's ancestors?¹⁰

A Fantasy in Realist Garb

The story provided in *Ibnulvaqt* is straightforward and is usually seen to exemplify the quandary of post-1857 Muslim elites regarding whether to preserve their own heritage (sartorial, linguistic, literary, etc.) or adopt European ways. The novel's central character is named 'Ibnulvaqt', an Arabic term that means 'Son of the Moment'. Initially a hereditary retainer of the Delhi court attached to a royal lady named Ma'shuq Mahal Begum, Ibnulvaqt's life changes drastically when he saves and protects a prominent Englishman, Mr Noble, during the 1857 uprising. Mutual curiosity about political and cultural matters leads Ibnulvaqt and Noble to become involved in lengthy, fully cordial discussions during the latter's three-month refuge with the former. Once British control is re-established, Ibnulvaqt receives a big reward for his loyalty and, under Noble's direction, takes the drastic step of changing his whole mode of life to that of an English gentleman. He is shown to regard his actions as that of a much-needed Indian-Muslim reformer, although this eventually leads to his alienation from his family as well as the English gentry who regard him as an arrogant native upstart. Faced with seemingly insurmountable cultural and financial troubles, Ibnulvaqt is counselled by Hujjatulislam ('Proof of Islam'), the husband of a cousin, who is a deputy collector in the colonial administration but maintains a traditional Indian Muslim lifestyle. He is regarded very well by his European superiors and is able to intercede with them on Ibnulvaqt's behalf in order to lessen his troubles. The sparse plot is fleshed out and propelled forward through the insertion of lengthy descriptive sections and scholastic dialogues on political, epistemological and theological subjects that repeat arguments well known from classical metaphysicians and their modern critics. The novel ends abruptly in the middle of a discussion, without offering a final denouement.¹¹

Nazir Ahmad's choice of personal names for his characters was obviously symbolic. For example, Ibnulvaqt's old employer, Ma'shuq (beloved) Mahal Begum, maps to old imperial Delhi and passes away

dutifully when the first post-1857 canon shells land in the city. The faithful servant of an Englishman is named Jan Nisar (self-sacrificer). The saved Englishman is named Noble, providing a positive complexion to the fact that he treats Indians as equals and provides Ibnulvaqt access to English society. The man who objects to Ibnulvaqt's adoption of European ways and tries to disenfranchise him is named Mr Sharp. This pattern becomes more complex when we come to the two main characters, Ibnulvaqt and Hujjatulislam, both Islamic religious terms with long histories. Ibnulvaqt is a Sufi concept denoting a person who achieves salvation by escaping the temporal world of generation and corruption and coming to dwell in the eternal present. Hujjatulislam is an honorific applied to religious scholars, most prominently the famous theologian Muhammad al-Ghazzali (d. 1111) among Sunnis, and any number of middle-ranking scholars among Shi'is.¹² Neither of these designations maps to the novel's characters and they are best seen as half-allusions meant to widen their field of associations without direct signification. Aijaz Ahmad offers 'time-server' as an idiomatic translation of Ibnulvaqt into English, although the character is portrayed quite sympathetically and does not seem to fit that distinctly negative connotation.¹³ Nazir Ahmad was also accused of caricaturizing Sir Syed Ahmad Khan or his son Syed Mahmud to invent the character of Ibnulvaqt, although he himself denied this explicitly on multiple occasions.¹⁴ To my reading, the most apt translations of the two names seem to be the rather simple 'a man of his time' and 'one who argues for Islam', although Nazir Ahmad can certainly be presumed to have been aware of the baggage the terms carried. Although it has been read nearly universally as a didactic tract, one of the peculiarities of the novel is that it does not offer a single programme for thought or action. Ibnulvaqt and Hujjatulislam are both protagonists, provided with page upon page of justification for and against adopting European dress and habits. They are both entirely sold on European intellect, science and organizational ability, the 'traditional' Hujjatulislam even more so than the Europeanizing Ibnulvaqt. The difference of opinion between the two has to do with attire and mode of living. To reduce the matter to essentials, the ideological impasse at the heart of the novel's plot is thus not whether one should think like the Europeans or believe in what they believe regarding society and politics—they both seem to think well of this prospect—but rather whether one should wear English trousers and eat with cutlery, or wear Indian pants and eat with one's hands.

Nazir Ahmad's fiction is usually described as realist and down to earth, exemplifying the direct and unornamented literary language promoted by institutions such as Delhi College, which Nazir Ahmad attended for a few years before 1857.¹⁵ In the view of many critics, his narratives qualify as novels rather than the old Urdu-Persian genre of *dastan* precisely because they depict realistic human situations rather than fantasy creatures, or humans with superhuman powers performing epic feats.¹⁶ Although all this is certainly true for *Ibnulvaqt*, the story here is quite unrealistic and rather fantastical when seen within its historical context. Its very first two sentences acknowledge that it is an imagined past that, if it ever existed, has long been surpassed: 'If it had been the way things are nowadays no one would have even heard about it. What made Ibnulvaqt so famous was that he chose an English lifestyle at a time when learning English was considered a sign of unbelief and using English goods a form of apostasy.'¹⁷ Moreover, consider the following aspects of the plot: a highly placed colonial official lands at an Indian door in a helpless situation; he happens to speak the vernacular fluently, with full idiomatic control, and is critical of British arrogance and has always had the wish to communicate with a native person regarding the problems faced by Indians; he recognizes his interlocutor as a deeply intelligent and cultured man and urges him to take on the mantle of his community's reformer; he showers his native benefactor with material gifts and utmost moral support on principle, without any consideration of what other Europeans might think; and he sponsors Ibnulvaqt's entrée into British society at a status equal to that of any European. To put it mildly, the likelihood of circumstances arranging themselves in this fashion in post-1857 Delhi were low. The novel is thus best seen as a colonial subject's fantasy of escape from the political and cultural regime facing him. In the novel, the Indian characters have unlimited access to English officials, contrastable with lengthy, somewhat comic scenes in which they are also shown to wait to meet such officials at the expense of their dignity. In one case, Hujjatulislam, who is a deputy collector, explains his general aversion to the society of Englishmen despite his high regard for the English government, by describing the process of going to meet the English collector. While he is a man of considerable status, he must leave his carriage at the gate of the collector's residence to walk a long way to the door, taking care to stop and catch his breath in order not to arrive panting and thus being disqualified from his job on account of not being in good physical shape. Inside the bungalow,

there is complete inattention to his presence and he has to be respectful to the servants in order to get news of where the sahib might be. He then remains standing for two hours until given a broken seat, and continues to wait. The sahib is apparently taking a bath, which Hujjatulislam compares to the washing of the corpse on account of how long it seems to go on. He eventually makes it to the sahib's presence but has to stand and wait quietly for him to notice. Some interaction does finally take place between the sahib and a lower functionary, which makes Hujjatulislam wonder about the sahib's capacities given his inability to utter a single sentence of Hindustani correctly after fourteen years of living in India and interacting with locals on a daily basis. The scene ends with Hujjatulislam departing after informing the collector that he had come with no other purpose than to present his regards. In summary, in stark contrast with the novel's fantastic side, barriers of status, language, and race make the breach of the Indian-European divide an abject impossibility. Between the bath, the breakfast, and the inability to learn the language, the Englishman's civilizational imperatives require that he be uncivil to his Indian associates.¹⁸

The second scene of waiting occurs when Ibnulvaqt goes to meet Mr Noble for the first time after the restoration of British government. Given his part in saving the Englishman's life, he expects to be treated with special consideration. The extent of this turns out to be that he is allowed to wait in an inside room rather than with the multitude of natives milling outside. Noble is delayed while attending to swarms of supplicants at his residence to curry favour or seek redress. Ibnulvaqt is forced to wait a long time while playing around impatiently with the objects and books present in the room.

His interrogations of the native servants do nothing to hurry the process, but when Noble does eventually arrive, he begins, quite against the general custom of the English, with a deep apology for the wait. Noble's eventual civility toward Ibnulvaqt is circumscribed on all sides by the force of colonial circumstances.¹⁹

The contrast between the way the two waiting scenes end reinforces the nature of the plot. The decent Englishmen within the novel seem to be inordinately full of goodwill toward Indians and regard the trappings of their status as hindrances against a common mission rather than necessary barriers between rulers and ruled.²⁰ The wishful element implied here is repeated at a later point in the novel as well when Mr Sharp—who turns out to be Ibnulvaqt's nemesis but is well-disposed toward Hujjatulislam

and is fluent in the vernacular—immediately admits Hujjatulislam to his presence against his usual habit of not meeting anyone for an hour after his daily evening excursion.²¹ Our ability to characterize the novel as a fantasy gradually fades as the narrative progresses. Titillate as it may, access to the English world provides no resolution for the conundrum of whether one should wear English trousers or Indian pants. In a way, the fantasy turns into an interminable purgatory within which the characters remain suspended to the narrative's last word.²²

The novel's central concern with the multivalent potential of external habitus finds its most salient treatment in the way clothing and food are shown to mediate identity. We read of an Englishman wearing Indian clothes and eating Indian food, and of an Indian doing the opposite. During his period of hiding in Ibnulvaqt's protection, Mr Noble dresses in Indian clothes and is described as being so graceful (*jamah zeb*) that he looks tremendously handsome in them.²³ Similarly, when questioned by people about the culinary arrangements he made for Noble's stay, Ibnulvaqt responds: 'What arrangements were to be made except that the sahib ate what was cooked at home. We did ensure that there were no chilies in his food, and ground salt and black pepper were served in separate containers to him. Among Indian dishes, he particularly relished pulao, kabab, samosa, firni, and other lightly sweet desserts.'²⁴ The happy times suggested by these comfortable descriptions do not extend to Ibnulvaqt when he decides to undertake the change of habit in reverse. An extended description of his first attempt at eating with utensils at Mr Noble's table shows him unable to aim well towards his mouth, ending up with the following:

Whoever would have seen his face then would have taunted him by saying, 'is that a face or a Diwali cup'. Although he didn't say this, his sudden intakes of breath suggested that he had pricked himself in the lips, gums, or tongue with the fork. . . . The last foolish and uncouth thing he did was to drink the water in the finger glass.²⁵

In later periods, Ibnulvaqt habituates to the new manner of eating, although he claims to refrain from alcohol and keeps wine in his store solely for European guests. The tastelessness of European food is remarked upon a number of times, along with the hint that Ibnulvaqt's palette seems to have craved spices rather more than he was willing to let on.²⁶

Along with the food, Ibnulvaqt changes his attire to European clothes of the highest quality and transfers his domicile from inner city Delhi to

the more open atmosphere of the English town. The clothes make him uncomfortable and they also make it impossible for him to perform the daily five prayers on account of their stiffness and the amount of time it takes to get in and out of them.²⁷ Most significantly, no one is fooled by his change of habit to take him as being equal to an Englishman, despite his conscious attempt to promote this idea. In contrast, we recall that Mr Noble's disguise in Indian habit works perfectly, saving his life and going undetected in accord with its intended purpose.

The variant efficacies of the two changes of outer form indicate the way the relationship between the inner and the outer are different for the European and Indian cases. The European subject is shown to be inherently universal on the inside irrespective of what it has on the outside. This manifests itself in the fact that the change of outside circumstances never hints at any possibility that Mr Noble may go native and change permanently. His identity lies many oceans away in England, to which he returns in the long run. Conversely, the lengthy discussions between Ibnulvaqt and Hujjatulislam center on whether Indians must change their outer forms to achieve parity with the English. Whichever way one goes, the external form is essential to Indian identity because it either changes the interior or reflects that which is presumed to be essential about the interior. Indian subjects are thus portrayed as being inherently particular, incapable of occupying the universal position. They have to accept that they are tied to a civilization that is *passé*, or acquire a new civilization that can never be concordant with their essences.

Towards the very end of the novel, Hujjatulislam is shown to emphasize the particularity of being Muslim by critiquing the likes of Ibnulvaqt in the following words:

They do not understand that when nothing remains to a collectivity of its religion, dress, mode of civilization (*tarz-i tamaddun*), and knowledge, then nothing remains of its group distinction. Whose reform then, and for what these well-wishers? . . . Reform of Muslims will be called reform only when they remain Muslims, meaning they bind themselves to the affect of the religion of their ancestors, and can be recognized as Muslims from afar. It is only after this that their hearts may be tickled toward progress according to the prevailing conditions.²⁸

The difference is that Europeans are immune to the pressures faced by Indians. Hujjatulislam's effort to drive a wedge between European culture on one hand and modernity as an impersonal process on the other is a

theme quite familiar to us, most prominently in recent years in the vogue for the discourse of multiple modernities.²⁹ However, it seems to me that the sting remains the same today as in Nazir Ahmad's words published in 1888. The reason for this is not that variant domestications of modernity cannot be documented worldwide. Rather, the difficulty lies in the impossibility of escape from European universality. The real issue then is not simply Ibnulvaqt's effort to refashion his essence by donning European clothes and customs, but that *plus* Mr Noble's ability go undetected as an Indian—and looking damn good at it—while retaining his European essence. The European character has consummate control and can project a stable signified identity as the civilized human subject even when changing outward signifiers at will for purposes of sociopolitical expediency. Indians, in contrast, are either obsolete and frozen in the past (if they cultivate a 'native' aspect) or fakes (if they pretend to be European).

Mr Noble's past, present and future—English as well as Indianized and at whatever point of the narrative we take them—make no difference to the representation of his identity and ideas. Even the grievous harm and consequent immobility he endures during the uprising fail to alter his worldview in the slightest degree. This matter parses quite differently in the cases of Ibnulvaqt and Hujjatulislam. As in all other aspects of the narrative, when it comes to the question of temporality too these two are interlaced characters. The variation between their attires and modes of living in the novel's present time indexes alternate visions of the past, as something that either needs to be overcome, or needs to be perpetuated when looking to the future. The difference is understandable but one wonders about the futility of Nazir Ahmad's investment in the struggle between these characters given that the first sentence of the novel already declares that the battle is over at the time the narrative is being penned. It is here, I think, that Nazir Ahmad's use of the very topic of corporeal affect suggests his appreciation of the fundamental contradictions at work in the context as well as some elements of a politics of subversion.

Civilization and Incivility

Hujjatulislam's insistence that Indian Muslims exemplify their identity through their attire and outward habit is a critical issue that receives no satisfactory justification in the extended dialogues, save the commonsensical claim that not doing so dissolves the boundaries of

Muslims as a collectivity. As presented in Hujjatulislam's words, Ibnulvaqt is deluded in thinking that he can remain a Muslim in essential identity while outwardly behaving like an Englishman. Despite his great regard for the English, he refuses to be seduced by the English claim that Europeans' universal subjectivity is not tied to their outward cultural particularity. In this situation, for him as an Indian, the options are to seek an alternative universality as to be found in Arabic and Islam and resist becoming a native in European garb. By doing so, he insists on different scales for civilization and civility than the one posited as universal by the Europeans. Of the two, resisting assimilation is the more realizable step, one that implies the refusal to meet Europeans on their own grounds, under rules of civility dictated by them. This cannot be done through verbal argument since to enter into a dialogue amounts to acquiescing to a framework that already defeats one's purpose. Subversion seems possible only through an unreasoned, tribalistic insistence on wearing Indian pants rather than English trousers. However, the pants are not a symbol in and of themselves—they become so only because of the steady proliferation of limbs clad in trousers that ones sees around oneself in late nineteenth-century India.

Based on the novel itself as well other evidence from Nazir Ahmad's works, it is fair to say that the author's own sympathies lay with the arguments he presents from Hujjatulislam's mouth. However, the chief reason the novel is a compelling narrative is the fact that Ibnulvaqt's viewpoints are presented with full force of conviction and are not straw figures meant for easy demolition. Hujjatulislam's positions always compel Ibnulvaqt to think further and sharpen his own viewpoint rather than acquiescing with his opponent. Nazir Ahmad's seeming commitment to have both sides represent themselves fully means that an impasse is the only possible conclusion to the novel. The fateful events of 1857 then provide a highly appropriate backdrop to the quandaries of the cultural situation.³⁰

The poignant but ultimately indecisive ruminations projected by the novel's characters lead to the seemingly counterintuitive conclusion that, at least under the colonial situation, civilization and civility are processes that strain in opposite directions rather than dovetailing together. If Indian subjects retain or cultivate an Indian form of civilization that varies from European ways, then they are regarded as being on a lower rung of civilization. As in the case of Mr Sharp's treatment of Hujjatulislam, European civility toward the Indian, conforming to the colonial code,

is patronizing and directed at one who is regarded as being from an inferior group. But if the Indian subject becomes civilized by adopting European ways, that goes against the colonial arrangement and leads to incivility on the part of Europeans. Mr Sharp's negative attitude toward Ibnulvaqt exemplifies this, and Mr Noble treating Ibnulvaqt civilly is the fantastical exception that proves the rule.

Whether we see it as a set of societal arrangements that has existed over time (European civilization) or as a process applied to an individual or a group (civilization of Europeans), civilization is fundamentally a discriminatory concept. Civilization's ultimate effect is to distinguish between the civilized and the uncivilized, whether in a given moment or over the course of time. Civility, on the other hand, connotes minimalization of distinctions, either momentarily for the sake of orderly social interaction, or in an extended time frame when defining a group's form of general sociability. In Norbert Elias's famous discussion of the evolution of European societies, the two concepts synchronize when civilization is seen as the product of an expansion of incipient forms of civility, in a moment as well as over the course of time. But civilization and civility pull apart in a colonial situation since a power imbalance is the bedrock underneath all interactions between the colonizers and the colonized. Under such circumstances, those who hold power are liable to lose it if they are fully civil to their subordinates and treat them equally. And those whose civilization has come into question are in an impossible position: they can neither assert themselves as civilizationally equal, nor adopt the dominant habitus, which defines civilization, because of structural limitation. The final result in such a situation is a stillborn civilizing process, one whose form is there to be seen but one that cannot be animated into real existence.

Nazir Ahmad's description of the events of 1857 in *Ibnulvaqt* is comprised of two sharply contrasting scenes. On one side he presents the terrible violence, first by the rebels when they take over Delhi and dispose off the British, and then by the British who exercise revenge on the city's population while drawing minimal distinction between rebel and citizen bystander. To be recognized as a punishable enemy in these circumstances is a matter of simplest outward signs of belonging to one side or the other. While mayhem rages outside, Mr Noble sits in Ibnulvaqt's house, protected and cared for by him at considerable risk and in extended debate regarding matters of civilization and progress. In my reading, it is a detail of the greatest significance that the mutual

recognition as equals and consequent exemplary civility between Ibnulvaqt and Noble are enacted when both are wearing Indian clothes and eating Indian food. The dramatic inversions of 1857 force the Englishman into Indian refuge, creating circumstances that last only as long as Indians outside the house are able to maintain the upper hand. When European violence returns in the form of revenge as well as the structural conditions of colonialism, Ibnulvaqt and Noble try to recreate their civility, this time in the English town and while dressing and eating like Europeans. This proves to be futile since Ibnulvaqt fails in the effort to be regarded as an equal by Europeans despite his change of habits. But the novel does not show him reverting to his Indian Muslim ways. Suspended between negated pasts and unattainable futures, his character signifies cultural conditions prevalent in the late nineteenth century.

By the time he published *Ibnulvaqt*, Nazir Ahmad was thirty years removed from the severe violence he had witnessed as a young man. These three decades were the most successful period of his life and included climbs up multiple bureaucratic ladders and achievement of considerable renown as a man of letters. These successes indicate a man of his time, well able to manoeuvre expediently in the circumstances that surrounded him. His astuteness as a cultural observer is reflected in the creation of the Indian as well as English characters in *Ibnulvaqt*. Taken together, they bring forth a sociopolitical scene in which the demand for civilization goes hand in hand with the withholding of civility. The novel's equivocal didacticism suggests that, as a realist, Nazir Ahmad well understood this as a fact of the colonial situation. But as a writer of fiction, memory of violent inversions of 1857 seem to have goaded him to fantasize a world in which civilization and civility could be brought into a tandem. Indians changing themselves to match European habits were inconsequential for the possibility of such a world. And this was occurring unaided rapidly in any case, as acknowledged in the novel's first sentence. What was needed were circumstances, such as those that came to exist briefly in 1857, when Europeans were required to seek Indian protection and don Indian clothes.

Notes

1. Margrit Pernau's recent work is also focused on civility, but from a somewhat different perspective than what I am attempting in this essay. Writing in the vein of 'conceptual history' with an impressive empirical range, she maps

out the multiple intellectual and social landscapes occupied by Muslims in Delhi over the course of the nineteenth century. For details, see her *Ashraf into Middle Classes: Muslims in Nineteenth-Century Delhi*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011.

2. For the circumstances of Sir Henry Lawrence's death see Harold Lee, *Brothers in the Raj: The Lives of John and Henry Lawrence*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002, pp. 333–52. The place of rumour as an essential ingredient in the 1857 uprising is treated in Kim Wagner, *The Great Fear of 1857: Rumours, Conspiracies and the Making of the Indian Uprising*, Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010.
3. For the background and functioning of this periodical see Margrit Pernau, 'The *Dehli Urdu Akhbar* Between Persian Akhbarat and English Newspapers', *The Annual of Urdu Studies* 18, 2003, pp. 105–31. An extensive catalog of Urdu material concerned with the mutiny is available in 'Atiq Siddiqi, *1857: Akhbar aur dastavizen*, Delhi: Maktaba Shahrah, 1966.
4. The use of this trope by a prominent Indian author is the main point of discussion in this essay. For its use in English literature see Gautum Chakravarty, *The Indian Mutiny and the British Imagination*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
5. The general theme of Europeans and their colonized subjects constructing their identities against each other is the subject of a huge scholarly literature by now. While my discussion in this essay certainly relates to this topic, this is for me a stepping stone to get to the further issue of the connection between recognition and civility as a foundation for thinking about cultural and political subjectivity in the colonial context.
6. *Ibnulvaqt* is available in a good English translation, see Nazir Ahmad, *Son of the Moment*, tr. Mohammed Zakir, New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2002. For Nazir Ahmad's place as a novelist in the history of Urdu literature see C.M. Naim, 'Prize-Winning Adab: A Study of Five Books Written in Response to the Allahabad Government Gazette Notification', in *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam*, ed. Barbara D. Metcalf, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, pp. 290–314; Christina Oesterheld, 'Nazir Ahmad and the Early Urdu Novel: Some Observations', *Annual of Urdu Studies* 16, 2001, pp. 27–42. The most extensive overall study of Nazir Ahmad's life and work is Iftikhar Ahmad Siddiqi, *Mawlawi Nazir Ahmad Dihlavi: Ahval va asar*, Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqi-yi Adab, 1971.
7. Nazir Ahmad, *Maw'aza-yi hasana*, Lahore: Majlis-i Taraqqi-yi Adab, 1963, pp. 199–200.
8. For the details of Nazir Ahmad's life see Siddiqi, *Mawlawi Nazir Ahmad*. Particularly vivid images of his personal life are provided in Mirza Farhatullah Beg Dihlavi, *Daktar Nazir Ahmad ki kahani, kuchh meri awr kuchh un ki zabani*, ed. Rashid Hasan Khan, New Delhi: Anjuman-i Taraqqi-yi Urdu, 1992, and the collection of letters to his son published under the title *Maw'aza-yi hasana*.
9. Cf. Ahmad, *Maw'aza-yi hasana*, pp. 39–44, 210–14.

10. A full discussion of the question of changing modes of civility among Indian Muslims in the modern period would require engaging the complex of ideas and practices referred to as *adab* in Islamic religio-cultural terminology. *Adab's* purview ranges between etiquette, rules for proper companionship, and literary genres as well as the social setting for the production of literature. Although *adab* and civility do have significant overlapping connotations, the concepts' overall semantic ranges cover rather different terrains. I have bracketed the question of *adab* in the present discussion in order to remain focused on the nexus between the English terms civilization and civility.
11. One interesting aspect of the novel is the absence of a female character of any lasting significance. This is all the more striking because a number of Nazir Ahmad's other novels are focused singularly on Indian Muslim women's education and social roles, see Siddiqi, *Mawlvi Nazir Ahmad*, pp. 312–60.
12. For an early Islamic articulation of 'son of the moment' see Michael Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, pp. 98–102. For the theological background to the notion of 'proof' and its application to scholars see the article 'Hudjdja' in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2nd edn., vol. 3, p. 543.
13. Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, London: Verso, 1992, p. 116.
14. Siddiqi, *Mawlvi Nazir Ahmad*, pp. 412–13.
15. See Christina Oesterheld, 'Deputy Nazir Ahmad and the Delhi College', in *The Delhi College: Traditional Elites, the Colonial State, and Education before 1857*, ed. Margrit Pernau, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006, pp. 299–324. For the process through which Urdu rose as a colonial language in India, see C.A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 192–6.
16. See Ralph Russell. 'The Development of the Modern Novel in Urdu', in *The Novel in India: Its Birth and Development*, ed. T.W. Clark, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970, pp. 117–22.
17. Nazir Ahmad, *Ibnulvaqt*, Lucknow: Uttar Pradesh Urdu Akadami, 1983, p. 1.
18. *Ibid.*, pp. 41–8.
19. *Ibid.*, pp. 30–3.
20. This novel is, of course, a narrative connected to the 1857 uprising as well. Its characterizations contrast interestingly with those of English literature spun from tales of the Mutiny in which the breach between the Indian and European spheres is a problem rather than a positively valued fantasy (see Chakravarty, *Indian Mutiny and the British Imagination*).
21. Ahmad, *Ibnulvaqt*, p. 170.
22. The novel's plot is related to the report that Nazir Ahmad's in-laws saved the life of an Englishwoman during 1857. Ironically, the reward they received from the British for this loyalty ended up causing dissension in the family itself, see Siddiqi, *Mawlvi Nazir Ahmad*, pp. 14–16.
23. Ahmad, *Ibnulvaqt*, p. 22.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 34–5.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 121, 162.
27. *Ibid.*, pp. 106–9.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 217–18.
29. For a diverse set of articles on this issue see Shmuel Eisenstadt, *Multiple Modernities*, New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction, 2002.
30. Although Nazir Ahmad's other novels are less ambiguous with respect to their didactic impulse, his instinct as a storyteller seems always to have worked to endow multidimensionality to both positive and negative characters. For example, his *Tawbat al-nusuh* (1874) dramatizes a thoroughgoing condemnation of a culture marred by poetry that had come to be seen as decadent. The dandified young man who is the ultimate embodiment of the intended condemnation is also the novel's most complex character and is made to argue his objections to his moralizing father with great vigour. For a detailed discussion of the cultural issues at stake in this novel see Frances Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and Its Critics*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.