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Seema Alavi, *Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire*, Harvard University Press, 2015, 504 pp., \$45.00 US (hbk), ISBN: 9780674735330.

A major lacuna in the study of British colonial India is what to call the events of 1857. Were they a mutinous uprising by British East India Company soldiers? A rebellion by Muslim elites looking to recapture the glory days of Mughal rule? A war of “Indian” independence? Some combination or none of these things? And this confusion in historiography has a parallel in the historical record of the events themselves: a bewildering cacophony of myriad actors, haphazard and sporadic eruptions of conflict bereft of any unified design, inexplicable alliances and irresolute carnage amidst a general perplexity and puzzlement about what was happening and to what end. If there is some unanimity among protagonists and scholars alike, it is on the point that 1857 marked a definitive end to the old order and the beginning of high British imperialism in India. But such a rendering of these events has the effect of *ex post facto* taming their diversity. The complexity of the old and the new is acknowledged, but marking 1857 as a *passing* domesticates it, roots it in place as an *event*, localized and over with; for the narrative of *death* offers a clean contrast between the old and the new irrespective of the complexity or simplicity of the incidence of death. Eschewing such a constricting interpretation of these events, Seema Alavi’s new book *Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire* self-consciously “picks up where other stories end and shows how the 1857 experience moved across empires via refugees and émigrés” (5). Condemned by the British as outlaws and fanatics in the bloody aftermath, these refugees of Alavi’s book were elite Muslim intellectuals and reformers in the crosshairs of the new colonial administration for their ostensible role in the events of 1857. As they escaped and fanned out across the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean into the Ottoman capitals of the Hijaz, Egypt, and the Near East, “1857 precipitated a moment of unprecedented connectivity between the Ottoman and British worlds” (18). Alavi uses the biographies of five such individuals to illustrate how their “1857 experience” stretched out into the internecine spaces between imperial assemblages, spawned various forms of Muslim cosmopolitanisms, and generated novel possibilities for the construction of modern Muslim identity. In this reading, 1857 cannot be localized and domesticated to its Indian time and context, but rather it is a “world-historical” event with global, and ongoing, implications.

Its world-historical significance notwithstanding, “the spirit of 1857” was forged in the specific context of Mughal decline and “the disintegration of the Indo-Persianate imperium of the late eighteenth century” (33). In Chapter 1, “Muslim Reform and the Transition to English Rule,” Alavi argues that as the Muslim political order was gradually unraveling and

its successor states were being picked off one by one by the British, religious reform movements blossomed everywhere in response to this new state of affairs. The Mughal sovereign's diminishing viability either as a locus of communal identity or as a divine intermediary for the Muslims of India undermined the regnant political theology of Persianate vintage that made sense of both religious membership and divine knowledge as mediated through the person of the King, the body of the Saint, or the instruction of the Sufi master. In its place, religious reformers like the Delhi Naqshbandi Sufi Shahwaliulla imagined "an alternative political imperium for Muslims via the universal appeal of the scriptures and individual agency" (34) by grounding their new political theologies firmly in the Arabic canonical texts, the Qur'an and the Hadith. While the initial reformist agenda was ostensibly to integrate Sufi doctrine and practice with the monist Quranic theology of *tauhid* in an effort at unity through consensus (*ijma*) among the various sects of Islam, in practice the emergent reformist theologies were quickly overwhelmed by their Arabist substrata. And "since the reformists aimed to create a united umma that was welded together by *tauhid*, the new political culture they espoused was both global and Arabist in its orientation" (45).

With the Mughal imperium devastated, the reformist imagination was unfettered of this particular imperial assemblage to ground Muslim identity and hence sought succor in the theological solace of *tauhid* and a universal, trans-imperial and later trans-national, umma. At the same time, this global focus was complemented by a "reformist literature [that] freed people from the shackles of ritual and figures of religious authority" and "empowered them with interpretive powers that enabled Muslim networks to spread across the Indian subcontinent and beyond" (43). Alavi contends that in an environment of political and economic uncertainty in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century India, this new, Arabist cultural grid that spoke of a universal umma of Muslims unified by common scripture and language, and bound to each other as individuals in an egalitarian religious field under a supreme God "fired the imaginations of many Muslims" (45). As this diverse group of Muslims (traders, teachers, soldiers for hire, pilgrims, etc.,) moved across the geographic landscape, this "cultural grid was ever expanding and corresponded to the temporal map of their physical movement within and outside Hindustan" (50). And while it was certainly a rival cultural and political grid competing with the English imperium for the loyalty and fealty of their Muslim subjects, there was no simple and exclusive anti-British sentiment attached to it. In fact, Alavi argues that much of the movement of information and people that encouraged the expansion of this new form of Islamic religiosity was facilitated by trade networks spawned by the new market realities and royal intrigues of the British colonial project.

The most interesting aspect of Alavi's recounting of this period of reform is the historically contingent nature of the changes that engendered a shift toward an Arabist and globalist orientation in Indian Islam. Under the sway of an Indo-Persianate imperium, the Arabic sources had great ritual and symbolic significance but little theological or political relevance. That texts like the Qur'an and the Hadith, and concepts like *tauhid* and umma came to the forefront in the religious and political imagination of Muslims in India was a direct consequence of the particular historical circumstances in which they found themselves. In the contemporary period, when the Qur'an has become a kind of stand-alone symbol of Islam and Muslims everywhere in the minds of many Muslims and non-Muslims alike, the insight that there is no necessary relationship between a Muslim identity and a particular Arabist grid provides us with an important historical corrective.

Having laid the groundwork with an exhaustive accounting of the shifts in Indian Islam at the turn of the century, Alavi turns to the first of her five biographies that illustrate how

these shifts generated various forms of Muslim cosmopolitanism in the mid-nineteenth century. Sayyid Fadl (1824-1901) was a resident of the Malabar coast in south India, belonged to a religiously influential family of Yemeni origin, and was deported to the Arabian peninsula in 1852 by the colonial administration as an “outlawed fanatic [and] a seditious wahabi” for “politically [mobilizing] Muslim peasants to violent yet religiously sanctified protest against their British-supported Hindu landlords” (112-113). In Chapter 2, “The ‘Indian Arab’ and the Tale of Sayyid Fadl,” Alavi recounts how Fadl turned this liability of exile into a political asset by carving out for himself a liminal cosmopolitan subjectivity that both stretched between the rival British and Ottoman imperial orders and occupied the internecine spaces in between them.

Once in Yemen, Fadl not only managed to, for a time, occupy and rule over the small city state of Dhofar (1876-79) as a holy man/king (utilizing his family’s myriad connections in the peninsula and among the many Malayali Indian pilgrims to the Hijaz, and also the tacit support of the Ottoman court). But even after being formally expelled from Dhofar by the King of Muscat, Fadl landed on his feet by endearing himself to the Ottoman sultan in Istanbul as just the kind of cosmopolitan subject (Indian, Arab, Ottoman) that fit Abd-al Hamid II’s global, pan-Islamic aspirations as the spiritual and political leader of all Muslims. Despite deporting him many years earlier after the debacle of 1857, the British renewed and maintained an interest in him as an “Indian Muslim” subject who could embody their rival political ambitions to “get supreme influence over the whole Mussalman world” by arguing that “the Mussalman religion requires for its support the aid and protection of England” (145). But Fadl’s liminality as a cosmopolitan exiled subject, and his general political opportunism, frustrated the designs of both the Ottomans and the British to mark him territorially according to their own competing political designs. And it was precisely because he was “caught at the cusp of two imperial rivals, Fadl made it his career to play on their fears, phobias and political ambitions” (113).

In Alavi’s reading, it was not so much Fadl’s particular brand of Islam (which shifted and churned over time according to prevailing winds, though it retained an Arabist bent) but the very fact of his movements and the networks that these movements both engendered and strengthened that mark him as a Muslim cosmopolitan of some considerable importance. As an Arab/Malayali Muslim subject of the British Empire, exiled for a time in Yemen and the Hijaz who eventually ended up in Istanbul, “Fadl represented networks that were global rather than simply pan-Islamist in the pro-caliph manner” (167). But it is also true that from his family lineage, his writings, and the general tenor of his ministry, “Fadl contributed to the intellectual and political energy of Istanbul and helped establish it as the hub of a vast Muslim network that was both Islamist as well as cosmopolitan” (166). Although his exile pre-dated the 1857 events by a few years, his cosmopolitanism is in many ways paradigmatic of the “1857 mood” because it was forged in and relied upon the same networks that sustained the later refugees and émigrés.

One such refugee (and a close associate of Fadl during his time in Istanbul) was Maulana Rahmatullah Kairanwi (1818-1892), the scholar rebel of 1857 who drew his intellectual inspiration from Shahwaliulla of Delhi and his penchant for revolt from the *jihad* of Sayyid Ahmad Shahid of Rae Bareilly. In Chapter 3, “Rahmatullah Kairanwi and the Muslim Cosmopolis,” Alavi describes his early attempts to use “print and vernacular Urdu to reach out to the Indian masses with literature offering advice...about individual adjustment to the new British political sovereigns,” his heated theological debates with the Christian missionary Carl Gottlieb Pfander, his thrilling escape from British India to the Arabian peninsula after 1857, and his eventual intellectual maturation in Istanbul, where “he

combined the Indian reformist emphasis on the salience of the individual with the Ottoman Salafi tradition that foregrounded science and rationality as the frame for individual action” (170). Like other men of letters of his time, Kairanwi was multi-lingual and wrote simultaneously in Urdu, Persian, and Arabic with a global audience in mind. He believed that the Qur’an could serve the cause of worldwide Muslim unity since “it lies engrained in the hearts and minds of all Muslims” and that this global connectivity was only possible if “not only ulema but ordinary people [became] aware of the thrust of his public discussion” (171-172). This interest in the ordinary Muslim and a foregrounding of the Qur’an bears a clear theological debt to the turn of the century reformers, as did his vociferous opposition to what he thought of as British attempts to neuter the cause of worldwide Islam. Always on the radar of nervous colonial administrators, his explicit and material support of rebels in 1857 sealed his fate as an outlaw and led to his ouster from India shortly thereafter.

Kairanwi followed much of the same geographical path as Fadl although his own political career was rather less interesting than that of the “Indian Arab.” He eventually ended up in the patronage of the Ottoman Sultan Abd-al Hamid II only because “Kairanwi epitomized the entanglement of Muslim networks with Western empires and this lent him immense political value” (175). But these networks themselves were animated by the novelty and appeal of Kairanwi’s theological innovations not by political intrigue. While he relied on the Sultan for patronage, his own conception of Muslim unity was both broader in its global orientation and was informed by the reform liberalism of the Ottoman Porte which was often at cross purposes with the Sultan’s ambitions. Kairanwi was, for example, so fed up with the provinciality of the intellectual environment in the Hijaz that he set up his own madrasa in Mecca for the streaming masses of *mahajirs* (refugees) from India, and elsewhere, as “an international school that would hire religious teachers proficient in different languages, admit students from all over the world, and boast a syllabus that covered both religious and scientific education” (186). Kairanwi’s emphasis on scripture was complemented by his theological “discovery” that in its lyrical beauty, its “this worldly charm” (212), its perfection of meter and rhythm, and its unchanging relevance to societal issues in any age, the Qur’an issued a kind of transcendent authenticity even by this worldly literary standards or, and this is important, positivist, scientific rationality. Kairanwi was thus a prime example of an India-specific Arabist grid, powered by the spirit of 1857 and self-consciously, and simultaneously, Islamist and globalist in its aspirations. He served as a conduit for “literature from India [that] stamped the Indic seal on the nineteenth century Arab liberal reform that emanated from the Ottoman provinces in the Middle East” (189) and belonged to “a global Muslim community that was accessible via imperially embedded pan-Islamic networks” (220). A Muslim cosmopolitan indeed!

Kairanwi’s theological utilization of the Qur’an for forging a unified Muslim umma was complemented in Mecca by his close associate Haji Imdadullah’s (1817-1899) reinforcement of a cosmopolitan message by an emphasis on *ijma* (consensus), *i’tamad* (mutual trust), and, most importantly, on “an urbane civility...based on tolerance and recognition of internal difference [and]...a standard form of virtuous public conduct” (232). In Chapter 4, “Haji Imdadullah Makki in Mecca,” Alavi describes how Imdadullah became ensnared in the dragnet of an overly suspicious British administration (he had played no obvious role in the rebellion), fled to Mecca to 1859, and became a central figure in the city’s “multiethnic melting pot of Muslim immigrants as well as a seat of sedition and the hub of anti-Western politics” (225). Imdadullah recognized the late nineteenth century hardening of imperial borders (due to increasing tensions between the Ottoman, Russian, and British empires) and widening sectarian rifts as the two gravest threats to Muslim unity in the emergent world

order. Mecca was the ideal location from where to articulate a theological and political counter-narrative to these developments and “to forge an alternate Islamic imperium as a spiritual and civilizational space between empires” (228).

Teeming with pilgrims and refugees from a bewildering variety of places, the city presented the cultural and religious diversity of Islam in close proximity to its centripetal unity around the Kaaba. Imdadullah theologized that a form of “public conduct...based on a virtuous disposition as sanctioned by the Shariat” would allow Muslims to “balance the local with the global” and hence “unite the culturally diverse umma” around “universal formats of devotion” (230-234). In faint echo of John Rawls’s idea of an “overlapping consensus,” Imdadullah imagined that an *ijma* (consensus) among the learned around a standardization of important devotional rituals (like *suluk* [public conduct], *tilawat* [Quranic recitation], *namaḥ* [prayer], *durud* [salutations], etc.) could then allow for diversity of opinion on other matters to be of less significance. Unlike many other reformists operating within the Arabist cultural grid, Imdadullah was much closer to the original teachings of Shahwaliulla of Delhi in arguing that the “proper agent who makes localized renditions of devotion connect to standardized norms of universally acceptable conduct” has to be some equivalent of a sufi master/teacher and not the individual Muslim carrying out the task of interpretation (236). In this, Imdadullah’s particular Arabism was even much more India-specific, and in many ways far more tolerant of diversity and difference, than Kairanwi’s and others’. He himself certainly embodied this vision of urbane civility in maintaining close intellectual and personal ties with sufis, deobandis and wahabis alike, who despite their strident opposition to his theological positions never lost respect for him and were, for the most part, always willing to entertain the importance of his teachings. His gentle blending of this and that over the enduring foundation of the Qur’an may not have had the theological clarity of some other reformers, but his tolerance of difference did make his brand of Muslim cosmopolitanism the most convivial of the bunch.

The protagonist of Chapter 4, “Nawab Sidiq Hasan Khan (1832-1890) and the Muslim Cosmopolis,” is of a very different vintage from Fadl, Kairanwi, or Imdadullah in that he was never forced out of India after 1857. This was in part due to his marriage to Shahjahan Begum, the ruler of Bhopal, but was also a function of the British inability to initially account for the power of his cosmopolitan networks even as they maintained a great suspicion of his reformist activities. A prolific author, Khan wrote upward of eighty books and used the power of the royal purse to ensure that they were published and circulated simultaneously in India, Istanbul, and Cairo *and* in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu! He also used the Bhopal treasury to forge “self-driven global links [through the use] of middlemen, agents, brokers, and merchants [who] mediated the production and distribution of books and created a community of readers” (303). These networks, and the ostensibly “wahabi” bent of his writings, raised continuous British ire until they finally deposed him in 1885 from the post of nawab consort of Bhopal.

Of course, wahabi as a catch-all British term for Muslims they deemed improperly loyal to the colonial administration was seldom an accurate description of said Muslims in any theological sense. This was certainly true in the case of Khan as well. In his writings, Khan maintained the Arabist emphasis on scripture and hadith, and highlighted the concept of *tauhid* as the single, overarching “universalist grid with which to unite Muslims” (275). But in the tradition of Shahwaliulla, he advocated “consultation, self-judgment, reason and rationality” when dealing with these sources, and an emphasis on *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) rather than *taqlid* (imitation of precedence) (270). Khan thus sought to negotiate “the scriptures with human judgment, reason and rationality to forge a progressive social

body—a civilizational frame that would function as a formidable force alongside the Western global imperium” (271). And much like Imdadullah in Mecca, he advocated for “establishing universally acceptable standards for dress (unstitched cloth), bodily deportment, and discipline, along with norms of circumambulations and prayers, [to help] lay out unifiers, despite all the dissensions within Muslim society” (281). Inasmuch as the British would not countenance a rival cultural imperium to rival their own, Khan was their enemy. Still, “his public sphere of books and journals could never be successfully extinguished by the British government because it had roots in the connected worlds of imperial rivals in the age of globalization” (273). In this sense at least, Khan’s Muslim cosmopolitanism has some affinity with the “republic of letters” that frustrated the territorially confining mandates of particular nations or empires, and forged a European ecumene in the age of enlightenment. Never a refugee or an émigré, Khan was nonetheless a man of the (Muslim) world!

The book’s final biography maps the travels and travails of a rebel convict being hauled all over India by his British jailers before ending up on a penal colony on Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal. In Chapter 5, “Maulana Jafer Thaneshri (1835-1905) and the Muslim Ecumene,” Alavi argues that this journey and subsequent incarceration away from India infused the erstwhile eponymous rebel with a sense of patriotism toward an India he heretofore never knew existed. Additionally, this new conception of a unified *mulk* or nation populated by diverse peoples, religions, and cultures required Thaneshri to imagine an alternative to the British legal and territorial system to establish the newly discovered nation’s unity and integrity. A Muslim ecumene, with its own rival set of laws and regulations, its own forms of social hierarchies and public virtues, even its own ethnologies and ecologies was Thaneshri’s vision of such an alternative to the British imperial system.

Thaneshri actively participated in 1857 but was able to escape to the border areas of his native Punjab in the aftermath. He was finally arrested in 1863 for conspiring to smuggle funds to the anti-British *mujabideen* in Afghanistan. Initially sentenced to death, he was later granted the leniency of life imprisonment in the penal colony of Andaman Islands. As he was being transported from the Punjab through northern and eastern India, he came face to face with “the multifaceted nature of his *mulk*” and the “crowds of sympathetic people of all religions who cheered in solidarity and support along the way...reminded him of the common thread that, at least politically, knitted him to this diversity” (340-341). As with the bureaucrats in the American colonies of Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, Thaneshri’s budding vision of a united, unified country was born of movement and a newfound sense of time and space. And Thaneshri was eventually able to bake this nascent imagination into solid clay as, year after year, “he profiled his proto-nation against the ecological and cultural contours of the Andaman Islands...[and contrasted his Hind] to the penal colony in terms of its topography and seasons” (342). But for Thaneshri, his *mulk* was just as decisively defined as the administrative territory under the oppressive and corrupt rule of the British legal order. And he contrasted this “British India, whose legal confines he identified as his homeland, or *mulk*, [with] the moral and spiritual succor of Islam” (337).

Released from prison after 18 years of service at the penal colony as a clerk (he was not locked in a cell) and having written a memoir about his life and times on the Islands (*Tavarikh-i-Ajaib*), Thaneshri returned to his native Punjab in 1884 where he was actively involved in Muslim affairs until his death. One feature of his later ministry was to counter British propaganda against Muslims accused of sedition, from Sayyid Ahmad Shahid of Rae Bareilly to his contemporaries, by “coloring these local [Indian] figures with the universalist spiritual hue associated with the upholder of universal peace, the Prophet” (354). His

biography of Shahid was especially effective in being “subtly anti-colonial, territorially rooted, and yet outward looking” toward the larger Muslim umma (355). Thanesri’s Muslim cosmopolitanism is distinct because it retains the rooted patriotism of the “felt community” of *Hind* which nevertheless requires an alternative universal and civilizational framework to make it healthy and whole again (361). There is certainly nostalgia here for the old Muslim political order of India, but the framing of Thanesri’s Muslim ecumene is decidedly a product of an Arabist cultural grid with an Islamist civilizational imprint foreign to the Indo-Persianate imperium of the Mughals. And it certainly appears to be an antecedent to the kind of cosmopolitan Muslim identity that would later become the basis for a demand for Pakistan and the establishment of a state for Muslims in Thanesri’s native North West India.

Alavi’s book is an important intervention in historical debates concerning the nature and extent of pan-Islamism in the late nineteenth century and offers the reader a richer panoply of Muslim cosmopolitan identities and imaginations than the Caliph-centered accounts of other histories. She is also able to effectively argue that any notional incompatibility between terms such as scripturalism, Islamism, or Arabism and rationality, reason, or cosmopolitanism is an accident of our own intellectual moment. Many of her protagonists were clearly, and unabashedly, both and developed coherent theologies and political identities accordingly. The self-conscious framing of the book as picking up where other stories of 1857 usually end suggests an attempt to rescue the rebellion from the provinciality of British imperial and south Asian histories and work out its global importance to world history. In this reading, Alavi is clearly arguing for a more exhaustive historical accounting of contemporary “Islamisms” wherein the role of an India-specific Arabist cultural grid unleashed on the wider Muslim world after 1857 by refugees and émigrés cannot be overstated. *Muslim Cosmopolitanisms in the Age of Empire* is an excellent and informative foray into the “future history of 1857” (whatever one decides to call these events), and its continuing relevance and importance to the Muslim ecumene and the world we live in today.

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