



Beyond Synthesis: A Review of Epsita Haldar's 'Reclaiming Karbala'

Epsita Haldar, *Reclaiming Karbala: Nation, Islam and Literature of the Bengali Muslims*

Epsita Haldar's *Reclaiming Karbala* forces us to undertake a fundamental reckoning with how we understand the processes of religious modernisation, literary formation, and cultural agency in colonial contexts. The book's empirical richness derives from meticulous multilingual archival work spanning *Dobhāshī* literature, reformist tracts, institutional records, and print culture materials across Arabic, Persian, Urdu, and Bengali sources. Rather than offering yet another case study of Islamic reform, this work demonstrates how Bengali Muslims created distinctive forms of modernity through what Haldar terms 'productive ambivalence' (p.144): the generative capacity to thrive within the ambiguities of, rather than categorically resolve, fundamental cultural tensions. In fact, Haldar's intervention is especially noteworthy because it moves beyond what can be characterised as the 'curse of the facile synthesis', that is, the problematic tendency to resolve complex cultural, religious, and intellectual tensions through a facile synthesis or hurried compromise that remains insensitive to deeper asymmetries and hierarchical structures. Haldar demonstrates how Bengali Muslims developed sophisticated cultural technologies for operating 'productively' within unresolved tensions, creating new forms of literary modernity that in its ambition neither rejected Islamic claims to authenticity nor simply accommodated colonial linguistic frameworks.

The theoretical intervention of this book may be understood as a challenge to three dominant analytical paradigms: first, it disrupts linear modernisation narratives by moving 'beyond the popular binarism between poetic freedom and religious reform which pits the 'modernist' (*Śikhā*) against the 'orthodox' (*Mohāmmadī*)' (p. 215); second, it contests a recurring colonial model of centre-periphery through an analysis of '*miśra bhāshā*' (composite language) and 'local cosmopolitanism,' which reveals 'more nuanced and layered deliberations than a straightforward narrative' of peripheral dependence (pp. 216, 228); and third, it challenges the orientalist trap of binary thinking that reduces colonial responses to resistance or accommodation, demonstrating instead a 'productive ambivalence' in reformist literature (pp. 214–216). The creative complexity through which colonial communities negotiated multiple modernities simultaneously, moving beyond predetermined theoretical categories, is precisely the reason why these theoretical intervention are non-trivial.

Halдар traces cultural formation through what she terms ‘contact nebula’ (p.4): transterritorial networks that challenge both Orientalist East-West binaries and nationalist territorial frameworks by revealing how local cultures emerge dynamically through multilingual circulation rather than isolated development. This quasi-cosmological framework becomes particularly evident in Halдар’s treatment of authentication practices; rather than viewing citation systems and textual validation merely as scholarly methods, she demonstrates how these methods functioned as community-building mechanisms that simultaneously established religious authority and created internal hierarchies. Thus, the *Dobhāshī* authors’ extensive use of Arabic and Persian citations did not simply legitimise their Bengali compositions with a sacred mantle, but also performed the socio-ritual function of defining who properly belonged to the community of authorised knowers whilst enabling creative theological innovation within Islamic frameworks. This approach avoids the binary between reductive syncretism versus vapid orthodoxy that has long dominated South Asian Islamic studies. In other words, instead of asking whether Bengali Muslims were ‘truly’ Islamic or ‘syncretically’ Hindu, Halдар examines how they developed what she calls ‘literary equivalents’ (p.13) through systematic searches for functional parallels with existing Bengali theopoetical repertoires that preserved Islamic systematic coherence whilst enabling creative adaptation. Indeed, the reformist appropriation of Husayn-centric piety was not a synthesis of *Sunni* and *Shī‘ī* elements but a strategic re-staging that maintained theological distinctiveness whilst absorbing emotional power. Consequently, this motif represents a more productive exploratory tool than ‘hybridity’ for comprehending the manner in which cultural systems preserve fidelity to roots whilst transforming across linguistic and regional routes.

Halдар’s historical argument unfolds through a sophisticated analysis of how Karbala-centred narratives functioned as dynamic sites for working out fundamental tensions in Bengali Muslim identity formation. Chapter 1 reveals how the transition from oral-scribal culture to print created multiple ambivalences that became foundational to reformist modes of literary modernisation, with various authors creating ‘speech-act texts’ (p.43) that enabled their readers to participate in ritualistic performance whilst maintaining reformist authenticity through scriptural citation. Chapter 2 demonstrates how some members of the reformist ulema repositioned the figure of Husayn within Sunni theological frameworks whilst preserving the emotional power of martyrdom narratives. In this way, they generated pro-Caliphate sentiment among Bengali Muslims through their strategic re-staging of an Islamic vision. Chapters 3 and 4 trace how this symbolic imagination enabled the institutional formation of a Bengali Muslim sense of national identity (*jāṭīyatā*) in the 1880s. The voluminous body of periodicals published by networks (*anjuman*) reveals how modern Muslim publics emerged through styles of creative adaptation that sought to maintain trans-territorial Islamic connections whilst establishing regional literary authority. The development of a range of historical and biographical genres within these milieus created ‘generic multivalence’ (p.161) where poetry claimed historical truth and retellings of history employed poetic techniques, enabling Bengali Muslim authors to retrieve an age of Islamic glory from a Hindu-normative historical imagination. The culminating analysis in Chapter 5 shows how all these developments enabled Bengali Muslims to create a sophisticated style of multilingual and literary modernity through their ‘composite Bangla’ (p.221). They crafted a ‘linguistic identity-in-difference’ (p.281) that enabled multiple forms of belonging simultaneously. Thus, the return to *Dobhāshī* traditions

in the 1930s represented not a nostalgic retreat but an active redefinition of literary modernity that recovered Muslim literary heritage whilst maintaining reformist credentials.

For the field of Islamic studies, Halдар's framework provides new models for understanding reform movements that move beyond orthodox/heterodox binaries. Her demonstration that reformist 'success' involved a skilful appropriation rather than an outright rejection of contested traditions offers key insights applicable also to contemporary Islamic movements navigating the vexed terrain between scriptural authority and local cultural practices. Halдар's analysis of authentication in terms of community-building mechanisms provides a luminous lens for understanding how religious authority operates in pluralistic contexts. More broadly, the work offers frameworks to scholars of religious studies for understanding how religious communities may navigate modernity through cultural production rather than institutional adaptation alone.

Whilst Halдар's theoretical sophistication and empirical richness make this a work of groundbreaking scholarship, the relationship between textual analysis and 'real-world' community formation requires more systematic examination. Whilst Halдар demonstrates how literary products created the conditions for identity formation, questions remain about reception practices, economic contexts of publication, and the social worlds of readers beyond elite literary circles. The concept of 'productive ambivalence' (p.144), while compelling, could benefit from more theoretical treatment such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's postcolonial theorisation of 'strategic essentialism', whereby subaltern communities deploy seemingly fixed identities as tactical instruments for political mobilisation whilst maintaining awareness of their constructed nature.

Methodologically, some tension exists between Halдар's claims about 'popular' literature and the evident sophistication of much analysed material. This is because the *Dobhāshī* texts reveal considerable theological and literary complexity, suggesting either a greater intellectual competence among Bengali Muslims than commonly assumed, or a limitation of these sources to relatively educated audiences despite their 'popular' designation. Moreover, Halдар's conceptualisation of 'Bengali Muslim identity' as a unified analytical category unfolds considerable geographical constraints that exacerbate these methodological issues. In fact, the emergence of 'Pak-Bangla' as a distinct category, articulated through claims such as: East Pakistan's literary tradition 'should be essentially different from that of West Bengal' (p. 283), can dialectically be interpreted as a departure from the pan-Bengali synthesis that had characterised the colonial period. Halдар's temporal scope, ending primarily at 1947, to a large extent critically limits her ability to address these territorial divisions, leaving Bengali Muslim identity development in West Bengal unexplored and raising questions about whether her concepts of 'productive ambivalence' and 'local cosmopolitanism' operated differently within a Hindu-majority versus Muslim-majority state context. On top of that, Bangladesh's assertion of independence in 1971, which introduced additional challenges where 'composite Bangla entered a different dynamic' through 'deliberate distancing of the intelligentsia from religious authorities' (p. 285), can be read as a moment when the cultural synthesis achieved through *jātīya sāhitya* underwent fundamental transformation under linguistic nationalism. This, in turn, suggests that Halдар's analytical frameworks may be more historically specific than their theoretical claims

imply; they are, therefore, notably limiting their applicability to post-partition contexts where the notion of a unified 'Bengali identity' requires more systematic examination than her pre-partition focus provides.

Nevertheless, the work's lasting significance lies in its demonstration of how Bengali Muslims created a distinctive form of literary modernity through strategic cultural navigation rather than unreflective synthesis; unlike previous scholarship that has primarily focused on elite reformers or institutional changes, Halдар shows how popular literary culture itself became a site of theological negotiation, not merely cultural expression. Her multilingual archival approach reveals the interconnections between scriptural authentication, aesthetic innovation, and community formation across multiple genres, thereby extending the study of Bengali Muslim intellectual history beyond existing analyses of periodical culture and literary societies. The theoretical frameworks developed here are likely to be adopted widely by scholars working on religious modernisation, postcolonial literature, and comparative cultural studies. Most significantly, whilst existing scholarship has tended to treat South Asian Islam through either reformist or traditionalist lenses, Halдар's concept of 'productive ambivalence' provides a new analytical framework that captures the creative tensions within religious modernisation processes, with clear applications beyond the Bengali Muslim context. The work successfully bridges the gap between detailed historical analysis and broader theoretical intervention, demonstrating how careful empirical work can reshape fundamental assumptions about cultural formation and religious modernity. Halдар has produced scholarship that successfully avoids the curse of the middle path whilst providing concrete analytical tools for understanding how communities create sophisticated cultural solutions for complex historical challenges.