

Shibli, English, and the Step-Mother

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Abstract

The relationship between English (in what this term comes to mean as a language, as a discipline of studies, and as a synecdoche of Western culture) and our culture as Muslim Pakistanis has developed over a period of time since the British colonization. The history of this cultural interaction may be divided into three broad phases: the initial, the middle, and the present. The strategy adopted in this paper is based upon the argument that this relationship may be traced through some of the most representative figures of our culture, such as, Shibli, Iqbal, Faiz etc. in each phase of this interaction. The present essay on Shibli deals with the first phase of our cultural interaction with English. It adopts what may be termed as an analogical approach to the issue as it intends to engage with what I think to be rather unwarranted psychoanalytic forays of some of our critics into the psycho-dynamics of such culturally representative figures like Shibli in their relationship with English. The paper exploits the analogy first used by Sheikh Muhammad Ikram, and later employed by Nasir Abbas Nayyar that Shibli's attitude towards English was the same as his attitude towards his step-mother at home. English, in other words, was a step-mother for Shibli, and for the generations represented through his figure in this early phase of our cultural interaction with the language. Shibli's terms of engagement with his step-mother, and analogically with English, is the subject of this essay.

Nasir Abbas Nayyar has credited Sheikh Muhammad Ikram with being the first person to have traced a whole cultural enactment of our relationship with English through the personal, psychological, cultural, and epistemological “dilemma” of one single individual — Shibli Nomani. Nayyar, in the case of Shibli’s relationship with English (as a language, and also as a synecdoche for modern Western education and culture), calls it *dojazbīyat* (ambivalence). According to Nayyar, it was Ikram who “drew attention to how the boundaries between the personal and social lives of the one who plays an important role in the public life

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are diminished; (how) his unconscious complexity finds way into his scholarly life, or how the border of a personal incident melts into the social reality!" Commenting upon Ikram's idea that "in Shibli's subconscious the thoughts and feelings about modern education were the same as those about his step-mother at home", Nayyar raises the questions whether for Shibli

English was a "pariah" just like his step-mother, which was forced upon by the rulers like his father. Did Shibli have the same love for his tradition, his mother-tongue, which he had for his real mother? Did Shibli also think that English, like the step-mother, had tried to replace the mother-tongue and culture? . . . The dilemma of Shibli's personal life was that despite disliking his step-mother, he was forced to accept the fact that she was his father's legitimate wife, and his mother. The collision of Shibli's personal feelings was with that 'reality' which was in a 'position' to prove itself as legitimate and rightly-placed in the social and cultural world. That is why the ambivalent attitude of Shibli was not just a personal, private matter — it was a cultural matter.¹

If English, according to Ikram and Nayyar, was a step-mother for Shibli and his generation, to me the following generations, culturally represented by figures like Faiz Ahmed Faiz and the poets and writers who followed, in their attitude and approach towards English seem to be gradually but increasingly suffering from a condition that may in some ways resemble the classical psychoanalytic symptom of "mother-fixation", a condition Freud considered as "The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic life",² as the title of his 1912 essay on the subject says. Mother fixation, as Peter Barry explains, is a classical condition

In which there is an exaggerated reverence for the mother. Such people (who suffer from mother fixation) are attracted only to women who resemble the mother, but because of this shadow of the incest taboo makes the expression of sexual feelings towards them difficult or impossible. Hence, their only way out is to seek sexual relationships with women who do not resemble the mother, and whom they therefore

¹ Nasir Abbas Nayyar, *Urdū Adab kī Tashkīl-e-Jadīd* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 322-23 (English translation from Urdu is mine).

² First published in *Jahrbuch*, Bd. IV., 1912. Reprinted in *Saamlung*, Vierte Folge, translated by John Riviere. Sigmund Freud, *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963, first Touchstone edition, 1997), 48-59.

despise. So in order to generate sexual excitement such men have to degrade the love object, since if they are not degraded they will resemble the mother, and hence in the man's mind, not available as a sexual partner. Thus women are polarized into idealized maternal figures on the one hand and prostitute figures on the other. The exaggerated reverence for the mother is usually much diluted by adolescence, but if the mother has died before the child reached adolescence . . . then a damaging, idealized image of her can live on, and eclipse that of all sexual partners. (My parenthesis)³

Is the present day generation in Pakistan, with all its various cultural crises, being brought up in the “absence of the mother (-tongue),” or at least in its presence *sous rature*?⁴

کس نوشتے کی طرح خود کو پڑھیں ہم آخر
ایسے لکھئے ہونے بین جیسے مٹائے ہونے بین

(Like what script should then we read ourselves? / We are written as though we are erased. —Ahmed Navid)

A bit of insight drawn from the psychoanalytic thoughts of Freud or Lacan may perhaps help us in thinking about our contemporary cultural situation that may seem to resemble in some ways that of an infant who is living in the presence of the mother *under-erasure*. I will keep this question for my inquiry into our cultural relationship with English in its phases subsequent to Shibli’s generation.

Shibli Nomani (3 June 1857–18 November 1914) is definitely one of those outstanding figures in our cultural history who, along with Sir Syed Ahmed, Hali and Iqbal, can safely be considered as a true representative of our rather complex cultural experience in its early

³ Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory, An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1995), 108.

⁴ *Sous rature*, generally translated as “under erasure” is a philosophical concept developed by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger which involves the writing of a word while crossing it (~~Being~~ Being), signifying the presence of something *as if* not present.

بے نہیں کہے کہیں جنڈ بر پستی فریو مت بے نہیں بے
(Beware! Do not be deceived by Being / Even though they say it is, it is *naught*. —Ghalib)

Can we say something similar for the existence of our regional languages (Urdu as our declared national language and our rich cultural patrimony that exists in our other regional languages) in our complex cultural and educational patterns in Pakistan today?

colonial phase. Shibli drank deep from the fountains of the traditional Islamic scholarship in India, remained associated with Sir Syed and the Aligarh, became the cofounder of Dar al-Uloom Nadva in Lucknow and was the first to propose the inclusion of English in its curriculum. He was a distinguished religious scholar, a literary critic and historian *par excellence*, and much more. The multi-dimensionality of his figure thus truly represents the difficult prospect of tracing through him the cultural experience of a nation that could be considered “simple” only perhaps in comparison with our own present-day cultural experience with English. Both his biographers, Syed Sulayman Nadvi and S. M. Ikram, acknowledge the uniqueness in Shibli that may reflect the general cultural ambience of a whole age. According to Nadvi, Shibli’s complexion:

was not that of those ancient religious scholars whose pious occupation is only the guidance in the *khanqahs* and teaching in the *madrassahs*. Had this been the case, the biographer would not have to face any difficulty in traversing the straight path that has been the convention of writing the biographies of such elders. This is rather the biography of the life of the foremost religious scholar of the modern age, in whom, along with the ancient, there are such modern tendencies which at times prick the familiar eyes of the ancient period. As his period saw the foundation of a new age, he became the meeting-point of the ancient and the modern in which the streams of both the rivers had come to mingle, *He (Allah) has let free the two bodies of flowing water, meeting together*; and that is why the feats of his life are relatively different from the feats of the preceding religious scholars. He was a scholar of our ancient and religious disciplines of knowledge, and was also aware of many opinions and ideas of the modern ones. He had remained in the company of the traditional scholars, and had also remained in the company of the founders of modern education and with the modern educated people. Along with that he was also a researcher of art, a writer, a poet, an essayist, an orator, a historian, a dialectician, a thinker, a reformer—was also political—an educationist, and against many requirements and demands of the modern times was also a revolutionary . . . It is for this (myriad of colours in his personality) that this nine hundred pages book (Shibli’s biography) is not simply a biography of a single person of this age, rather it has in reality become a history of the fifty

years of the scholarly, literary, political, educational, religious and national events of the Indian Muslims.⁵

Sheikh Muhammad Ikram has similar opinions about Shibli's cultural relevance:

In our national life, no one else can occupy the over-all position he (Sir Syed) has. But this does not diminish the greatness of Shibli. He remained a companion of Sir Syed for sixteen years and found extraordinary opportunities of supporting Sir Syed and benefitting from him. But in our national history his status is not secondary. He took the job forward, strengthened its foundations and in many goals far surpassed Sir Syed . . . Shibli was two-dimensional in a true sense. He was not only a “foundational pillar” of the Aligarh Movement, but when the first formal meeting of the Nadvatal Ulama was held in 1894, he also became the “dominant part” of that. He knew the point of view of both the modern group and the religious scholars, and could choose a middle way . . . because of him, some of modern elements became an integral part of the nation’s intellectual life and the continuity with the ancient also remained intact . . . A close study of his life, his feats, and his method would not only enlighten the features of a revered personality, but would also help understanding our intellectual history and determining our future course.⁶

As far as Shibli’s case is concerned, it is true, as both his biographers, Nadvi and Ikram, point out, that Shibli exceedingly loved his mother and his displeasure at his father’s second marriage was primarily motivated by the pain this marriage had caused to his mother. But a few factors should be kept in mind while assessing Shibli’s relationship with his step-mother, and through the analogical detour we are employing in this study, his relationship with English which, going by the analogy of Nayyar and Ikram, may symptomize our larger cultural relationship with the language and its associated culture in that particular historical phase of this interface.

First, and foremost, Shibli’s relationship with his step-mother *did not* develop in the absence of his own mother, his father marrying the

⁵ Syed Sulayman Nadvi, *Hayāt-e-Shibli* (Lahore: Maktaba-e-Alia, n. d.), 31-32. Parenthesis and English translation are mine.

⁶ Sheikh Muhammad Ikram, *Yādgār-e-Shibli* (Lahore: Idārah Saqāfat-e-Islāmiyyah, 1994, second ed.), 16. Parentheses and English translation are mine.

second time while Shibli's mother was still alive — which would analogically suggest that culturally our relationship with the mother-tongue, despite the colonial imposition of English at that time was still organically intact. There can be seen an interesting difference in Nadvī's and Ikram's accounts of Shibli's relationship with his step-mother. While both the biographers seem to agree upon the fact that during his father's lifetime Shibli remained exceedingly averse to his step-mother, Nadvī's and Ikram's accounts present differently what happened afterwards. While Ikram's account of Shibli's visit to his step-mother's after his father's death does sketch a very positive picture of the lady ("and that courageous lady, for the sake of familial exigencies, extremely graciously remitted all her rights"), Shibli's own purpose for visiting her is restricted to just getting the deceased father's inheritance remitted: "During the whole lifetime of his father, he (Shibli) did not talk to the step-mother, did not visit her, and when after the father's death he visited her to get her to remit her rights to the property which his father had bequeathed her (and that courageous lady, for the sake of familial exigencies, extremely graciously remitted all her rights), still he mentioned her extremely repugnantly in his letters by calling her "Chhawni" and "Arbab-e-Chhawni".⁷ On the other hand, Nadvī's account tells a more detailed story:

Sheikh Sahib's (Shibli's father) death was not a tribulation alone, rather it was a combination of many tribulations. He (Shibli's father) was the patron of a verdant family, and the deprivation from his patronage brought a decline on the whole family. In his own lifetime in 1892, Sheikh Sahib had bequeathed a portion of his property to his wife whom he had married outside the family (*ghair kufv*) apart from his first wife (Mawlana's and his brothers' mother), with which the Mawalana (Shibli) and his brothers strongly disagreed . . . Along with the property with an income of six or seven thousand, Sheikh Sahib had also left a debt of 30,000 — apart from the debt, there was Sheikh Sahib's vast factory spread out, to keep which established a monthly income was needed. The step-mother and her supporters also presented a prospect of a feud.

During the whole lifetime of his father, let alone meeting her, the Mawlana was averse to the name of his step-mother—did not even want to listen to her mention. But after the father's death came this revolution that he himself went

⁷ Ibid., 30.

to the Chhawni⁸ where she lived, fell to the (step-) mother's feet, asked for the whole life's forgiveness, and showed such felicity which is not possible even for one's own (real) son. This is also an important event of the Mawlana's life.

Anyway, since the Mawlana was the eldest among all the siblings, the burden of the all the problems fell upon him. The suitors and the Mahajans⁹ surrounded him from all the sides, the law-suits got underway and the following of the law-suits started. In that condition the Mawlana said: "Had it been that the father had not left behind a single penny, but not this debt!" In any case, this was a situation that was completely against his disposition, and was enough for his heart's distress and mental disturbance, but he fully took up even this responsibility, (something) to which he was never (dispositionally) attracted throughout his life . . .

...In the 20 December letter to (late) Ishaq (Shibli's brother), he has called him after mentioning all the difficulties . . . and in the end he writes: "A dense cloud of thoughts (is upon me). Let's see how it clears".

But this dense cloud was cleared by the Mawlana's good intent. The Mawlana made Muzaffar (Sheikh Sahib's grandson from the second wife), who was (legally) deprived (of Sheikh Sahib's property), share his own property, and included his (Muzaffar's) name also, with the agreement of (other) inheritors, among the share-holders (of the property). Looking at such treatment from the Mawlana, the child's grandmother, that is, the Mawlana's step-mother, returned the property that Sheikh Sahib had left her. This returned property was given over to the suitors, and (thus) he was unburdened of the major portion of the debt.¹⁰

Parts of these details Ikram does quote from Nadvi on various occasions in his biography (for example, the part of Nadvi's account that shows Shibli reconciling with the step-mother on page 226 of *Yādgār-e-Shibli*) but the scattered nature of this presentation does not bring to mind a

⁸ Nadvi's note: "In Azam Garh (Shibli's ancestral town) the house of the staff of zamindari . . . is called a Chhawni. In Azam Garh, Mohallah Pahar Pur, Sheikh Sahib had a big house, which was for this reason called Chhawni. Sheikh Sahib's second wife lived in the same house, and hence was called 'Chhawni Wali'. In (Shibli's) letters . . . etc. she has been remembered as 'Arbab-e-Chhawni'." Parenthesis mine.

⁹ Indian money-lenders

¹⁰ Nadvi, 429-31. Parentheses mine.

holistic picture of this relationship. However, the above extended quotation from Nadvi's biographical account of Shibli's relationship with the step-mother — from the account of a biographer whom Shibli with all his stringent requirements and strict standards for writing a biography had himself sanctioned to write his biography while refusing to allow others to do the job¹¹— reveals a much “improved” relationship between Shibli and his step-mother after the death of Shibli's father. It presents *a picture of a reconciliatory exchange — a reciprocating relationship of ihsān (aesthetic beneficence) between the two from which both seem to benefit — Shibli asking for and getting forgiveness on his former behavior, and thus getting to undo the larger portion of the debt left by the father, and the step-mother getting herself finally accepted*

¹¹ Moeen-ud-Din Ahmed Ansari, *Shibli Makātib kī Roshnī Mein* (Karachi: Urdu Academy Sindh, 1967). Ansari writes: “A gentleman named Iftikhar Alam expressed his desire to the Mawlana of writing his life. But the Mawlana ignored (his request) and wrote to Abul Kalam Azad: ‘Mr. Iftikhar Alam, having written the life of Mawlavi Nazir Ahmed, wants to touch the life of Shibli with the same polluted hands, (and) has asked for (my) permission and (life) events. I have written (to him) that the apparent facts would be available from anywhere, but there is one more knower of the secrets (of my life) apart from God. Ask for them (the hidden details of my life) from there. Wouldn't you tell him? (I hope not). No matter how much such people write — who would be happy?’ This (letter) does not reflect any ridiculing of Nazir Ahmed, but (it reflects that in the matter of writing a biography) Shibli had high standards. He did not consider *Hayāt al-Nazir* a standard biography, rather when Iftikhar Alam had expressed his intention to write the life of Nazir Ahmed, then at that time Shibli in one of his letters wrote this: ‘Had these four elements become biographers for each other, only then the rights of writing a biography would have been fulfilled.’ About *Hayāt-e-Shibli* he also thought that it should be a biography of a high standard, and the truth is that only a person who had a close relationship with him and fully knew his disposition and nature could've best written his life—whether it was Abul Kalam or Syed Sulayman. Shibli's own desire was the same, therefore in one of letters to Syed Sulayman he wrote thus: ‘If ever you are free from all the (other) matters of the world — then you yourself should write (my biography).’ Therefore, Syed Sulayman Nadvi fulfilled his desire...” (66-67, parenthesis and English translation from Urdu are mine). Although Ansari criticizes even Nadvi for “probably” not fully following the standards of his teacher by turning *Hayāt-e-Shibli* largely into a “eulogy” (*maddāhi*) (67), the fact still remains that if there was anyone whom Shibli himself considered to be qualified to write his biography, it was Nadvi.

into the family by having her grandson included among the legal inheritors of the property.

I have emphasized the above lines in order to draw attention to the possibility of understanding our cultural relationship with English at that time in the same terms, if we are to agree with the analogy drawn by Ikram and exploited by Nayyar. Regardless of whether we as a culture managed to do that successfully or not, or without going into the controversy of the opinions as to whether we should have done that or not — did we, while represented through such cultural figures like Shibli, at least *attempt* at developing a reciprocal relationship of a cultural exchange, a relationship of *intended ihsān*, of a possible relationship of aesthetic beneficence between the orient and the occident from which both were expected to benefit? How did we treat our step-mother after the death of our father? Analogically speaking, once the Muslim rule in India was gone, did the figures like Shibli consider English with all its synecdochic associations a kind of a responsibility left by the “father” to be taken care of, a kind of a debt left by the predecessor that was to be undone? Did we try to make English a member of the family by becoming a possible source of our cultural enrichment? I understand the dangers of stretching analogies to the point of breaking up, but as far as this one is concerned, there is definitely more to it left:

بزار بادہ نا خورده در رگ تاک است

As for the titles of “Chhawni” and “Arbab-e-Chhawni” for the step-mother in Shibli’s letters, Nadvi first of all points out that she was called as such because the place where she lived was called thus, and in Shibli’s early letters (when his father was still alive) the titles may seem to carry a pejorative sense, but Ikram’s view that even after the father’s death, Shibli continued to call her by these titles to show “extreme repugnance” does not look to be correct. In Shibli’s later letters (after the father’s death) the use of these titles does not reflect any repugnance, rather the title “Chhawni” appears more as a matter of routine. A passage from Nadvi would help explain my meaning:

The Mawlana’s father had another marriage in the lifetime of the Mawlana’s mother, and the Mawlana had such a strong disagreement (with his father) on this that as long as the father remained alive, he (Shibli) did not even step into the house where this second wife lived. But immediately after the father’s passing away, out of love and humanitarian necessity, the Mawlana dwelt in the same house, and despite the fact that the Mawlana’s other brother was a lawyer, and had more income than him, the Mawlana fixed a monthly

salary of Rs. 30 for him from his own stipend and continued to pay him. Therefore he writes in a letter to his brother, the late Mawlavi Ishaq: "I take my hands off the worldly desires. A hundred rupees are there (for a monthly expenditure). *Forty or fifty will go into (the expenses of) Chhawni, Alia, the school etc.* Whatever would be left should be sufficient to live a good life of poverty".¹²

As the above passage reiterates the transformation in Shibli's behaviour towards his step-mother and associates it with his loving and humanitarian nature, the italicized part from Shibli's quoted letter containing a reference to the step-mother by the title of *Chhawni* does not exude any particular displeasure, anger or repugnance, simply mentioning her in passing just as any other family member whose responsibility Shibli feels as an integral part of his life.

Although Moeen-ud-Din Ansari criticizes Nadvi for largely eulogizing Shibli through his biography instead of following Shibli's own standards of writing a biography, which were, according to Ansari, to show both the weaknesses and strengths instead of presenting a one-sided picture of the subject, still he seems to get along at least with Nadvi's position on Shibli's relationship with his step-mother, and with a particular reference to Ikram disagrees with Ikram's position on Shibli's "lack of attachment with his children":

Apart from Shibli's scholarly and public life, it looks necessary to assess his family life so that the whole sketch of Shibli's character comes out . . . there are such personalities seen who could be counted as great outside their homes, but their family lives, because of their own behavior, become extremely sour. But a study of Shibli's life reveals that there was immense respect of his parents in his heart, his attitude (towards them) never remained objectionable. His brothers he loved extremely. Who doesn't love his own children? He was extremely affected by the death of his wife. In short, he was also a family-man, but some of Shibli's biographers exaggeratedly presented some events (of his life) giving them a wrong colour. One of these incidents is the second marriage of his father, on which he had become displeased. The (real) reason for this (displeasure) is the infinite love for his real mother, but it does not at all mean that he had started hating his father. Had this been the case, then why would he have behaved so felicitously with his step-mother after his

¹² Nadvi, 860. Parentheses and italics mine.

father's death and why would he have taken so many pains to undo the debt his father had left behind?¹³

Perhaps a biography after all is a “decision”, based on as much precision as the biographer could bring into it. All the various biographical accounts of Shibli seem to somewhat agree at least on one point: that there was a change in Shibli’s initial position both regarding his step-mother *and*, as we will see analogically, towards English. It is only in the interpretation of the motivation that brought about this change where Nadvi and Ikram seem to part ways. This difference becomes significant for us as Ikram, and in his wake Nayyar, both seek an analogical correspondence between Shibli’s attitude towards his step-mother and English, and thus attempt tracing our cultural approach towards English at that time through such a correspondence.

Ikram’s account appears to suggest — and Nayyar seems to agree with Ikram’s thesis by employing it “unquestioningly”¹⁴ in his own tracing of *dojazbiyyat* in Shibli’s criticism — that Shibli’s ultimate approach to the step-mother was primarily motivated by a financial expediency. This would analogically correspond to a cultural exploitation of English for monetary gains, as Ikram seems to suggest the same by putting Shibli’s initial irritation with English into the context of his struggle for getting a job and initially his subsequent reconciliation with it (after joining the Aligarh) in the view of his own “bitter experiences”.¹⁵ Did Shibli, like our dominant cultural attitude towards English today, also want English to be learnt and to be taught primarily to seek a good social stead?

Ikram can be seen to be getting it wrong when it comes to translating the analogical to the logical, that is to establish a correspondence between Shibli’s relationship with his step-mother and with English, when he is found acknowledging himself that “to weigh the Aligarh employment (of Shibli) only in the balance of silver and gold is not correct”.¹⁶ This is where Nadvi’s version of Shibli’s relationship with the step-mother, in its initial aversive and later reconciliatory phases sounds more plausible as it analogically corresponds better with Shibli’s initial aversion to and later reconciliation with English. One can see that the details Ikram chooses to elide from his account may have a

¹³ Ansari, 79-80. Parentheses and English translation are mine.

¹⁴ As such, Nayyar does raise questions which, as he says, “are raised by the interpretation of Ikram,” but these questions, mentioned above in the earlier passage quoted from Nayyar, are all rhetorical in nature.

¹⁵ Ikram, 112. Translation mine.

¹⁶ Ibid., 83.

significant bearing not only upon how we holistically see Shibli's relationship with his step-mother, but since this relationship has been analogically used first by Ikram to look into the "true sense" of Shibli's "two-dimensional" (*zujihatayn*) personality and later banked upon by Nayyar for his consideration of "ambivalence" (*dojazbīyyat*) in Shibli's criticism, the elisions may also affect our assessment of our cultural relationship and interaction with English in the phase of our history represented by figures like Shibli.

Just like the development of Shibli's relationship with his step-mother, his relationship with English in both its earlier aversion and later sympathy does not look to be motivated by purely mundane considerations. A careful reading of his letter that both Nadvī and Ikram quote may reveal that his frustration and anger at remaining jobless after completing his traditional education was not so much directed towards English itself, as Ikram would have it, than first towards his luck, and then towards those who looked at English solely as a guarantee to a good job:

The Mawlana probably had an idea of the weakness of his exam answers,¹⁷ therefore after the exam he met with Mr. . . . in Allahabad who was his father's friend and used to be the examiner in those days. But when he (Shibli) came to know that he was not the examiner that year, he was sad. Taking an omen from the *Divan* of Hafiz he found this:

Whatever effort I have shown in your desire
Measures this much that the destiny cannot be changed.

This couplet further distressed him, and then the taunt of the people that a big job could not be had without English kept pricking his heart like a thorn. He writes to his brother Mahdi (late):

... I welcomed despair and sat despondently. You must be saying that with all this freedom at home what does all this despair mean . . . But what can be done as . . . it's been two years now that I have been looking for a job and haven't reached anything. Friends say that without learning English it wouldn't do. And what is this (nonsense)? Look at all—they haven't learnt any English and still have reached good positions . . . After all in Tehsildari etc. it (English) is itself

¹⁷ The law examination that the Mawlana attempted, despite his own aversion to it, at his father's insistence.

not a condition. On the whole, the struggle of the heavens and involvement of my fate has brought this upon me that I spend a chunk of my life in wandering . . .¹⁸

In a similar vein, another letter from Shibli that again both Nadvi and Ikram quote and interpret differently as a reflection upon his relationship with modern education (or English) helps us in understanding the nature of Shibli's simultaneous aversion and attraction to English. After joining the Aligarh, Shibli writes to a relative:

Since arriving here (in the Aligarh) all my perceptions have been endorsed. I came to know that this English-educated sect is an extremely insignificant sect. Let go religion — the breadth of ideas, true liberty, sublime aspiration, the enthusiasm for progress are not to be found even in name. These things are not even mentioned here. It's only a showcase of coat-pantaloons. The young lads of our town would make me think about the BAs (BA used to be a big thing in those times) that they (the BAs) would prove all religious matters weak, *la haul wa la* . . . these poor guys can't even understand the movement of this earth. Syed Sahib (Syed Ahmed Khan) often said this to me that among all the English-educated Muslims in India, there is not a single one who could say something in a gathering or write anything . . . He would only make an exception of three individuals. He says that English does not bring any change to their (the English-educated people) minds.¹⁹

Shibli seems to be quite settled with his own position on English. As Ansari points out, "Shibli did not want to make knowledge only a source of getting employments, rather to induce a genuine love and interest of knowledge was his way".²⁰ According to Ansari

In that (Shibli's) period, two different schools of thought had the claim to the leadership of the nation. One was a group which thought of moving an inch here or there from the old religious education as heresy, and the other which in its obsession with westernization was thinking of tearing off its shirt; the one that was the custodian of religion only and the other that only had the key to the worldly progress. But there were also some individuals who wanted to have an influence on the intellectual life of the Muslims, behind whom there

¹⁸ Nadvi, 187.

¹⁹ Ibid., 205.

²⁰ Ansari, 77.

was no power but only a programme, an enthusiasm, a passion to work, a love for the nation and religion and a feeling for its greatness. Among such individuals was also Shibli Nomani whom both the groups misunderstood, who was in reality concerned for both the world and the hereafter of the Muslims.²¹

Ansari quotes from various letters of Shibli to support his view of Shibli's thoughts about our cultural engagement with English. These passages show how Shibli respects the possible benefits that the nation could reap from such a studied engagement, and also an awareness of the possible dangers an engagement with English in the absence of an engagement with religion and with our traditional education may have for us. Writing about one of his closest friends at the Nadva, Shibli says: "One is this enlightened Sherwani of ours, whom I call my *imam*. His condition is this that he trembles at the name of English. With much difficulty to lure the Muslims, when he has (finally) agreed to (my) suggestion (of teaching English at the Nadva), now he is perturbed in its implementation although the purpose is not to teach it to all the students and neither this is what I have in mind. The purpose is this that a few students should also study English".²² Ansari concludes that Shibli's theory for an engagement with English Studies was this that

The Muslims, along with the religious education, should also benefit from the Western disciplines of knowledge. Keeping in view the period and its conditions, only the religious and the text book instruction could in no way be helpful. Shibli was of this healthy opinion that the Muslims, along with the religious education, should also be provided such education in which there is a marriage of the Eastern and the Western disciplines of knowledge so that the Indian Muslims become enlightened and they could overpower the Western scholars and answer them, especially those who have presented Islam and history in a wrong light. For this it was necessary to learn English and be acquainted with it.²³

One may or may not agree with Shibli and his generation for pinning their hopes with English for an intellectual uplifting of the Muslims in the subcontinent, but one point that comes out quite clearly from Shibli's above mentioned letter is that Shibli, and some others in his generation like Iqbal, were not interpreting this uplifting only in terms of monetary

²¹ Ibid., 74.

²² Ibid., 76.

²³ Ibid., 77.

or worldly gains, but wanted a genuine cultural exchange with English that would possibly instill some “breadth of ideas, true liberty, sublime aspiration” and an “enthusiasm for progress” in what they would feel to be a declining system of education. Just like Shibli’s initial apprehensions about English were motivated by the fact that it could possibly make the Muslims lose their cultural patrimony, may divert all their attention towards a mere “show-casing” of coat-pantaloons, and may result in an empty and vain pride in knowing English, and be taken as merely a guarantee of getting a good job, his later attraction towards it was similarly occasioned by a possibility through English of strengthening of the tradition that was always so dear to him.