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Belkacem Belmekki

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Britain's Image in the Eyes of a Nineteenth Century Muslim "Occidentalizer" in British India

According to Denis Judd, the "occidentalizers were those colonial and subject peoples who respected, admired and idealized the West, and in particular Britain" (Judd 229). In this article, an attempt will be made to set out the case of a nineteenth-century Indian Muslim intellectual, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan⁴⁴, who was one of the very few prominent Muslim colonial subjects from the British Empire to have had a very positive opinion about Britain. In fact, this Muslim "occidentalizer", to use Denis Judd's appellation, looked to this country with much respect and admiration. He perceived it as a source of enlightenment and a cradle of modern civilization, while he depicted the British people and their culture as the most humane and refined in the world.

Actually, as an orthodox Muslim person, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan had previously had deep reservations about the British culture and way of life, and at times, he had experienced moments of cultural *malaise* when in their company. Nevertheless, in the course of his interaction with his British colleagues in the Indian Civil Service, he changed his mind. In this respect, D. N. Bannerjea observed that:

like Raja Ram Mohun Roy, he [Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan] was somewhat suspicious of, if not quite hostile to, English ways and methods. But actual dealings with the English not only ended the strained feeling but fostered respect and right understanding. (Bannerjea 100)

Indeed, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's socialization with the British residents in India gave him a glimpse of what the British culture stood for. This kindled in him the desire of paying a visit to Britain in order to have a closer look at the British institutions and way of life (Hay 186). To his delight, he was lucky enough to make a trip to this country by July 1869, to enter his son Sayyid Mahmud at Cambridge University.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898) was one of the most influential Muslim modernist reformers in the South Asian Sub-continent during British Raj, who sought to reform his co-religionists along modern lines. Prior to the unsuccessful events of 1857, he was employed in the service of the English East India Company as a clerk in the Judicial Department, and later rose to the position of sub-judge.

⁴⁵ Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's son, Sayyid Mahmud, was the first Indian Muslim student to benefit from a scholarship offered by the colonial government to pursue further studies at British universities. (Bannerjea 105).

It is worth noting that this trip, according to many scholars and contemporaries, was to be a U-Turn in the life and attitude of this Muslim reformer. Commenting on this statement, the Pakistani scholar Tariq Hasan argued that this journey was going to “change his life forever” (Hasan 40). This could be reflected, as will be seen later in this article, in the fact that upon returning to India, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan embarked on a nation-wide reformist campaign to modernize his hitherto moribund and old-fashioned community, the result of which would change the course of destiny of his co-religionists in British India. This historic trip, which lasted for seventeen months, opened the eyes of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan to the good benefits of British culture. His already positive views about the Western, and in particular British, civilization, were further reinforced. As put by Shun Muhammad, “[t]he English civilization and culture had impressed Sir Syed much earlier and a visit to England dazzled his eyes all the more (Muhammad xviii).”

Thus, upon his arrival, this Muslim intellectual was deeply impressed by the British culture, life-style as well as the technological progress. He had been able to meet people of all categories and social stratifications. While in London, he once wrote home, he had the opportunity to be with lords and dukes at dinners and evening parties. He met many working-class people and visited famous places and museums as well as industrial fields (Hay 186). This only made him admire the British society, its traits and values all the more. So impressed was Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, wrote Tariq Hasan, by the advances made by the European races (Hasan 40). In a letter that this Muslim intellectual addressed on 15 October 1869 to the Scientific Society, the organization that he helped found back in 1866, he frankly wrote that “[a]ll good things, spiritual and worldly, which should be found in man, have been bestowed by the Almighty on Europe, and especially on England” (qtd. in Bannerjea 106). In the meantime, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan felt deeply sorry for the inhabitants of the Indian Sub-continent, whom he made responsible for their predicament. Indeed, he did not dither over the idea of castigating his fellow-countrymen back home, Muslims and Hindus alike, for their benightedness and ignorance. This could be confirmed by the following passage excerpted from a strongly worded letter that Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan sent home while in Britain:

Without flattering the English, I can truly say that the natives of India, high and low, merchants and petty shopkeepers, educated and illiterate, when contrasted with the English in education, manners and uprightness, are as like them as a dirty animal is

to an able and upright man. The English have every reason to believe us in India to be imbecile brutes. (Symonds 28)

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan understood that the secret behind the British socio-cultural and technological progress lay in the education of both men and women (Hay 186). Indeed, he became convinced that “unless the education of the masses is pushed on as it is here (*i.e.* in Britain), it is impossible for a native to become civilized and honoured” (*ibid.*). With regard to women’s education, he expressed his disappointment over the deteriorating condition of Indian women. This feeling of disappointment was, in fact, triggered by a trivial incident that occurred to him when in his room in London. It was when his landlady’s daughter, during her bleeding period, asked him to lend her one of his controversial books on religion to read. He was deeply amazed by the fact that a British woman, even during her sickness, had the desire and the willingness to cultivate her mind. D. N. Bannerjea quoted him reacting to this incident:

Is it not a matter for astonishment that a woman, when ill, should read with the object of improving her mind? Have you ever seen such a custom in India, in the family of any noble, Nawab, Raja, or a man of high family? (qtd. in Bannerjea 108)

For Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, the British civilization was a good example to follow. As a result, upon returning home, he resolved to recreate in India everything positive he had seen in Britain. In this regard, D. N. Bannerjea humorously commented:

I suppose the turbulent activities of the suffragettes were not in those days much in evidence, or else the Syed would take back to India the same progressive views concerning the rights and duties of women. (Bannerjea 106)

As part of his reform campaign, educational uplifting of his community was going to be one of his key projects. According to Khursheed K. Aziz, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan’s slogan was: “devote yourselves to education; this is your only salvation” (Aziz 20). Thus, few years after returning to India, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan managed to lay the founding stone for a college based on the “lines of the best public schools and colleges of England” (Hasan 40). This was the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College, founded in 1875 at Aligarh, where Muslim youth would drink deep from the fountain of Western ideas and values while remaining truly faithful to the very principles of Islam. M. Asaduddin quoted Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan as saying that:

The aim of the [Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental] college was "to form a class of persons, Muhammadan in religion, Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, and in intellect. (qtd. in Asaduddin)

Interestingly, it is worthwhile to mention the fact that this educational institution was to be modelled on Cambridge and Oxford colleges, exactly as this Muslim intellectual had seen in Britain.⁴⁶ It was to be residential, where students could study and live at the same time. To put it in a word, the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College was to be a true replica of Britain's most prestigious colleges of Oxford and Cambridge (Symonds 29). Ruswan described this institution as follows:

the college was equipped with dormitory-style accommodations, where hostel authorities provided all furniture, even bedding and servants, so that students did not need to bring anything from home. (Ruswan 37)

In addition to that, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan wanted to imitate the British elitist approach to education. Like nineteenth-century Oxbridge, education at the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College was not to be made affordable to everyone in society. In fact, the College administration set up higher registration fees so that only students from the nobility and wealthy families could afford entrance. According to Ruswan, the aim behind this elitist approach was twofold: on the one hand, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan wanted to make education more valuable, and on the other hand, he wanted to create a Muslim elite who would serve as future leaders of the Muslim community (Ruswan 38). This, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan believed, could only be achieved "if the Muslim aristocracy sent their sons to the college" (*ibid.*) Lending support to this fact, Hafeez Malik wrote:

Sir Sayyid abandoned the Mughal India's concept of egalitarian mass education, and adopted instead Britain's pragmatic but aristocratic policy of advanced and elitist education. (Malik 101)

In another sphere, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan was determined to reform his co-religionists socially. He wanted to elevate the Muslim community to the apogee of refinement, on the same level as the British. Towards that end, he launched an Urdu journal entitled *Tehzib-ul-Akhlaq* or the "Muhammadan Social Reformer", whose aim it was, as put by Muhammad Y. Abbasi, to de-

⁴⁶ Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan wished this college to be a western-style university for the Indian Muslims. This wish was fulfilled 22 years after he passed away, that is, by 1920 (Read & Fisher 77).

velop the moral standards of his community to the “highest degree of civilization,” and to effect a “fundamental religious, moral and social reform” (Abbasi 21). It is noteworthy to refer to the fact that Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan issued *Tehzib-ul-Akhlaq* on the model of two previous British journals, the *Tadler* and the *Spectator*, that used to be edited by two reform-minded British intellectuals, Steele and Addison, with the aim of reforming the morals of the British society back in the eighteenth century (Reetz 215). In other words, through *Tehzib-ul-Akhlaq*, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan wanted to acquaint members of his community with the liberal ideas and values—ushered in by the age of Enlightenment—that were prevalent in the British society at that time, which, in his opinion, did by no means contradict with rationalism and common sense. The German scholar, Dietrich Reetz, described the impact that the British society had on this Muslim modernist:

Over there [...] he was most deeply influenced and impressed by both the free and liberal conduct of affairs in public and the idealistic, enlightened ideas and concepts of a rational and human life. (Reetz 214)

Actually, it was during his stay in Britain that this reform-minded Muslim leader came to the conclusion that the Muslim community in India had to break loose of the ropes of religious traditionalism and embrace a new approach to life based on reason and rationalism (*ibid.*). To that end, he filled the pages of *Tehzib-ul-Akhlaq* with articles in which he pleaded with the Muslims of India to cast off their outdated customs and superstitions which, he believed, only hindered their progress. In this respect, Shun Muhammad quoted Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan as saying that “blind emulation of custom-ridden practices would do no good to society as it would kill the very initiative” (Muhammad x).

Instead, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan urged his co-religionists to embrace British ideals and values and to imitate the British day-to-day social life without neglecting their Islamic principles (Malik 262). Reflecting his admiration to the British society, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan began wearing a “modified version of the tailcoat worn by the English aristocracy and the red fez which he adopted from the Turks” (Abbasi 32). According to Hafeez Malik, Sir Sayyid Ahmad was convinced that “[b]etween the East and West the Turkish dress was a happy compromise, since he saw the Turks as the most Westernized and advanced of all Muslim nations (Malik 265).⁴⁷

⁴⁷ It is interesting to note that Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan imposed a similar dress on the students at the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College (*ibid.*).

Actually, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan wanted to “westernize” the Muslim society in the Sub-continent. This could be seen by the fact that he appealed to his co-religionists to intermix with the British in social matters, such as dining and marriage. In fact, he encouraged them to dine, “at the same table with spoon, knife and fork” (Muhammad xii), with Christians, who he referred to as the “People of the Book” (an appellation already used in the Quran). Meanwhile, Hafeez Malik asserted that Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan urged the Muslims of India to adopt “European table manners” (Malik 262), such as using knives and forks when eating. This was because he believed that the current eating habits of his community would make any civilized person feel like vomiting (264).

Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan went a step further in his attempt at westernizing the Muslim community. Actually, his infatuation with Britain and her civilization took him so far as to exhort the Muslims of India to adopt a loyalist attitude towards the British colonial government (Belmekki 44). To substantiate his position, he took support from the Holy Quran and the Hadith, or sayings of the Prophet Muhammed, as well as the interpretations made by some distinguished Muslim scholars such as Imam Bukhari and Imam Tirmizi. While on the subject, it should be mentioned that this pro-British stance ultimately triggered a wave of opprobrium against Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan from many orthodox elements among the Muslim community, particularly the traditional Ulama, who accused him of apostasy and dubbed him as a “kafir”, meaning an infidel. In addition, other critics in the Subcontinent, mainly Hindu nationalists, referred to him as a “sycophant” or a “toady”, who sought to ingratiate himself with the British rulers in order to gain favours (Aziz 21). In a word, in the eyes of Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Britain represented the most intellectually, culturally as well as technologically advanced nation in the world. His fascination with the greatness and considerable refinement of the British social life, mainly after his historic trip to Britain, made him one of the most distinguished figures amongst the “occidentalists” that Denis Judd referred to in his book *The British Imperial Experience*.

Dr. Belkacem BELMEKKI⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Maître de Conférences - HDR (British and Commonwealth Studies), Dept. of Anglo-Saxon Languages, Faculty of Letters, Languages and Arts, University of Oran, Algeria. Mobile: +213 771 53 41 52, Email: willynilly.dz@gmail.com; alternative email: belmekki.belkacem@univ-oran.dz.

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