

Anxiety of Erasure is at its most powerful when it takes up politics directly; its strongest chapters are those that analyze works connected to Syria and Syrian writers. The chapter on *The Homeland* (*Al-watan fil-‘aynayn*) by Hamida Na‘na‘ is one of the most interesting. It offers ways to think about women’s roles as activists who shape political movements, and what happens to them when they leave the struggle. Al-Samman’s writing is particularly compelling when she connects this book—most prominently in the postscript—to the life and death struggles of people in Syria today. She argues for the importance of reading literature in its political context and how literature fights against injustice and oppression. She states this in the final pages by linking the personal to the political: “At the hands of contemporary diaspora women writers, the Shahrazad of today is not interested in liberating women from real or imaginary veils; rather, she is determined to demolish the walls of local and global oppression that silence Arab females and males alike” (254). *Anxiety of Erasure* is thus the kind of book we need today—both because we need more studies that focus on women’s texts and struggles and also because these must be linked together in order to actualize the political possibilities of literature and how we read it. ✂

DOI:[10.1017/rms.2016.99](https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2016.99)

Michelle Hartman
McGill University

SEEMA ALAVI. *Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015. 504 pages. Cloth US\$45.00. ISBN 9780674735330.

Seema Alavi, a preeminent historian of early modern South Asia, offers her readers a capacious view of late nineteenth century India in *Muslim Cosmopolitanism in the Age of Empire*. Her narrative combines documentary rigor with historical revisionism. At its center are five fugitive Indian Muslim elites: the Kerala Arab outlaw, Sayyid Fadl (d.1901); two Uttar Pradesh rebels, Rahmatullah Kairanwi (d.1892) and Haji Imdadullah Makki (d.1899); the anti-imperial Bhopal Nawab, Siddiq Hasan Khan (d.1890); and finally, the Punjabi rebel organizer, Maulana Jafer Thaneshri (d.1905). It is the saga of these five activists that occupies center stage in this lengthy book, with notes, acknowledgments and index but no bibliography.

The leitmotif of Alavi’s analysis is Muslim cosmopolitanism, which first appears as a social response to “[t]he easy mingling of the seafaring cultures

and the religious, economic and political networks that were especially visible at harbors and ports” (4). Later, Muslim cosmopolitanism, at least for two of her five subjects (Kairanwi and Imdadullah), becomes “an urbane civility based on universalist Muslim virtuous conduct,” “a unifying universalist, civilizational entity grafted onto imperial networks” (20).

The German sociologist, Bernhard Giesen, reviewing the early modern period in Western Europe, noted that cosmopolitanism amounts to “an extension of absolutist court culture” (“Cosmopolitans, Patriots, Jacobins, and Romantics” *Daedalus* 127(3), 221, 1998). It combines a double accent on virtue and on reason. When collective virtue is based on public reason, argues Giesen, cosmopolitanism is their natural, inevitable byproduct. Yet it never ceases to be shaped by its link to court culture: cosmopolitanism remains hierarchical and elitist.

In India the absolutist court culture is Mughal, with a vision shaped by Persian or Indo-Persian. Muslim cosmopolitanism, as evoked by Alavi, depends on dedication to a long tradition of learning marinated in Persian. Throughout the initial chapter on Muslim reformists, she identifies that tradition as Indo-Persianate or more often as Persianate.

Yet one looks in vain, and longs to find, an explanation of what is Indo-Persianate, especially as compared to Arabicism or the Arabicist cultural grid (see especially 84–92). As clear, often crystalline, as the prose of Alavi’s successive pen portraits is, we are never told what this tension between the Indo-Persianate and the Arabicist cultural grids portends for the legacy of the five rebels.

The absence is especially acute in the case of Haji Imdadullah. Chapter 4 offers a marvelous exposé of Imdadullah’s presence in Mecca, “the cradle of Muslim cosmopolitanism” (225). We learn much about the transnational inclusive spirit of the multilingual world of the British and Ottoman empires. Indeed, a central, productive feature of Alavi’s analysis is the competitive nature of the British and Ottoman imperial strategies: her five subjects are as often its beneficiaries as its victims. They do more than suffer the manipulations of power; they often initiate and use them to their own benefit. But the importance of multilingual practices for Haji Imdadullah is so foundational that, in her words, the *Masnavi* of Maulana Rumi “remained his source of inspiration throughout his life” (223). Because this text is also central to the entire Indo-Persianate imaginary, one would have expected the author to connect the dots, to relate the earlier discussion about Indo-Persianate/Arabicist cultural grids to the case of Haji Imdadullah, and beyond his lifetime to the pursuits of his followers.

Despite the absence of these connections, and an index that makes it hard to trace the references as well as fill in the gaps, this remains a spirited, probing, high-minded narrative. It is hard to imagine another book that tells the story of nineteenth century India with more panache. From the margins to the center, it looks at losers as winners, with a keen eye for local detail as well as the grand sweep of the imperial Raj and its less than compliant subjects.

Alavi's approach is inductive rather than deductive. She seeks to persuade the reader of the networked cosmopolitan ethos of her five protagonists in the age of the competing British and Ottoman empires. Through the mapping of several contexts, the iteration of convergent perspectives, and the narration of complex life stories, she provides a tapestry of monumental proportions. It sheds new light on the nineteenth century but also the travail of early modern history for Muslims in the Asian subcontinent.

The travail is linked to a decisive historical moment or what Ferdinand Braudel called a hinge of history. That hinge is 1857. Though never fully described, it is invoked from the outset as "the mutiny-rebellion of 1857 that shook British rule in India" (1). One of the immediate results of its brutal repression was to put at risk all Muslim leaders alleged to be conspirators or supporters. The escape of Haji Imdadullah inaugurates the book, and then is revisited in Chapter 4 (243). Indeed, it is in Mecca, his home in exile, that he meets Kairanwi. Sayyid Fadl also eludes the British, though he was deported to the Hijaz in 1852 before the mutiny, while both Tanesri and Siddiq Hasan also had their lives shaped by 1857. Of the five principals, it is Tanesri who is the most active in supporting the uprising in Delhi (331–2). It is surprising that after his arrest he is spared execution, sentenced to a "mere" eighteen years of exile in the Andaman Islands.

More than nostalgia, the Muslim cosmopolis of these pages evokes a world of hope and victory, where heroic words and deeds transcend the political and social, the cultural and religious storyline of Muslim decline, partition, and attrition. Here we have an assembly of talented, energetic, often brilliant proponents of both Arabicist and Indo-Persianate culture, forging an inclusive vision of Islam that persists into the twenty-first century. The British empire has ended, but not its Muslim cosmopolitan sequel, and it is to Alavi that we owe the strong lines, along with the shadows, of this panorama. ✎

DOI:[10.1017/rms.2016.98](https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2016.98)

Bruce B. Lawrence
Duke University