

A Polyphonous 'Urdu': Gender and Multi-linguality in Anis Kidwai's *Azaadi ki Chhaon Mein*

AYESHA KIDWAI
Jawaharlal Nehru University

This paper originates from a translation project of *Azaadi ki Chhaon Mein* (1970) by Begum Anis Kidwai (1906–1982) that I am currently engaged in. Aside from it being an invaluable historical record of the times, the memoir is especially interesting for the language it employs, which she presents as the everyday language of the common people/women.

But quickly, the light in my heart is extinguished. The language being spoken around me was even more alien than English – in the words of Josh:

*That which can be understood by no one but aliens
Is the language, saki, that is in usage these days*

Seated all around on chowkis were Buddhist monks, Brahmin priests, Muslims clerics, and God knows who else. Many languages were spoken that day – English, Sanskrit, Arabic, difficult Hindi, but not the tongue that belongs to us all, in every expression of which a hundred flowers scent the air.

So much was said that day, but neither I nor all the women around me, gazing at this spectacle with stopped throats and astonished eyes, could comprehend what was going on.

Chapter 1

The questions I want to explore in this talk are:

- *What is this language that belongs to all of us? Is it Urdu or Hindustani?*
- *How does this square with Anis Kidwai's self-identification as an Urdu speaker and writer?*

My contention will be that:

- *That the language that Anis Kidwai speaks and writes in must remain forever a language with no name because to name it would be the acceptance of a communalised Muslim identity, a denial of the Urdu identity she ascribes to, her political commitment to the nationalist cause, and her personal biography as an educated Muslim woman of UP.*
- *That this complex of factors creates a novel linguistic identity in which Hindi and Urdu emerge as two distinct languages that share a register of the everyday.*

I. Anis Kidwai's Language of No Name

Strikingly, Anis Kidwai does not name the language that she and others speak, or the language is writing in. Clearly, the spoken language is one with no 'difficult' words, and is one that never 'shows off':

The return of the Jaitpur people became a great problem for all of us. We had once organised a meeting where we invited all the villagers who were in the camp, and tried to reason with them. Amongst them, there was a gentleman in a fez cap, whom we

could see scurrying around canvassing with people against what we saying. Three or four others were constantly heckling us as we spoke, interrupting us with long lectures, their discourse studded with the choicest of difficult words from Arabic and Persian, with the intent to impress the audience of their superiority of intellect and knowledge.

Chapter 7

The spoken/written language, however, also marks religious identity and difference:

A special gift of the times was the word used for refugees from Pakistan – *sharnaarhi*, 'he who had gained refuge'. For many days we could not even pronounce it properly – such a fat, unwieldy word that it would simply fill up one's mouth – but just as we were getting used to it, Punjabi newspapers protested its use for Punjabi migrants on the grounds that they were not charity-seekers, living off those who gave them refuge. They took up the cause for the use of the word *purushaarhi* – 'he who labours' – in recognition of the fact that the refugee's own labour rebuilt his life. Later, some also argued for the use of the word *muhajir* – 'he who has forsaken his land'. I do not know which to use: the word *panahguzin* and *muhajir* are Arabic and Farsi words, and the word *purushaarhi* smells of manual labour, so *sharnaarhi* will have to do. *Chapter 3*

In the language Anis Kidwai writes in, which presumably is also one that all of us can 'understand', there is as much Arabic and Persian, as there is English, Awadhi, and Khari Boli:

Ek bacca jiski paidayish pa me mahinoN dholak bajti, jiske baghair saltanat viraan, ghar beraanaq aur khaandaan ka chirag gul ho jaayaa kartaa tha. Jiske lie mandir, masjidon aur dargaahon ki khaak chaanii jaati hE, daulat ke dher bekaar aur ilaqon, zamindaariyon ki tikka-boti ho jaati hE, vahi baccaa is camp meN bib bulaye mehmaan ki taraah har roz aane lagaa. Na koi nars thii, na daii, baghair kisii daaktari madad ke ek-ek din meN pandrah-pandrah bacce aur ek-ek raat meN das-das bacce rote-chiikhthe duniya meN utarne lage. Ye ek aisa maslaa tha jiska koi hal nahiiN suujhtaa tha.

Well before more robust shelters and medicines could arrive, and doctors and nurses begin their visits, newborn infants started arriving. A newborn, to celebrate whose arrival drums would have beaten for months on end in an overjoyed home; a child, without whom a kingdom became a wilderness and the flame of a lineage sputtered out; an offspring, in the longing for whom the dust of temples, mosques, and dargaahs was churned, mountains of riches squandered, land and property divided; that child was now an unwanted guest, arriving every day in the camp unbidden. There were no nurses or midwives, yet in every day, up to fifteen, and in every night ten, bawling infants would find their way into the world.

Then why is this language not Urdu or Hindustani (history having denied her the label of Hindi by then)?

II. Urdu vs. Hindi vs. Hindustani: Trancending the Question of Choice

- In 1902, Altāf Husain Hālī said that the compiler of an Urdu dictionary should be a person from Delhi, and should also be:

• Quotes here, unless otherwise specified, from Faruqi, S. R. (2001). *Early Urdu Literary Culture and History*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

a sharīf musalmān (a well-educated Muslim of good family), for even in Delhi, it's only the speech of Muslims that is considered proper and conforming to the required standard.

- In 1912, Shiblī Nu mānī granted the expertise of Hindus in Urdu, in these words: It is alleged that the Hindus are active in obliterating Urdu, which is the language of our community [hamārī qaumī zabān], Let's see how. Is it because the Hindus bring out the very best magazines [original in English] and journals (Adīb, and Zamānah) of the Urdu language?...
- In 1910, Dātā Dayāl Maharshī Shīvbrat Lāl Varman (1860-1939), a Hindu saint and a prolific Urdu writer: "No language in the world other than Hindi can fulfill the religious needs of the Hindus".
- In 1930, Munshi Premchand, 'Urdu meN Fir'auniyat' (translated by CM Naim): It is a common enough charge against the Muslims that they have never duly acknowledged the Hindu writers and poets of Urdu. ...I think that if someone properly investigates how many Hindus and Muslims separately speak Urdu it would be found that their numbers are not that far apart. ...If a Muslim seeks to give Urdu an Islamic color by stuffing it with Arabic and Persian words, then a Hindu can also wish to give Urdu a Hindu color by putting into it vocabularies from Hindi and Bhasha. Urdu is not the exclusive heritage either of the Muslims or of the Hindus. Both have equal rights to read and write it. The Hindus have a prior right over it because it is a branch of Hindi. Hindi soil and water have given Urdu its inherent shape, and that cannot be altered by inserting into Urdu a few Arabic and Persian words—a change of dress does not change anyone's race or nationality. ...While Hindu writers are being shown such appreciation, just look at how devoted the Hindus are to the Muslim poets [of Hindi]. New editions of Rahim's and Ja'isi's works continue to appear, and they are read as assiduously as the writings of Surdas and Tulsidas. ...No one gives any thought to their being Muslims. But I find no example of any Muslim scholar editing for publication the work of a Hindu poet. "
- SR Faruqi: "It was only in the 1930's that the Muslims, thrown on the defensive by the realization that Urdu might have no place in a Hindu-dominated India, proclaimed the folly and falsity of the 'Urdu equals Muslim' equation, and began to assert the truth: Urdu was, and had always been, the language of both Hindus and Muslims."

For Anis Kidwai to name her language as Urdu would push her into a 'Muslim camp', a camp which she does not want to be in, as insaaniyat (a 'truer' Islam) is her religion. To name it as 'not-Urdu' would be both a denial of her Muslim-ness as well as a rejection of the historical facts of the emergence of Hindi, a label that history has denied to her. As Tarachand (1944) has summed up the historical record indicates a development of Modern Hindi as recent (see also Faruqi 2001):

Urdu was regarded by both Hindus and Mussalmans of the 18th century as their lingua franca. ...Modern Hindi was till then unknown, for no literature existed in it. It was at this time that it began to be employed for literary purposes. The professors of the college encouraged Lallooji Lal and other teachers to compose books in the language used by the Urdu writers; but to substitute Sanskritic words (tatsama) for Persian and Arabic words. Thus the new style was born which was considered specially suited to

the requirements of the Hindus, and the Christian missionaries gave a fillip to it by translating the Bible in it.

The new style (which is now known as Hindi) took a long time to become popular. In fact it was only after the Mutiny of 1857, that Modern Hindi began to attract attention. Special efforts were made to foster it. It was about this time that Beames, Kellog, and others wrote grammars to establish its claims. Even Provincial Governors went about dissuading people from the use of Urdu.

The irony, of course is, that the choice of an Urdu script irrevocably commits her to both Urdu and the Muslim camp In 1882, Bharatendu Harishchandra had testified before the Education Commission. Not only was the script 'foreign', it also permitted ambiguity in reading, and thus encouraged people to cheat.

By the introduction of the Nagari character they [the Muslims] would lose entirely the opportunity of plundering the world by reading one word for another and misconstruing the real sense of the contents....The use of Persian letters in office is not only an injustice to Hindus, but it is a cause of annoyance and inconvenience to the majority of the loyal subjects of Her Imperial Majesty.

To write in the Urdu script was therefore to be an Urdu speaker and a Muslim.- In her refusal to name the language she speaks, Anis Kidwai seeks to transcend these labels of communalised identity, without giving up her claims to Islam or Urdu.

For Anis Kidwai, naming her language to be Hindustani is not an option, although it should be available as one. The case for Hindustani is best made by Tarachand, drawing on the construction of Hindi and Urdu as the languages of Hindus and Muslims:

Although Modern Hindi is a recent growth, for its beginnings do not go beyond the 19th century and its real development has taken place within the last sixty years, it has made rapid strides... Urdu literature has also made great progress... But the unfortunate feature of their advance is that these languages are becoming identified more and more with special communities, and communalism in politics is invading the field of culture. ...

The situation then is that Urdu and Modern Hindi are both claimants to the status of the lingua franca of India. The advocates of Urdu point out that it is older in age, that it is a product of fusion of Hindu and Muslim cultures, that members of both communities have shared in its growth, both have regarded it till recently as their common speech. ...Modern Hindi claims a close kinship with such Indian languages as Marathi, Gujarati, Bengali, Punjabi, Oriya, etc, which are all descendants of a common Indo-Aryan mother-tongue. Hindi is therefore easier for the speakers of these languages than Urdu. Sanskritization of Hindi makes for closer relationship between the modern Indian languages of the same family.

Although Gandhi and Nehru wanted both the Nagari and the Urdu script to be the national scripts of India, criticism of the Urdu script infected even these discourses:

"Those who in anger boycott Urdu script put a wanton affront upon the Muslims of the Union who in the eyes of many Hindus have become aliens in their own land."

"The limitations of this script in terms of perfection are many. But for elegance and grace it will equal any script in the world. It will not die as long at least as Arabic & Persian live, though it has achieved a status all its own without outside aid. With a little adaptation it can serve the purpose of short hand." Gandhi (1948)

The arguments of the protagonists of the two are weighty, but not decisive. Language is a medium of social intercourse. The nature of society and its needs must determine its characteristics, and not merely considerations of convenience. Today India exists largely as a geographical unity; if it is to grow into a living unified society, into a consolidated nation, it can only do so by the fusion of the communities. Such a fusion will be possible only when each community is assured that its language, religion, and culture is preserved as an organic part of the whole.

The reasons why this could be so:

- **Anis Kidwai's personal biography:** One of the rare Muslim women to be educated (at home) in her time, Anis Kidwai's education was in Persian and Urdu; however, like other Muslim women of Uttar Pradesh, her language of the home was Awadhi (rather than Khari Boli). An aware and erudite woman, she knew that hers was not the simple simplified Bazaar language that Suniti Kumar Chatterji spoke as a solution to the *lingua franca* question. All her learning and speech varieties enter her textual practice, as part of a multilingual code, in which *scene*, *nazaara*, *manzar*, *drishya*, are paradigmatic choices. To call this code Hindustani is impossible, because she did not see her own language as, to quote Gandhi, "a resultant of Hindi and Urdu", but as a symphony of her many speech varieties.
- **What is Hindustani anyway?** Although recourse has frequently been taken to notions of a continuum between the two, with Hindustani as the mutual intelligible "core" underlying two distinct high literary variants of Hindi and Urdu, this is not what the historical record tells us. If Urdu is, as history tells us, only a recent name (last quarter of the eighteenth century) for the common core was already as syncretic as Hindustani is supposed to be – this would amount to a mere changing of names. With this change is attendant a loss of identity – a cost too high to pay for Anis Kidwai, or indeed any believing Indian Muslim of her times.
- **Hindustani cannot be a site of production:** in all the political definitions of Hindustani is never conceived as a site of production. For example, Gandhi emphasizes the comprehension aspect in defining the requirements of the national language: "(1) It should be easy for Government officials to learn, (2) It should be capable of serving as a medium of religious, economic and political intercourse throughout India, (3) It should be the speech of large number of Indians, (4) It should be easy for every Indian to learn, and (5) In choosing such a language, considerations of temporary or passing circumstances should not count"

III. Building Multilinguality into Autonomy

Simply put, Anis Kidwai's need is to keep Hindi (and all the other languages she infuses into her text) apart from Urdu, but allow them to mix in a way that a common language of the everyday emerges. Anis Kidwai's problem is not hers alone. This is a problem that Urdu-waalahs repeatedly return to. For example, in his review of King's *One Language, Two Scripts*, Ralph Russell contends that "King's description is valid only for one level of the language, the language of everyday conversation on mundane themes, and even there the correspondence is not quite a hundred percent:"

But to equate Hindi with just this range of Hindi would be absurd, and to do the same sort of thing with the comparable range of Urdu would be equally absurd. It is true that the Hindi equivalent of "How far is the station from here?" is identical with the Urdu equivalent. And it is equally true that the Urdu for "The eighteenth century was a period of social, economic and political decline" is "*athāravīṅṅ ṣadi samāji, iqṭisādi aur siyāsī zavāl kā daur thī,*" while the Hindi equivalent is "*athāravīṅṅ sadi samājik, arthik, aur rājnītik girāv kī sadi thī*" (and in the Hindi version, Rupert Snell tells me, one could say "*ṣatābdī*" instead of "*sadi*" and "*tathā*" instead of "*aur*"). He also tells me that instead of the second "*sadi*" (which simply repeats the word for "century") one could say "*samay*" (which means simply "time").

Russell's conclusion is that "for all practical purposes, therefore, Urdu and Hindi are two separate languages and should be described as such, despite their almost completely common structure and less completely common stock of everyday words."

But this is not what gets us Anis Kidwai! Here's What Does:

My proposal is that this language/space with no name is best characterised not as "core" but as a *register*, a mode of speech employed as appropriate for a particular context, most commonly the quotidian, but also extendable to encompass the literary and other formal discourses. This register is what each language owns individually, but is also shared by the other; as a result this shared space may be continually enriched by both languages.

So central is this intersected space for both Hindi and Urdu individually, that attempts to liberate it into an autonomous language are viewed with suspicion by Hindi and Urdu-wallahs, with "each side seeing it as merely a Trojan horse of the other; or, occasionally, in moments of cultural confidence, greedy to annex it by infecting the middle domain with their kind of extremism" (Rai 2005). As a consequence, too, identity claims to only *either* Hindi or Urdu by "ordinary people", as the "middle" of a language does not offer a peg to hang an identity on, and particularly when this middle is included in more than one language.

To be a Hindi or Urdu speaker and writer in 1947 was to exploit the latitude afforded by this shared cross-fertilised register. Creativity in language use lay in the ability to, as Rai (2005) observes, "play with polymorphous perversity ... over the entire range, from fairly frissons to a genuinely multilingual community." For some writers, the movement is genuinely pole to pole, for others it signals a liberty to cavort between the end one has pitched one's tent in and the vast middle beyond. What has been lost by 2006, most evidently in literary production, is the right of both Hindi and Urdu to enrich and access this middle. Anis Kidwai's language is a sterling example of how this included middle can be claimed and enriched by an Urdu writer.