



Tehzib, Memory, and the Politics of Aesthetic Practice: Reading *The Mirror of Beauty*

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Abstract

Shamsur Rahman Faruqi's *The Mirror of Beauty* positions *tehzib*, Delhi's comprehensive cultural formation encompassing aesthetic sensibility, ethical comportment, and refined learning, as a mode of resistance that operates through preservation rather than confrontation. This study examines how the novel deploys literary form to reconstruct cultural knowledge that colonial archives systematically excluded. *Tehzib* resists colonial modernity not by preventing its advance but by maintaining alternative frameworks for understanding value, beauty, and human dignity that refuse subordination to purely instrumental logics. The novel acknowledges forthrightly that aesthetic recovery operates on different temporal and political registers than direct political action. Memory here functions as creative labour that must negotiate between archival fragments and imaginative synthesis, producing knowledge forms that resist the abstracting tendencies of modern historiography while accepting their own necessary incompleteness.

Keywords: Aesthetic, Culture, Delhi, Identity, Resistance, *Tehzib*.

Delhi maintained extraordinary aesthetic vitality through the nineteenth century even as its political sovereignty collapsed. The British progressively dismantled Mughal administrative structures, and the Marathas periodically invaded the city. The paradox demands explanation: How did *tehzib* sustain itself when the courtly patronage systems that had historically supported cultural production disintegrated? C. A. Bayly demonstrates that Delhi's cultural infrastructure had become embedded deeply enough in daily practices, marketplace transactions, and social networks

that it could operate with relative autonomy from formal state sponsorship. Poets, calligraphers, musicians, and scholars-maintained production through marketplace circulation and private patronage networks. These economic arrangements created what Bayly identifies as distinctive consumption patterns that both reflected and constituted cultural identity, generating material foundations for *tehzib's* reproduction outside direct courtly control (Bayly 58-61).

Mirza Sangin Beg's contemporary documentation captures Delhi navigating

between competing political authorities while maintaining cultural institutions that neither fully controlled. Markets functioned as crucial sites where *tehzib* reproduced itself through daily practice. Salons transmitted aesthetic knowledge through face-to-face contact. This mode of transmission resisted the surveillance and documentation that colonial administrators attempted, creating opacity to external comprehension that constituted one dimension of cultural resistance (Chenoy 33-34). British ethnographers produced voluminous accounts claiming scientific objectivity, yet their positions of deliberate detachment prevented them from acquiring the immersive knowledge necessary for genuine comprehension. *Tehzib* existed primarily as embodied practice transmitted through apprenticeship rather than as codified doctrine available through textual study, rendering it peculiarly resistant to documentary analysis.

This recognition transforms *tehzib* from passive victim of historical circumstance into active agent of cultural survival. Delhi's learned classes devoted themselves to poetry, philosophy, and aesthetic cultivation with intensified commitment as political catastrophe loomed. They perhaps recognized that cultural practice might outlast military defeat and territorial loss. William Dalrymple documents how residents remained "interested in learning and in cultivating the arts, spending their days and nights reading and writing" even as the city's infrastructure crumbled around them (Dalrymple 57). This devotion suggests deliberate choice rather than mere habit. *Tehzib* became a form of civilizational resistance, maintained through crisis as testimony that Delhi's inhabitants refused to accept colonial definitions of value, progress, and human dignity. The British might control territory and administrative apparatus, but they could not directly destroy the aesthetic sensibility and cultural knowledge that constituted Delhi's distinctive civilization.

This article argues that *tehzib* functions as aesthetic resistance preserving cultural memory under colonial domination. Faruqi's novel, *The Mirror of Beauty*, refuses direct confrontation with imperial power. The text instead cultivates embodied, affective, and formal modes of survival that colonial archives cannot document. Wazir Khanam's mirror consciousness reveals how subjects navigate between public performance and private authenticity, and this doubled vision constitutes *tehzib's* most significant political achievement. The novel's expansive formal design enacts the values it defends thematically. Such alignment between form and content transforms aesthetic practice itself into historical archive and political testimony. This study examines three related dimensions: first, the epistemology of mirrored selfhood that enables strategic duplicity; second, the tension between visible devotion and concealed autonomy that the moth-and-candle imagery establishes; third, the novel's structural complexity as argument about cultural knowledge resisting modern historiography's abstracting tendencies.

Methodologically, this study employs close reading of selected episodes in conversation with postcolonial theory and aesthetic philosophy to argue for *tehzib* as both resistance and archive. The analysis attends to specific textual moments where Wazir Khanam's consciousness reveals doubled structure, and such attention yields concrete evidence for broader claims about cultural survival. Theoretical frameworks from Bhabha, Foucault, Todorov, Wellek, and Warren provide conceptual vocabularies for articulating how aesthetic practice operates politically, but these remain grounded in textual specificity rather than abstract application. The study treats the novel's formal properties as themselves constituting argument rather than neutral containers for content. Such method suits literary research examining how cultural knowledge persists across ruptures destroying

the social institutions that originally sustained transmission.

Critical Orientations and Scholarly Positioning

Scholarship on Shamsur Rahman Faruqi's *The Mirror of Beauty* increasingly reads the novel as an aesthetic project of cultural remediation in which narrative form, diction, and archival imagination become sites where aesthetic practice and political memory collide. Corpus- and stylistics-based studies (Anwar et al.; Kayani et al.) show how Faruqi's patterned figurative lexicon actively fashions gendered memory and aesthetic ideals, producing representations of women that appear at once objectified and strategically staged for critical interrogation. Comparative and translation-focused work on *Ka'i Chand Thay Sar-e-Aasman* and its English version (Parveen; Yasin) further stresses how Faruqi's self-translation negotiates registers of Urdu aesthetic terminology, so that the very act of translation becomes a method for preserving *tehzib* in a modern public sphere. At the same time, historians and editors of late-Mughal Delhi (Mahmood) treat the novel as a valuable cultural source whose painstaking reconstruction of urban, musical, poetic, and craft worlds is both narratively rich and evidentially suggestive. Taken together, this cluster of books, articles, and papers positions *The Mirror of Beauty* not merely as historical fiction or romance but as a deliberate aesthetic politics; a novel whose language, corporeal description, narrative polyphony, and translation practices enact cultural memory, stage *tehzib* as contested heritage, and invite interdisciplinary retrieval, critique, and reconfiguration for contemporary readerships.

This article diverges from prior criticism by foregrounding *tehzib* not as cultural context but as the novel's central analytical category and political strategy. Aesthetic practice here becomes a mode of resistance operating through preservation rather than confrontation, and this distinction matters methodologically. The study

synthesizes social history (Bayly, Chenoy, Dalrymple), postcolonial theory (Bhabha, Foucault), dialogical philosophy (Todorov), and literary formalism (Wellek and Warren) within a single interpretive frame. Such synthesis allows examination of how cultural knowledge functions as resource for survival when direct political channels close. The novel's formal properties receive sustained attention as themselves constituting historical argument rather than serving as neutral vehicles for content. Faruqi's structural choices perform the values *tehzib* embodied, and this productive alignment distinguishes his project from conventional historical fiction that merely represents past events through contemporary narrative conventions.

Mirror Consciousness: Selfhood between Performance and Interiority

Wazir Khanam occupies precarious social position as educated woman in Delhi's declining Mughal aristocracy during the mid-nineteenth century. Her family's status depends on maintaining cultural refinement even as economic resources dwindle, and she receives thorough education in poetry, music, calligraphy, and aesthetic judgment. The narrative follows her forced marriage to a man she does not choose, her navigation of restrictive domestic spaces, and her cultivation of sophisticated cultural competencies that grant limited autonomy within patriarchal constraints. These biographical particulars matter because Wazir Khanam's experience exemplifies how *tehzib* operated for those who possessed cultural capital but lacked political or economic power. She cannot escape structural domination. She can, however, deploy aesthetic knowledge strategically to expand possibilities for self-determination within oppressive circumstances.

The mirror functions throughout Faruqi's novel as an epistemological device that mediates between external observation and internal self-knowledge. This doubled structure of self-

perception becomes crucial for understanding how *tehzib* enables both adaptation to social demands and preservation of autonomous interiority. Wazir Khanam's relationship with mirrors structures her developing consciousness throughout the narrative, creating what we might term "double vision" – the capacity to see herself simultaneously as social object subjected to others' evaluative gazes and as autonomous subject possessing her own desires, judgments, and self-understanding.

Early in the novel, Wazir Khanam describes her encounter with her reflection: "not only delicate and svelte, but also a storehouse of eroticism, even lust" (Faruqi 454). The passage establishes fundamental distinction between seeing her reflection "in the mirror" and looking at herself "in her heart." These represent two modes of self-knowledge that operate according to different logics and serve different functions. The physical mirror shows her how she appears to others. It reflects back the social identity that Delhi's hierarchies and conventions construct for her as young woman of particular family background and social position. This reflected identity matters immensely within *tehzib's* elaborate systems of recognition and evaluation, determining how others will perceive her and what possibilities for action and relationship will become available to her. She must attend carefully to this external appearance, cultivating the visible markers of refinement that will grant her recognition within Delhi's cultural economy.

The inward gaze, however, reveals something different. She recognizes herself as "a storehouse of eroticism," claiming authority over her own embodiment and desire. This self-knowledge refuses to accept external definitions of appropriate feminine identity that would deny her erotic agency. The phrase "storehouse of eroticism" particularly demands attention. A storehouse contains accumulated reserves held for future use. The metaphor suggests that Wazir Khanam possesses depths of desire and

sensuality that exceed any possible external display, reserves of feeling that she maintains as private resources independent of social surveillance. She does not merely experience erotic desire as involuntary physiological response. She recognizes her eroticism as constitutive of her identity, something she consciously knows about herself and can potentially deploy according to her own purposes rather than according to others' designs.

This dual consciousness structures her negotiation of social space throughout the narrative. She must perform visible refinement to claim recognition within Delhi's cultural hierarchies and to accumulate the social capital necessary for limited autonomy. She learns the elaborate codes governing feminine behaviour, mastering the subtle arts of conversation, aesthetic judgment, poetic sensibility, and social grace that *tehzib* demands. This mastery grants her genuine status and authority within specific domains. Other characters seek her opinions on aesthetic matters, consult her judgment on questions of propriety and taste, and recognize her as exemplar of cultural sophistication. This recognition provides her with rhetorical resources and social positioning that she can strategically deploy to expand her agency within otherwise oppressive circumstances.

Simultaneously, however, she maintains inner reserves of autonomous feeling and judgment that exceed external observation. The novel repeatedly emphasizes spaces where her consciousness escapes social control. She cultivates internal aesthetic responses that may diverge from publicly stated judgments. She acknowledges desires and fantasies that propriety forbids her from expressing openly. She develops ethical evaluations of the social world that critique its injustices even when she cannot directly challenge them.

Wazir Khanam's cultivation of aesthetic judgment grants her genuine authority within Delhi's cultural hierarchies, yet those

hierarchies remain thoroughly patriarchal. Her mastery of *tehzib* permits her to expand her agency relative to other women and to claim status within elite circles, but it does not fundamentally challenge the structures that require her arranged marriage, deny her inheritance rights, or constrain her movements. Her “strategic duplicity” (Bhabha 136) succeeds brilliantly at navigating patriarchal constraints but cannot overcome them. This is not failure of imagination or will on Faruqi’s part, but rather honest recognition that aesthetic resistance has real but circumscribed limits. *Tehzib* provided Delhi with sophisticated frameworks for appreciating beauty and articulating desire, yet those same frameworks were deeply implicated in the patriarchal structures they were supposed to enable women to navigate. Recovery of *tehzib* as resistance thus requires acknowledging that what enabled certain forms of female autonomy simultaneously reproduced the very systems constraining that autonomy.

Tzvetan Todorov argues that selfhood emerges dialogically through “the reflections of our life in the plane of consciousness of other men,” requiring perpetual negotiation between self-perception and social recognition (94-95). Wazir Khanam certainly exists through sustained awareness of how her life appears to others, and these reflected social perceptions shape her profoundly. The novel refuses to extract its protagonist from complex social embeddedness or represent her according to liberal fantasies of autonomous selfhood existing before society constrains it. Yet this dialogical formulation creates productive friction with Wazir Khanam’s concealed reserves of autonomous judgment and desire. If recognition truly constitutes selfhood, then what status should we assign to her secret eroticism, her private ethical evaluations, and her fantasies exceeding social surveillance? The protagonist cultivates deliberate asymmetry within dialogical constitution: she permits certain dimensions of self-knowledge to be shaped through others’ reflections while

strategically concealing other dimensions from such reflection. This represents neither liberal autonomy nor pure dialogical constitution but rather calculated opacity, a refusal to achieve the full transparency that both colonial administration and patriarchal authority demand.

Michel Foucault asks how subjects speak truthfully about themselves as subjects of sexual pleasure, and at what price (444). Wazir Khanam must articulate erotic experience within multiple competing discursive frameworks that exact different costs. Victorian colonial propriety denies female desire entirely, and traditional patriarchal structures acknowledge such desire only to subordinate it completely toward male authority and familial reproduction. She navigates strategically between these constraints while maintaining access to older aesthetic vocabularies that *tehzib* provided for discussing eroticism. The ghazal tradition developed sophisticated languages for articulating desire through metaphoric indirection, and these aesthetic codes enabled communication evading direct censorship while conveying meaning to competent audiences. Wazir Khanam speaks desire through poetic allusion in ways remaining technically proper yet communicating effectively to those able to decode her references. This deployment of ghazal languages potentially reverses the dynamic Foucault identifies: she avoids modern sexuality’s truth-production mechanism by articulating eroticism through poetic metaphor rather than direct confession. Her meaning circulates among the culturally competent while remaining inaccessible to regimes of documentation claiming to produce true knowledge. Such refusal constitutes active resistance to epistemic frameworks through which colonial and patriarchal authority sought to constitute the truth of female sexuality in colonized contexts.

The mirror’s doubled structure thus enables what we might call “strategic

duplicity" –not dishonesty or deception but rather sophisticated navigation of multiple registers of truth. Wazir Khanam performs the social identity that circumstances demand while maintaining autonomous selfhood in domains that resist external surveillance. She speaks the languages that propriety requires while preserving meanings that exceed or contradict those official expressions. She adapts outwardly to oppressive conditions while refusing inward capitulation to the values those conditions enforce. This dual operation characterizes *tehzib's* resistance more broadly. Cultural practitioners could conform strategically to colonial domination's visible demands while maintaining alternative value systems in domains that resisted colonial documentation and control.

The Moth and the Candle: Public Performance and Secret Devotion

The novel returns repeatedly to poetic imagery contrasting spectacular public display with secret private devotion, establishing fundamental tension between visibility and interiority. The moth burning itself publicly before the candle provides visible evidence of devotion that observers can witness and judge. The passage suggests, however, that those who "worship appearances" miss deeper truths accessible only to those who "burn secretly" beyond external observation (Faruqi 401). This tension structures how *tehzib* operates within constraining social circumstances, requiring sophisticated management of the boundary between what can be displayed openly and what must remain hidden.

Simultaneously, however, *tehzib* cultivated depths of feeling and knowledge that exceeded any possible external display. The deepest forms of aesthetic experience, spiritual devotion, and authentic feeling might reside precisely in what remains hidden from public view. This creates productive tension. One must perform publicly to claim recognition and maintain social position. One must also preserve

dimensions of autonomous interiority that resist complete transparency to social surveillance. The strategic management of this boundary becomes crucial skill for navigating constrained circumstances.

Wazir Khanam exemplifies this dual operation throughout her narrative arc. She must conform outwardly to oppressive expectations, performing the role of dutiful daughter, then dutiful wife, accepting arrangements that violate her desires and constrain her autonomy. This outward conformity appears to observers as submission to patriarchal authority. It grants her survival and limited agency within circumstances where direct rebellion would prove suicidal. Simultaneously, however, she maintains inner reserves of autonomous judgment and authentic feeling that she strategically conceals from surveillance. She evaluates critically the social world that constrains her, recognizing its injustices even when she cannot openly challenge them. She cultivates desires and fantasies that exceed and contradict the roles society assigns her. She preserves ethical commitments that differ from prevailing social values, maintaining alternative frameworks for evaluating human worth and proper conduct.

This inward resistance operates invisibly to external observers. Colonial administrators documenting Indian women's lives would record Wazir Khanam's outward behaviour – her arranged marriage, her apparent acceptance of patriarchal constraints, her performance of traditional feminine roles. They would miss entirely the internal resistance and autonomous selfhood that this outward conformity conceals. Their documentary accounts would systematically misrepresent her actual experience, mistaking strategic adaptation for genuine submission. The novel insists that this misrepresentation characterizes colonial documentation more broadly. British accounts systematically failed to grasp dimensions of Indian experience that operated beyond their observational capacities, producing flattened

representations that encoded metropolitan prejudices while claiming scientific objectivity.

The moth-and-candle imagery gains particular resonance here. Public display (the moth burning visibly) provides evidence of refinement that others can evaluate and that establishes social recognition. Secret devotion (burning invisibly) preserves authentic commitment and autonomous feeling beyond social surveillance. *Tehzib* requires cultivation of both dimensions simultaneously. One cannot survive socially while maintaining only invisible interiority, for recognition within cultural hierarchies' demands visible performance of competence. One cannot preserve authentic selfhood while maintaining only external performance, for that would reduce identity entirely towards social role and eliminate autonomous judgment and feeling. Sophisticated navigation of the boundary between public performance and private truth becomes essential practice.

This dual structure enabled *tehzib's* persistence through increasingly hostile circumstances. Cultural practitioners could adapt strategically to colonial expectations and Victorian propriety while preserving alternative value systems in domains resisting colonial documentation and control. They could perform outward conformity to new regimes while maintaining inward commitments to traditional aesthetic and ethical frameworks. They could appear to accept colonial authority while cultivating forms of knowledge and sensibility that implicitly challenged colonial values. This resistance operated invisibly to colonial observers, creating spaces of cultural autonomy within structures of political domination.

Aesthetic Form as Historical Knowledge

Chitra Sankaran refers to Amitav Ghosh that "the history of the planet, in its socio-cultural, historical, and political aspects, is entangled with its literary histories" (2). Faruqi demonstrates this entanglement concretely, showing how the ghazal tradition provided

Delhi's inhabitants with aesthetic vocabularies and conceptual frameworks through which they comprehended their own experiences of desire, loss, devotion, and suffering. These poetic resources proved remarkably adaptable to historical catastrophe, offering languages for articulating collective trauma that more prosaic modes of documentation could not capture.

Literary form becomes historical archive preserving modes of feeling and categories of experience that administrative records systematically exclude. Colonial documentation recorded political events, administrative policies, economic transactions, and demographic information. These archives contain immensely valuable historical information about certain dimensions of colonial experience. They systematically exclude, however, the subjective dimensions of how historical subjects actually felt and understood their circumstances. They preserve minimal record of how people loved, grieved, hoped, feared, desired, and made meaning of their experiences.

Tehzib existed primarily in these subjective domains. It structured how Delhi's inhabitants organized emotional life, articulated desire, expressed devotion, comprehended suffering, and maintained dignity under oppressive circumstances. The aesthetic traditions it encompassed provided essential resources for making experience meaningful. Ghazal imagery and convention shaped how people understood and communicated what they felt. Poetic categories organized perception and provided frameworks for interpretation. The novel attempts to preserve these lost dimensions of historical experience through literary means, accepting that narrative representation differs necessarily from original embodied practice while insisting that such preservation retains crucial historical value.

René Wellek and Austin Warren propose that aesthetic utility need not reside in "the enforcement of such a moral lesson" but might

consist instead in art's capacity to be "not a waste of time', not a form of 'passing the time,' "suggesting that serious aesthetic engagement constitutes valuable human activity regardless of whether it produces practical outcomes or teaches explicit lessons (Wellek and Warren 20). This conception applies directly to *tehzib*, which British colonial observers frequently dismissed as frivolous ornament or wasteful luxury rather than recognizing it as serious cultural work demanding sophisticated knowledge and refined judgment.

Delhi's aesthetic culture contained modes of knowledge that resisted translation into propositional statements or practical applications. These operated instead through cultivated sensibility and embodied practice that could only be acquired through sustained apprenticeship. Faruqi's novel attempts to transmit something of this aesthetic knowledge through literary means, accepting the inevitable losses such mediation entails. The work's massive length and structural complexity demand sustained readerly attention mirroring the labor historically required to acquire *tehzib* itself, resisting contemporary patterns of accelerated cultural consumption that privilege efficiency and immediate gratification.

This formal resistance enacts through the novel's structure what it describes thematically in its historical content, performing the values it seeks to preserve. Just as *tehzib* required patient cultivation over extended durations, so the novel demands slow immersive reading that refuses subordination to contemporary demands for rapid consumption and immediate gratification. Just as *tehzib* valued comprehensive intellectual engagement across multiple domains rather than narrow specialization, so the novel incorporates philosophical, theological, aesthetic, and historical discourses within single expansive narrative. Just as *tehzib* resisted instrumental rationality demanding that all activities demonstrate practical utility, so the novel

refuses to subordinate all narrative elements to plot advancement or character development.

Form thus becomes argument. The novel's structure does not merely represent or describe historical content. It enacts through formal means the values and practices that *tehzib* embodied, creating productive alignment where form and content mutually reinforce resistant cultural work. Readers who complete the novel's demanding journey have not merely learned about Delhi's culture through abstract description. They have participated, however partially and imperfectly, in aesthetic practices requiring the sustained attention, patient engagement, and comprehensive intellectual commitment that *tehzib* itself demanded.

Conclusion: Memory, Loss, and Literary Resistance

Faruqi's *The Mirror of Beauty* demonstrates that cultural resistance can operate through aesthetic means even when direct political channels have closed, preserving alternative frameworks for understanding value, beauty, and human dignity that refuse subordination to colonial modernity's instrumental rationalities. The novel reconstructs Delhi's *tehzib* with sophisticated awareness of such reconstruction's necessary incompleteness, accepting that imaginative synthesis must fill gaps where documentary evidence proves insufficient while insisting that this necessity does not invalidate the historical knowledge such reconstruction produces. *Tehzib* resisted not by preventing colonial conquest but by maintaining cultural forms that sustained collective identity and transmitted aesthetic knowledge across ruptures that destroyed the social institutions originally sustaining such knowledge.

Wazir Khanam's lifelong struggle "to choose for herself against all odds" (Faruqi 3) exemplifies what aesthetic resistance could and could not accomplish. She could not prevent her forced marriage or escape patriarchal structures that constrained her autonomy at every turn.

She could cultivate sophisticated aesthetic judgment and refined sensibility that granted her genuine status within Delhi's cultural hierarchies, accumulating social capital that she strategically deployed to expand her limited agency. She could maintain spaces of authentic selfhood through sophisticated management of the boundary between public performance and private interiority. She could preserve alternative frameworks for evaluating her circumstances that refused to accept dominant definitions of feminine propriety and appropriate behaviour. These achievements remained profoundly limited by structures of domination that aesthetic practice could not directly transform. They nevertheless constituted genuine resistance that sustained dignity and autonomy within oppression.

The novel's extraordinary formal ambitions enact through literary means the values *tehzib* embodied. Form becomes inseparable from argument. The novel does not merely describe historical content through neutral narrative vehicle. It performs through its structure the resistant cultural work it thematically defends, demanding from readers the sustained attention, patient engagement, and comprehensive intellectual commitment that *tehzib* itself required. This productive alignment of form and content creates aesthetic achievement that simultaneously functions as historical argument, literary performance, and political intervention.

The Mirror of Beauty preserves collective memory across temporal gaps where direct social transmission became impossible, sustaining knowledge of sophisticated civilization that colonial conquest destroyed. The work testifies both to the magnitude of this loss and to the immense labour such preservation requires. It acknowledges honestly the limitations of aesthetic resistance while insisting on its genuine significance. It refuses teleological consolations that would subordinate past suffering to future redemption, representing instead decline that

leads nowhere and loss that admits no compensation. It maintains that remembering matters profoundly regardless of practical outcomes, that aesthetic refinement possesses intrinsic value beyond instrumental utility, and that resistance can operate powerfully across generations through deliberate preservation of cultural memory against forces seeking its erasure.

Delhi's inhabitants devoted themselves to learning and cultivating arts even as political catastrophe destroyed their world. Faruqi continues their cultural project across more than a century by reconstructing through literary means the sophisticated civilization their labour created and sustained. The novel stands as monument to what was lost and testament to the possibility of recovery, accepting recovery's inevitable incompleteness while refusing to accept erasure as final.

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