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Chapter Three
CASTING DESPOTS IN DUTCH DRAMA: THE CASE OF NADIR SHAH IN VAN STEENWYK’S THAMAS KOELIKAN (1745)¹

Introduction

The conqueror-statesman Nadir Shah Afshar, otherwise known as Tahmasp Kuli Khan, caused a furore in the eighteenth-century world. If destiny had deemed him protagonist in the political theatre of Asia, the Dutch playwright Frans van Steenwyk in 1745 chose him as the lead character in his play Thamas Koelikan.² This literary piece was an example of the European obsession with the conqueror in the 1730s and 1740s.³ Numerous histories were published about Nadir Shah and new editions of older works rolled off the presses with updates of his latest victories and conquests and the European public relished it all. Describing the enthusiasm surrounding Nadir Shah, Frederick Bernard notes, “until 1740...and the galvanic deeds of Frederick (of Prussia), the one man whose exploits seized the attention of Europe and marked him as a ruler worthy of note was Kuli Kan, Shah of Persia.”⁴ As compelling as the heightened interest in the Persian ruler in the 1730s and 1740s is the association of Nadir Shah from the 1750s onwards with a phenomenon that China too, as we have seen, came to be associated with from the eighteenth century – Oriental Despotism. Visible in an array of European works including those of Byron, Tennyson, and John Stuart Mill, Nadir Shah came to symbolise Oriental Despotism at its worst and for centuries after, this image remained unchanged.⁵

¹ An earlier version of this chapter appeared as “Casting Despots in Dutch Drama: The Case of Nadir Shah in Van Steenwyk’s Thamas Koelikan,” in Indian Economic and Social History Review, Vol.4, No.2 (April, 2011), 241-286.
²Thamas Koelikan (Tahmasp Kuli Khan) meaning “Slave of Tahmasp” was the name that Nadir Shah acquired when he won the favour of the ruler of Persia, Shah Tahmasp in 1722. Laurence Lockhart, Nadir Shah : A Critical Study Based Mainly upon Contemporary Sources (Jalandhar: Asian Publishers, 1993), 26. Although Nadir is known to have discarded the name, Thamas Koelikan on assuming the throne of Persia, this name and its many variants continued to be used. P.J. Bearman, The Encyclopaedia of Islam (Leiden: Brill, 2005), see entry on Nadir Shah. Despite using the name Thamas Koelikan in the title, the playwright resorts to the name Nadir Shah when referring to the ruler in the text of the play. To avoid confusion, I use the name Thamas Koelikan when referring to the play itself and Nadir Shah when referring to his personage.
⁵See John Stuart Mill, The Subjection of Women (London: Longmans, Green, 1869), 61; Canto the Ninth. Verse XXXIII in George Byron’s Don Juan (published between 1819 and 1824) in Lord Byron, The Poetical Works of
The Plot (The Historical and the Literary)

In 1745, the well-known Amsterdam playwright Frans van Steenwyk published and staged his play, *Thamas Koelikan*. Unlike his more popular plays such as *Ada, Gravin van Holland en Zeeland* (1754), *Thamas Koelikan* was in many ways evasive. The play, we learn, was not popular. The Schouwburg authorities decided to stage the play only three times in 1645 (the year that the play was scripted) and once again in the following decade. Little known in its own time, the play has elicited no scholarly interest apart from customary inclusions in encyclopaedias of Dutch literature.

*Thamas Koelikan* was based on the story of Nadir Shah’s invasion of India, six years prior to the scripting of the play. In 1738, having usurped the Persian throne and amassed spectacular politico-military victories in West Asia, Nadir Shah Afshar stood poised to invade Mughal territory. The once great empire that lay before Nadir Shah in this crucial period had lost much of its vigour – so much so, in fact, that the paradigm of decline, has until recently, been the dominant lens for viewing this century of Mughal rule. During the three decade reign of Muhammad Shah from 1719 to 1748, the court was riddled by factional politics, provincial governors of regions such as Bengal and Awadh were gradually detaching themselves from imperial control and Mughal territory became victim to frequent Maratha incursions from the Deccan. It was amidst these troubled times that a Persian army led by

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*The title of the original reads Frans van Steenwyk, *Thamas Koelikan, of de verovering van het Mogolsche rijk* (Amsterdam: Izaak Duin, 1745). I use the republished version of the play: C.G. Brouwer, ed. *De Oostersche Schouwburg, deel 3: Achmet en Thamas Koelikan* (Amsterdam: D’ Fluyte Rarob, 1993). All references to the content of the play are in keeping with the latter publication.


*Ibid., 199; Apart from two unpublished articles on the theme by Brouwer, other works only briefly refer to the play. For instance see Jan te Winkel, *De ontwikkeling der Nederlandsche letterkunde*, deel 5, 2nd ed. (Haarlem: De erven F.Bohn, 1924), 292-93.

*The 1730s witnessed the ascent of Nadir Shah as statesman and military commander. After donning the role of regent to the son of the deposed ruler, the Safavid Shah Tahmasp for four years, he assumed the throne in 1736. In these years he undertook immensely successful military campaigns against the Turks and the Russians. Jadunath Sarkar, *Nadir Shah in India* (Calcutta: Naya Prokash, 1973), 14-15; Lockhart, *Nadir Shah*, 80-95.

*Present day historians have offered several explanations for the decline of the Mughal Empire ranging from religious policies of later monarchs to defective revenue strategies. In recent years, the paradigm of “decline” has been increasingly contested with scholars such as Muzaffar Alam preferring to read the affliction of Mughal India in the eighteenth century, as “reconfiguration” rather than decline. Muzaffar Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707-48* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 299-318. For an overview of the historiography of Mughal decline, see 2-10.

*Aurangzeb (r.1658-1707) has often been regarded as the last of the capable Mughal rulers. Between the death of Aurangzeb in 1707 and the accession of Muhammad Shah in 1719, five Mughal princes sat on the throne of Delhi. For a discussion of Mughal decline in the period, see John F. Richards, *The Mughal Empire* (Cambridge:
Nadir Shah, with his son Nasr Allah Mirza attacked in May 1738. The invasion began with the capture of Kabul and Peshawar but it was only with the capitulation of Lahore in January 1739 that the Mughal court woke up to the fast approaching threat. The confrontation between the two armies culminated in the historical battle of Karnal (24 February 1739), which resulted in the decisive defeat of the mammoth yet inferior Mughal army. With the Persian blockade on the Mughal camp still intact, both parties entered into talks over a settlement with the Mughal noble Nizam al-Mulk as mediator. When the negotiations failed, the emperor and his nobles were taken prisoner and Nadir Shah set forth for Delhi. Nadir’s peaceful entry into the capital assumed a violent turn when a rumour of the Persian ruler’s murder took root in the city. The invading army soon became a target of the city’s mobs. Persian retaliation followed. In what has often been seen as a grim re-enactment of Tamerlane’s sack of Delhi in 1398, over twenty thousand residents lost their lives. After the riches of Delhi had been siphoned off and a marriage bringing together the Mughal and Persian royal houses was conducted, Nadir Shah restored Muhammad Shah to the Mughal throne and on 16 May 1739 set forth on his journey back to Isfahan.

Among the many who watched the invasion of India with bated breath were the servants of the Dutch East India Company, which by the mid eighteenth century had been trading in the Mughal province of Bengal for over a century in raw silk, textiles, sugar, opium and saltpetre. With the establishment of its first trading post in Bengal in the 1630s, the VOC’s trade in the region soon grew. Farmans (entitlements) were acquired from the Mughals permitting them to establish trade and Dutch factories were set up at numerous places such as Kasimbazar, Patna and Chinsura with its headquarters at Hoogly. Patna, in Bihar, was another important centre. Apart from its significance in the realm of trade, the settlement, owing to its proximity to the Mughal capital, was an important source of


13Nasr Allah Mirza was the second son of Nadir Shah.
14For the account of Nadir Shah’s invasion into Mughal territory, I employ Lockhart, Nadir Shah, 122-55.
15Sarkar, Nadir Shah in India, 75, 85.
16Om Prakash, Encyclopaedic History of Indian Freedom Movement Series: Dutch in India (New Delhi, India: Anmol, 2002), 271.
17George D. Winius and Marcus P.M. Vink, The Merchant-Warrior Pacified : The VOC (the Dutch East India Company) and Its Changing Political Economy in India (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991), 22-23.
information for the Dutch about developments in the Mughal heartland. The Bengal trade of the VOC proved lucrative. Raw silk and opium, which were both products that the VOC relied on their settlement in Bengal to procure, were indispensable and highly profitable commodities in the Company trade in Asia. While the Company was able to secure and maintain an edge over its rivals in the Bengal trade in the seventeenth century, the later period proved less favourable. Their trade in the region began to contract and as the gloom set in into the Company affairs in Bengal in the eighteenth century; the VOC was in for more bad news. As a rule, conditions of trade were linked to the well-being of the kingdom and the invasion of India by Nadir Shah soon announced itself.

The plot that Van Steenwyk settled on for his play, Thamas Koelikan bore semblances of similarity and difference to the historical invasion that he modelled his play on. The drama dwells on the aftermath of Nadir Shah’s successful siege of the Mughal city of Lahore. Instead of proceeding ahead and conquering all of Indostan as any astute statesman would, Nadir Shah renounces his future plans for conquest and his claim to the spoils of war. He presents the Mughal ruler, Mahomet with a generous proposition – the marital union between his son Nasser and the Mughal princess, Milko. Mahomet however fails to appreciate the generosity of his benefactor and plots to assassinate him. In the classic battle between good and evil that ensues, good prevails. Nadir escapes unscathed and even conquers his burning desire to punish Mahomet for his treachery. The curtains fall with Nadir calling for peace between the empires of Persia and Indostan.

In view of Nadir Shah’s association with despotism, the backdrop of Van Steenwyk’s play seems ideal. No spectator could have demanded a setting more congenial than war to witness a despot engage in the darkest of human deeds of slaughter and blood-shed. Paradoxically, though, the playwright involves himself in a counter-exercise. Van Steenwyk’s

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21 Ashim Dasgupta observes a correlation between the eighteenth century economic crisis and the decline of the Mughal dynasty. Dasgupta, “Trade and Politics in 18th century India,” 46.
22 The spellings of the names of characters in the play vary from the standard spellings of the names of these historical figures as we know them today. I retain the spellings/names employed by Van Steenwyk when referring to the characters in the play, and use the standard spelling when referring to the historical personages. I make an exception in the case of the historical figure Shah Tahmasp, the ruler of Persia restored to the throne by Nadir Shah in 1729 and later deposed and executed by the latter in 1732. Although the play uses the name Thamas, I employ the name Shah Tahmasp to not confuse the ruler with Nadir Shah who was known as Thamas Koelikan (Tahmasp Kuli Khan).
Nadir Shah exemplifies not barbaric bloodlust but compassion. The playwright creates for his protagonist an image of righteousness, which finds expression in the deeds of the conqueror. Nadir Shah’s desire for conquest is said to have been driven neither by greed nor the lust for territory. The siege is legitimately pressed by Nadir’s need to punish Mahomet for his violation of their treaty. This covenant, which pledged Mughal support for the Persian kingdom at a time of distress, was disgracefully violated by Mahomet, who thereby “rightfully” inviting upon his kingdom, the wrath of Nadir Shah’s forces. In creating his protagonist, Van Steenwyk does more than invest his actions with righteousness; he shows Nadir Shah to be extremely compassionate. Although Mahomet shows himself to be completely undeserving of Nadir’s trust and forgiveness on more instances than one, the Persian does not punish the Mughal or seek reprisal. Also bearing witness to Nadir Shah’s innate virtue is his retained respect for his adversary, Mahomet. When Nasser (Nadir’s son) mocks Mahomet in Nadir’s presence, Nadir reprimands him:

Do not despise him [Mahomet] too much, lament his misfortune.
If I were raised in lechery like he,
Lived in lavish grandeur and wantonness,
And lent a foolish ear to a flattering court,
I shall be no less than he, haughty, disloyal and cowardly.23

In Van Steenwyk’s frame, the greatness of the Persian ruler is not extolled by the personage of Nadir Shah alone. Every character in the play contributes to the aura of magnanimity associated with Nadir, be it through Nasser’s boundless respect for his father, the unconcealed praise of the Mughal courtier Nizamelmoluk’s (Nizam al-Mulk) for the ruler, or Mahomet’s recognition of his adversary’s virtue. In his abhorrence of war, predilection for peace and chivalry Nadir Shah in the play is an aberration and qualifies in the least for providing the prototype of Oriental Despotism. Nadir Shah is instead endowed with all the trappings of an able ruler. The rationale for such a representation is not difficult to discern. In his preface to Thamas Koelikan, Van Steenwyk wrote, “it is desired that such compassion [that shown by Nadir Shah] is replicated by the Christian kings,” thus implying that the playwright regarded the nature of governance enjoyed by Nadir’s subjects was far superior to that experienced in Europe.24

23Brouwer, Achmet en Thamas Koelikan, 109, verses 51-55.
24Ibid., 104, 197.
Although Van Steenwyk refrains from investing the character of Nadir Shah with the traits of an Oriental Despot, it is clear that Van Steenwyk is not ignorant of the trope, but is instead painfully aware of it. When showcasing his understanding of kingship, Van Steenwyk posits Nadir’s governance in opposition to a degenerate condition of government similar to Oriental Despotism in which the former emerges victorious. While Shah Tahmasp, the Persian ruler who was deposed by Nadir Shah only receives passing mention, it is in the character of Mahomet that the trope of Oriental Despotism is constructed. Nadir is courageous, self-effacing and virtuous while Mahomet drowns in a myriad of vices: wantonness, effeminacy and cowardice. He embodies the Eastern propensity for laziness and debauchery and reveling in his seraglio. However, this degenerate condition is not irreversible and can be remedied and Nadir is the cure to this condition of depravity. Resolving the situation in Persia with his able governance, his redemption of India takes on the form of “rectified” restoration. Before leaving India, Nadir imparts valuable advice to Muhammad Shah:

Will you cast away the splendour and folly from your palace now that your disasters have bred on this luxury?
Will you, through honourable governance
Show your people that you have become fortunate as a result of your disaster?

Van Steenwyk’s *Thamas Koelikan* thus envisions the invasion of Mughal territory as an epic contest between able rule and Oriental Despotism in which Nadir Shah, the invader becomes guide and teacher in instituting good governance in the realm of Mahomet, the quintessential Oriental Despot and reluctant pupil.

Incidentally, this characterisation that Van Steenwyk sold to the public reflected a contemporary view of Muhammad and Nadir Shah. Accounts of Nadir Shah published in Europe in the 1730s and 1740s lauded the exploits and genius of the Persian nearly as much as Van Steenwyk’s *Thamas Koelikan* did. The play’s only point of departure from other contemporary works was that they did not share Van Steenwyk’s unbridled laudation for Nadir. But although others disapproved of Nadir’s complicity in deeds he had little to be proud of, they were impressed by his conquests, capabilities on the battlefield and sense of justice. This tendency is best captured in the work titled *The History of Thamas Kouli Kan*.

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25Ibid., 197-98.
26Ibid., 187, verses 1569-72.
Sophi of Persia, published in the year 1740.\textsuperscript{27} When chronicling the suppression of dissent within Nadir’s own dominions, the work underlined the morbidity of the punishment meted out to “the rebel Ashraf whom he [Nadir Shah] took prisoner and beheaded, after having put out his eyes.”\textsuperscript{28} Yet the same work, in a rather contradictory vein insisted that Nadir Shah “imitate[d] Tamerlan in what he had extraordinary and laudable, without any of his ill qualities.”\textsuperscript{29} Van Steenwyk’s view of Nadir Shah as virtually inimitable in the virtues he possessed was also not without precedents.\textsuperscript{30} Dennis De Coetlogon’s satire \textit{Diogenes Rambles}, published in 1743, enumerated the positive traits of Nadir Shah and insisted that his character was “a proper lesson of instruction… to some of our sullen European princes, who, except an intriguing minister, or a favourite concubine, can never be said to converse with anything in human shape.”\textsuperscript{31} Not only did contemporaries echo Van Steenwyk’s portrayal of Nadir Shah, but they also endorsed his caricature of the conqueror’s political opponents. In these works too, Muhammad Shah and Shah Tahmasp represented the depths of degeneration while Nadir was the epitome of good governance. Openly airing their disdain for Shah Tahmasp, who was “besieged by women” and Muhammad Shah who engaged in similar acts of debauchery, these works agreed that their deteriorating governments demanded replacement and soon.\textsuperscript{32} Van Steenwyk therefore was not alone in his narrative strategy of situating the trope of Oriental Despotism on the weak shoulders of Muhammad Shah and Shah Tahmasp. His contemporaries had done the same.

Despite the complicity of the works of the period in furthering the Oriental trope, it is their perspective of Nadir Shah that merits attention. These works were yet to formulate the association of Nadir Shah solely with arbitrariness, whim, and utmost cruelty. They rest on the view that if Nadir was a man of vice, he was also a man of worth whose merits outweighed his faults. The incrimination of the individual and the association of Nadir with his vices alone is a product of subsequent decades. Francois Lambert in his 1753 publication,

\textsuperscript{27}\textit{The History of Thamas Kouli Kan, Sophi of Persia. Translated from the French} (London: Printed for J. Brindley, 1740).

\textsuperscript{28}Ibid., 102; Ashraf was a Ghalsai leader who instituted Afghan rule in Persia when he overthrew the Safavids in 1725. He remained king until his ouster and death in the hands of Nadir Shah in 1729. Lockhart, \textit{Nadir Shah}, 42-45 and 334.

\textsuperscript{29}\textit{The History of Thamas Kouli Kan, Sophi of Persia}, 107.

\textsuperscript{30}Brouwer, \textit{Achmet en Thamas Koelikan}, 104, 197.

\textsuperscript{31}Dennis De Coetlogon, \textit{Diogenes’s Rambles or, Humorous Characters of the Most Noted People at Present in the World} (London: Printed for T. Cooper, 1743), 27.

\textsuperscript{32}\textit{The History of Thamas Kouli Kan, Sophi of Persia}, 103; James Fraser, \textit{The History of Nadir Shah: Formerly called Thamas Kuli Khan, the Present Emperor of Persia}, 2nd ed. (London: Printed for A. Millar, 1742), 131. Although the reference to the slothful nature of Muhammad features in Fraser’s account, as contents of correspondence between Delhi and Kabul, the letter appears to be a reconstruction rather than a translation of actual correspondence.
Curious Observations, claimed that “no prince ever governed Persia in so despotic a manner,” and by the late eighteenth century, Nadir Shah was understood as the “Asiatic standard,” a benchmark of cruelty against which the depravities of other Oriental princes was measured.  

While writers of the latter half of the eighteenth century had begun associating Nadir Shah with Oriental Despotism, those of the nineteenth century delighted in it. Lord Byron underlined the arbitrariness of the “Costive Sophy” in his epic poem Don Juan and in envisioning the magnitude of disaster perpetrated by Nadir in India, Tennyson wrote “the land like an Eden before them is fair, but behind them a wilderness dreary and bare.” Undoubtedly, literary works had fallen prey to a particular straight jacketing in the representation of Nadir Shah, but so too did works of history. Even Laurence Lockhart’s scholarly study Nadir Shah: A Critical Study Based on Contemporary Sources does not escape the lures of this enticing representation. In the opening statement of his work, he refers to Nadir, together with others “who overran vast stretches of country ravaging, killing and destroying” as “scourges of humanity.” With time, therefore, the virtues associated with the ruler such as industriousness and magnanimity which had earned him the respect of his contemporaries had faded into oblivion.

While Nadir Shah does not seem to have elicited the interest of later Dutch literary works, the separation of the conqueror from a flattering image of righteousness in the 1750s and after is a significant feature in the works of British poets, authors, and historians. The subsequent image of the monstrous and blood-thirsty invader may thus be attributed to the demands that colonialism, and more specifically British colonialism in territories such as India, made upon the characterisation of the Orient and its rulers. While Metcalf speaks of how the notion of Oriental Despotism moulded imperial consciousness in British India, studies on the works of literary figures such as Tennyson convincingly demonstrate the complicity of these literary works in providing colonialism with intellectual respectability.
How, then, is the sympathetic wave of the 1730s and 1740s to be understood? Several trains of thought are worthy of consideration. At one level, as much as the Saidian view of the late eighteenth century as marking the rise of institutionalised Orientalism helps us explain the later vilification of Nadir Shah, it also enables us to understand the earlier benign view of the conqueror. As works authored in the mid eighteenth century, they were products of a phase in which European views of Asia were still fluid and mutable unlike the period to follow. At another level, once again having recourse to Said, “sympathetic identification” in the history of literary representations of the Orient was not entirely new.38 In his words, “an eighteenth-century mind could breach the doctrinal walls erected between the West and Islam and see hidden elements of kinship between himself and the Orient.”39 Stepping back from the orbit of Saidian Orientalism, two other biographical factors should be considered. The first is a perspective repeatedly aired in contemporary accounts which modern day scholars also endorse – that Nadir Shah shortly before his demise “lapsed into obsessive avarice, rage, and cruelty” thereby becoming a leader to be detested.40 While this understanding helps explain the subsequent demonization of Nadir Shah, it remains to be probed whether the ailment of the Persian contributed to the image or whether it was the image which subsequently gave rise to such a characterization. Secondly, the death of monarchs is known to lead to profound changes in their portrayal.41 Jurgen Osterhammel in his study on Nadir Shah identifies the demise of the conqueror as the fault line that separated the genial portrayals of Nadir from the severe ones that followed.42 To a discerning eye, this inference would imply that the consequences of Nadir Shah’s death had a bearing on how he was later perceived. Despite the remarkable deeds of his career where he locked horns with three noted empires in the day, the Ottoman, the Mughal and the Russian, Nadir Shah had failed to institute a dynasty or consolidate his conquests and instead left Persia in the same weakened state in which he

4 (2000), 670-71. It is also important to note that simultaneous to the demise of Nadir’s image of a man of virtue, was the exclusion of Nadir Shah from the annals of history. Michael Axworthy dates Nadir’s descent to anonymity to the Victorian era. Michael Axworthy, The Sword of Persia: Nader Shah, From Tribal Warrior to Conquering Tyrant (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), xvi.
39Ibid; Endorsing the peculiarity of the epoch for the manner in which it regarded the Orient, Rousseau and Porter suggest that “the exotic provided a potent focus for vicarious identity.” G.S. Rousseau and Roy Porter, Exoticism in the Enlightenment (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 13. Other Oriental personages who were rehabilitated in the period included Tamerlane. See John Richardson, “Nicholas Rowe’s Tamerlane and the Martial Ideal,” Modern Language Quarterly 69, 2 (2008), 286.
40See Lockhart, Nadir Shah, 257; Axworthy, The Sword of Persia: Nader Shah, From Tribal Warrior to Conquering Tyrant, xv (the quotation).
41For the illustration of a similar trend in the characterization of the rulers of Mysore in Southern India, Hyder Ali and his son Tipu Sultan, see Amal Chatterjee, Representations of India 1740-1840: The Creation of India in the Colonial Imagination (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1998), 201.
found it. The admiration for Nadir Shah hence, had thrived on the contemporariness of his valour and victories. So long as Nadir continued on his conquests unhindered, he was gazed at with a star-struck eye. With his death however, the transience of his exploits became evident, his charm wore off, and he yielded to the stifling embrace of Oriental Despotism.

Van Steenwyk, Dryden, and their Sophies

If Nadir’s waltz with virtue in *Thamas Koelikan* is to be discerned, a comparison of the play with a kin on the other side of the English Channel becomes irresistible. Van Steenwyk’s *Thamas Koelikan* bears an uncanny resemblance to an English play, John Dryden’s *Aurang-Zebe* (1675), written seven decades earlier. The parallels between the two are striking. Both plays had Oriental monarchs for protagonists who were contemporaries of their respective playwrights. Both were also surprisingly positive appraisals of rulers who were otherwise condemned for their cruelty and vice. In a compelling study of Dryden’s play *Aureng-Zebe*, Balachandra Rajan demonstrates Dryden’s complicity in what he calls “the Orient’s infernalization.” This, he argues, is because Dryden had overstepped his limits as far as his characterization of Aurangzeb was concerned. In a depiction that was a far cry from how contemporaries perceived the Mughal, he cast Aurangzeb as the virtuous monarch. In the process, Dryden is said to have “define[d] India as the site of the utterly other” and fulfilled the self-serving intent of “construct[ing] examples for England.” In the light of extraordinary similarities, *Thamas Koelikan* may be subjected to a similar study. Van Steenwyk maintains a wilful silence about the massacre that Nadir undertook in Delhi and instead presented his protagonist as someone who relinquished war for peace. The playwright similarly submerges the tales of loot and plunder that Nadir perpetrated in the Mughal capital and presents Nadir as someone who took from Delhi, what was rightfully his. Also paradoxical is the case of Milko, who in Van Steenwyk’s play is the niece of the Mughal ruler, Mahomet. Milko, in reality, was the unfortunate wife of Muhammad, who in order to

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43John Dryden’s *Aureng-Zebe* is an English restoration drama written in 1675 based on the Mughal ruler Aurangzeb who ruled Mughal empire between 1658 and 1707.
46Ibid., 8, 68.
47This section builds on a number of leads provided by Brouwer in his pithy epilogue to the play in the discrepancies that feature in Van Steenwyk’s work.
48To quote Voltaire: “He carried away more treasures from Deli, than the Spaniards took at the conquest of Mexico.” Voltaire, *The General History and State of Europe*, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: Printed by Sands etc, 1758), 384. Also see Iqtedar Alam Khan, “The Middle Classes in the Mughal Empire,” *Social Scientist* 5, 1 (1976), 33.
save her honour took her own life before Nadir’s forces had reached the gates of Delhi.⁴⁹ Van Steenwyk’s Milko ironically is the reason why India is spared. Enamoured by her loyalty to her kingdom, Nadir Shah not only renounces his plans of conquest but also unites princess Milko with his own son in matrimony.⁵⁰

Also significant is that although Nadir’s siege of Lahore in January 1739 forms the backdrop of Van Steenwyk’s drama, the thematic props to which he resorts in weaving his tale are borrowed from a later event, Nadir’s entry into Delhi in March 1739. The marriage of Nadir’s son to a Mughal princess, the rumour of Nadir Shah’s death, and the suicide of the queen (which the play refers to in passing) were all episodes which took place within the context of Nadir’s expedition to Delhi.⁵¹ Curiously, when Van Steenwyk writes about the siege of Lahore liberally borrowing from Nadir’s expedition to Delhi, he glosses over the bloodbath and massacre that ensued. He justifies the terror unleashed by the Persian conqueror as righteous reprisal, and the gore that accompanied it is stifled. The siege of Lahore that features in Van Steenwyk’s work is hence in actuality; the fangless and tamer tale of Delhi with its more sinister aspects washed and ironed out. So, when Rajan states that Dryden’s *Aurang-Zebe* “ignore[s] the events in India that the text overwrites and comprehensively reverses,” Van Steenwyk’s *Thamas Koelikan* can be said to be guilty of precisely the same charges.⁵²

Rajan involves himself in yet another exercise, which is the comparative study of Dyden’s literary work and its source. He reveals that Dryden’s representation of the historical figure Aurangzeb departs radically from that depicted in its source, Francois Bernier’s travel account titled *The History of the Great Revolutions of the Empire of the Great Mogol*. This complete denial of its source by the drama *Aurang-Zebe* fortifies Rajan’s claim that “Dryden pillage[d] Indian history.”⁵³ If one imposes a similar study on *Thamas Koelikan*, one encounters Van Steenwyk’s forthright reference to the source of his work. Although the author omits mention of its title, it is likely that the work in question is a Dutch account, *Verhaal wegens den inval* published in the year that Van Steenwyk attributes to the

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⁵⁰ Contemporary texts no doubt chronicle the marriage of Nadir’s son, Nasr Allah to a Mughal princess. She nevertheless remains anonymous in these accounts. *A Genuine History of Nadir-Cha*, 44; Brouwer, *Achmet en Thamas Koelikan*, 197.

⁵¹ While many sub-plots were drawn from the events which originally took place in Delhi, others episodes as Brouwer notes took place in Karnal. Brouwer, *Achmet en Thamas Koelikan*, 197.

⁵² Rajan, “Appropriating India,” 70.

⁵³ Ibid., 76.
publication of his source – 1740.\textsuperscript{54} The *Verhaal* was subsequently translated into English the following year as *A Genuine History of Nadir-Cha*.\textsuperscript{55} As the source to Van Steenwyk’s play, the *Verhaal* is therefore the key to the character sketches of the two Asian potentates in *Thamas Koelikan*.

**Passage to (Mughal) India: Information Transfer and its Resultant Discourses**

The *Verhaal* no doubt contributes to the theme of representation. But it also sheds light on the intricate process of information transfer whereby political events in Asia shortly afterwards became published news in Europe. This is because the *Verhaal* was originally compiled in the Dutch factory in Hoogly (Bengal) on the orders of Jan Albert Sichterman, director of the Dutch possessions in Bengal from 1734 to 1744.\textsuperscript{56} This manuscript was later dispatched in 1739 as a part of the VOC documentation from the Dutch factory in Bengal to the High Government in Batavia and subsequently to Amsterdam where it was published in 1740 as the *Verhaal*.\textsuperscript{57} The other East India connection is that the patron of Van Steenwyk’s play

\textsuperscript{54} Verhaal wegens den inval van den Persiaanschen Schach Nadir anders Thamas Gouli Gan in het Mogolsche Ryk, geduurende de jaaren 1738 en 1739 (Amsterdam: Harmanus Uytwerf, 1740). The title translates as “An Account of the Invasion of the Mughal Kingdom by the Persian Shah Nadir otherwise known as Thomas Gouli Gan in the years 1738 and 1739,” and the work will henceforth be referred to as the *Verhaal*. I thank Jos Gommans for drawing my attention to this work. Van Steenwyk mentions in his foreword that he employs two works to write his play, the influences of both of which, he claims are evident in his work. He however claims that his reliance on the second source was marginal. Brouwer, *Achmet en Thamas Koelikan*, 104. My understanding of the *Verhaal* as the source to the play contradicts Brouwer’s reading of *The History of Thamas Kouli Kan, Sophi of Persia (1740)* as the source to the play. My positing the *Verhaal* as the source to Van Steenwyk’s *Thamas Koelikan* is justified on the grounds that the *Verhaal* offers the possibility of reconstructing the sources it relied on to the minutest detail indicating that the *Verhaal* was an “original” account and not a derivative of other works circulating in Europe in the period. The most telling detail which establishes beyond doubt that the *Verhaal* was the source to Van Steenwyk’s *Thamas Koelikan* is the *Verhaal*’s reference to Milko (as the wife of Muhammad Shah but reference to the name nevertheless which Van Steenwyk borrows), a feature absent in the other texts published in 1740, the year that Van Steenwyk ascribes the publication of his source to. *Verhaal*, 95; NA, VOC 2455, fol. 263r. The only other works in the period which carry the name Milko were the English translation of the *Verhaal* titled *A Genuine History of Nadir-Cha*, Present Shah or Emperor of Persia formerly call’d Thamas Kouli-Kan (1741) and *The History of Thamas Kouli Kan, Sophi of Persia (1740)* attributed to De Claustre. One suspects that this volume of the *Sophi of Persia* which Brouwer identifies as the source to the play borrowed substantially from the *Verhaal*. Not only does it make reference to Muhammad Shah’s wife Milko (also mentioned by Brouwer), but it also incorporates a Persian letter sent by Nadir Shah to the Governor Hattembeecq (Hatim Beg) which the account explicitly mentions was received in Bengal. I base these inferences on my consultation of the Italian translation of the work. André de Claustre, *Istoria di Thamas-Kouli-Kan, Sofi di Persia. Tradotta dal Francese, vol. 2* (Londra, 1741), 85, 5. This second volume, as the title page of the account shows, was published in 1741; For the said letter sent from Nadir Shah to Hatim Beg in the *Verhaal*, see pp. 13-21.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{55} *A Genuine History of Nadir-Cha*.

\textsuperscript{56} See NA, VOC 8787, Bengalien, pp. 271-350. While the title of the *Verhaal* does not reveal Sichterman’s role in its compilation, the title-page of the 1741 English translation of the work, *A Genuine History of Nadir-Cha* does.

\textsuperscript{57} Two copies of the draft version of the *Verhaal* are NA, VOC 2455, Bengalien 2 fls. 236-288 and VOC 8787, Bengalien, pp.271-350 titled “A treatise concerning the invasion of the Mughal Kingdom by the Persian King Nadir Shah in the years 1738 and 1739, his conduct in the capital Delhi and his departure to Persia extracted from successively received letters etc written in the Persian language on the orders of the Director of Bengal, Jan
Johannes Abeleven was a servant of the VOC, stationed at Surat and incidentally also at Bengal. His brother, Arnoldus Abeleven after initiating his career with the VOC in Asia concluded service as one of the Gentlemen Seventeen – a position that he held for eighteen years and one can only presume that this had an impact on the speed with which the manuscript of the Verhaal reached the printing press.

The Verhaal is a fairly succinct account. It commences with a comprehensive sketch of Nadir’s rise to power followed by an extensive engagement with his invasion of Mughal territory. The work concludes with Nadir’s sojourn in the Mughal capital and his journey back to Isfahan. The narrative of the Verhaal is interspersed with translations of letters originally in the Persian language. Some of these letters also feature in the appendix of the work. A significant number of these letters are Raqams, or edicts, issued by Nadir Shah to his elder son Rida-kuli Mirza, who was entrusted with the viceroyalty of Persia in Nadir’s absence, as well as to other Persian governors and his subjects informing them of his victories on Mughal soil. Other translations include reconstructions of the correspondence between Nadir and Muhammad, and excerpts from a diary kept in Isfahan. Quite similar to how other contemporary European works imagined Nadir Shah and distinct from how Van Steenwyk’s Thamas Koelikan perceived the ruler, the Persian on the Verhaal’s palate is not entirely the epitome of virtue. The Verhaal instead invites its readers to view Nadir Shah as a particularly complex individual. Evidently in awe of Nadir Shah’s achievements, the author details numerous instances of his benevolence such as his magnanimity in treating his vanquished adversary with the respect due to a person of his status. Yet, the account refuses to eulogise its protagonist and does not shrink from enumerating tales of the cruelty that Nadir perpetrated in Delhi. The morbidity of Nadir’s actions is captured in the description the Verhaal provides of the manner in which the Persian reacted to the large-scale killings in the capital. The account observes that when the Persian soldiers were about their work slaying the residents of Delhi, Nadir Shah was not agitated and ruffled in the least. He bore the countenance of a spectator watching a pantomime. The distinct shades of grey evident in the depiction of Nadir Shah are
conspicuously absent in the account’s sketch of the Mughal ruler. Muhammad Shah is not only shown to have been irresolute, untrustworthy, and a slave to the opinions of all and sundry, but the Verhaal is also aware that the image of the vanquished monarch cannot be complete without depicting the markings of an Oriental Despot. Muhammad Shah is thus credited with a standard Eastern upbringing, in the midst of the harem, which quite naturally told on the qualities he later came to possess. He was fainthearted, effeminate and his mannerisms were “living examples of the braggery of Eastern rulers and the conceit of the Mughal emperors.” Quite predictably, his bloated pride receives a beating with Nadir Shah’s invasion leaving him a shaken if not wiser ruler. With the Mughal ruler grovelling in such pitiable traits, the disdain with which the Verhaal sees the emperor is all too obvious.

The Verhaal is unsettling for several reasons. Its presumed insight into the character traits of the two monarchs and proximity in time to the episode it narrates raises questions about the informants and sources that inform the original manuscript and the published work. The title page of the Verhaal indicates that the account was “translated and compiled from Persian letters” allocating to the letters which accompany the work, a primal role in the construction of its narrative. Yet a close reading of these letters suggests otherwise. This correspondence functions only as a prop for the Verhaal; it devotes little space to the characterization of the two rulers and its contribution to the narrative is marginal. The primary source for the Verhaal is instead to be found in the archives of the VOC in a stream of correspondence that the Dutch factory in Hoogly received between October 1738 and September 1739, which was roughly the period of the invasion. The character of this set of letters differs considerably from the Persian letters appended to the Verhaal. The latter are predominantly Persian newsletters issued to Persian governors and the Persian public and

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61Ibid., 39; NA, VOC 2455, fol. 245v.
62...vertaalt en opgestelt uit Persiaansche brieven...” Verhaal, frontpage.
63 Endorsing the above inference is NA, VOC 2455, “Letter dated 17 November 1739 from Bengal addressed to the Gentlemen Seventeen in the United Provinces,” fols. 3v-4r. It reads, “We take the liberty of referring to the appended copies of the said letters, which were dispatched on February 10th, 20th...this year which together comprise a complete description of all that has occurred in this kingdom since 30th October last year. Since we last had the opportunity of writing to your Honor, a remarkable invasion has taken place where the Persian King Thamas Coulijchan or Nadir Cha (as he now calls himself) has with a handful of soldiers defeated the Mughal army which was unparalleled in numbers. The Mughal was forced to cede his entire kingdom and all he possessed. Such is mentioned in the accompanying account which has been [compiled] from successive letters from Delhi which have been received here and has for a large part, been confirmed by the Regams (Raqams) received from Gamron by boat which have duly been incorporated in the appendix.” This description is however misleading on one account. Its reference to Delhi as the source of the correspondence and Persian as the language of correspondence is not to be taken at face value. As later discussions should demonstrate, the letters originated from various parts of the Mughal empire and it is also unlikely that all the correspondence that Hoogly received was in the Persian language (as mentioned in the front-page of the Verhaal), primarily because they were also in receipt of letters authored by Europeans. This second charge however is a speculation.
relayed to Hoogly from the Dutch factory in Gamron (Bandar Abbas). Only a few of these letters make an appearance in the Company documentation in Hoogly outside the Verhaal. On the other hand, the letters that constitute a source for the Verhaal were written by miscellaneous authors residing in various parts of the Mughal Empire in Persian, the language of the Mughal elite in the period. The translations of these letters were subsequently incorporated in the Company archives as letters and papers that Batavia received from Bengal. The second source for the Verhaal is the Falck manuscript, which comprises a lengthy correspondence dispatched to the Dutch factory in Patna. This manuscript never made its way into the official archives of the VOC and features instead in the private papers of a VOC servant in Bengal, Otto Willem Falck.

The fact that the Verhaal written in the Dutch factory in Bengal drew from twenty-four letters in all, all of which pertained to the invasion and were received by the VOC in the course of a year alone, indicates the graveness with which the Dutch in Bengal viewed Nadir Shah’s expedition. The Dutch indeed had every reason to be anxious. In the least, the invasion meant the disruption of trade routes rendering it unsafe for travelling traders with armies fanning the countryside and the Company possessions such as Patna, which were vulnerable to attack, would need additional defences. Worse still, like the implications the Manchu conquest had for China, Nadir’s invasion could result in a change of guard in Delhi with the overthrow of the existing Mughal dynasty making additional demands on the Company if they sought to stay afloat. New alliances would have to be fostered, existing privileges renewed and expensive embassies organised to the court bearing even more valuable gifts. If under

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64 See previous footnote.
65 See NA, VOC 2427, follows page 549 but not assigned a number; NA, VOC 2399, fols. 214-220.
66 Most of these letters despite providing a wealth of information have neither been studied nor employed by historians. The only study which incorporates some letters (two to be precise) of this collection as correspondence also received in the Dutch factory in Surat is Willem Floor, “New Facts on Nadir Shah’s Campaign in India,” in Iran and Iranian Studies: Essays in honour of Iraj Afshar, ed. Kambiz Eslami (Princeton: Zagros, 1998).
67 O.W. Falck’s (1738-1814) career is a classic example of rising from positions of modest standing within the Company apparatus to finally rise to the apex. Having set sail to Asia in 1756, he held very forgettable posts in the Company’s settlements in Bengal. He ended his association with the enterprise as one of the Bewindhebbers of the Company. Lequin, Het personeel van de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie 255; Jos Gommans, Lennart Bes, and Gijs Kruijtzer, Dutch Sources on South Asia c. 1600 – 1825: Bibliography and Archival Guide to the National Archives at The Hague (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001), 137; The Falck manuscript comprises of two sheaves, of which the second constitutes the relevant source in the context. The first is a five page letter titled Brief geschreven door een geheimschrijver van zekere ambassadeur tot Constantinopelen betreffende Thamas Coulichan. The prospect of this letter as having constituted a source is likely but because it provides a sketch of Nadir Shah’s early life, it could have informed no more than the first three pages of the Verhaal. See NA, Archives of O.W. Falck. 2.21.006.48, Inv. No.5.
68 The Company took active steps to beef up security in Patna in the period. NA, VOC 8785, “Report from Bengal dated 30 October, 1738,” p. 415. The British and French were confronted with similar concerns regarding the security of their factories at Patna in the period. Sukumar Bhattacarya, The East India Company and the Economy of Bengal: From 1704 to 1740, 2nd ed. (Calcutta: Graphic Art Press, 1969), 77.
normal circumstances, correspondence was valued, it could by no means be under-estimated in the event of war. The need for information therefore assumed new dimensions with Hoogly tapping all possible channels in the quest for news. In view of the twenty-four letters that Hoogly had received, periodically briefing them on the advances of Nadir and the counter-activities of the Mughals, their efforts had met with moderate success.

In the invasion correspondence received by the Company, a crucial source was Sampatram, whose letters constituted a quarter of this corpus of information. As a resident of Shahjahanabad (Delhi), Sampatram had succeeded his brother Dakhniram as the Company’s correspondent in the capital. Not only did his letters carry crucial information about the invasion, but they also bore intimate details of the audiences granted at the court, the faujdaris (military offices) awarded, and other intricate details of Mughal court politics. In imparting such confidential news, Sampatram persistently pleaded that Hoogly exercise the utmost caution in either circulating or using the information he had sent. Most of his letters were addressed to the Merchant and Chief of the VOC factory in Patna, Bartholomeus Aukema, who in turn dispatched the correspondence to Hoogly in Bengal. Aukema himself sent periodic updates that the factory in Patna had received from the capital to Hoogly, ensuring that an alternative channel of information procurement was well in place. Company servants and official correspondents aside, the VOC at Hoogly also had recourse to the system of intelligence services characteristic of eighteenth-century India. According to C.A. Bayly, “each significant ruler maintained news-writers at the courts of other big players, and expected to receive their emissaries.” Participating in this world of information procurement was another correspondent, Raijjoegel Kiswor (Raja Jugal Kishor) the vakil or representative of the imperial viceroy of Bengal at the Mughal court. Although his letters were addressed

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69 The Generale Missiven dated 24 October, 1736 mentions of the death of Dakhniram and marks the first reference to Sampatram, which gives us a rough idea of when Sampatram began his tenure as correspondent with the Company. Abraham Patras VI. 24 October 1736. Jurrien van Goor, ed., Generale missiven van gouverneurs-generaal en raden aan Heren XVII der Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie. vol. 9: 1729-1737 (’s-Gravenhage: Nijhoff, 1988), 773. The nature of the relationship between Dakhniram and Sampatram remains ambiguous. When Sampatram identifies himself as the “brother” of Dakhniram in his correspondence, the Company records refer to him interchangeably as “brother” and “nephew” of the aforementioned. See NA, VOC 8786, Bengalen, p. 778; NA, VOC 2469, Bengalen 2, p. 347. For mention of these scribes, see Dasgupta, “Trade and Politics in 18th century India,” 47.
70 NA, VOC 2469, “Persian Missive written by Sampatram on 19 July, 1739,” Bengalen 2, pp. 350-351.
71 In the said period, Aukema authored two of the many letters dispatched to Sichterman, NA, VOC 8786, pp. 121-127 and NA, VOC 8786, Bengalen, pp. 765-771.
73 The Vakil, who Michael Fisher describes as “entrusted representative or agent,” wrote “reports which included advice and counsel, as well as prediction and rumour.” Michael H. Fisher, “The Office of Akhbār Nawī: The Transition from Mughal to British Forms,” Modern Asian Studies 27, 1 (1993), 50. Raja Jugal Kishor was a seasoned diplomat. He had served three successive viceroyos of Bengal. Ishrat Haque, Glimpses of Mughal
to his master, Shuja Khan (Shuja-ud-Din Khan), they invariably fell into Dutch hands, though precisely how remains a subject of speculation.\(^7^4\) While the interception of the letters by the VOC seems a distant likelihood, more convincing is the possibility that the recipients of such letters willingly shared or traded information with the Company. Mohammad Mohassen writing from Lahore for instance, addressed his letter to Mohammad Semman who, Company records described as “residing in the [Dutch] factory in Patna,” and unmistakably therefore in the services of the Company.\(^7^5\) If the Company was not necessarily the recipient of the letters in some cases, in others instances they were not the only recipients. Joseph Devolton, a Frenchman who sent the Company two letters on the events in Delhi in late 1738 seems to have catered to the information needs of the French East India Company as well in the same period.\(^7^6\) This Frenchman who offered his services at the Mughal court as physician had considerable access to inside information also appears to have authored the second source to the Verhaal, the so-called Falck manuscript.\(^7^7\) Another European who features as a correspondent in the Company annals is an Italian named Toretti who resided in Patna but about whom little else is known.\(^7^8\) The Company’s stack of letters also came to include newsletters from Delhi, which may have been either official newsletters or private ones.\(^7^9\)

Writing in times of war and political uncertainty occasioned foreboding and prayers for the future. This inadvertently caused the letter-writers to speculate about the qualities of the Mughal emperor, and the invader. Amidst such deliberations, a detectible difference enters the frame. The Verhaal’s perspective on events displayed the distinct stamp of the Company’s own, and by the same token differed starkly from that revealed in a majority of the letters. While the stories they told were similar, the accompanying baggage of inferences made and estimations drawn differed, indicating the presence of two distinct discourses at work: the Mughal discourse inherent in the letters authored by the correspondents, native to the Mughal

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\(^{74}\) Shuja-ud-Din Khan was the Subahdar or Viceroy of Bengal from September 1727 to March 1739.

\(^{75}\) NA, VOC 8786, “Letter from Muhammad Muazzamin in Lahore to Muhammad Zaman residing in the Factory at Patna written in the 21\(^{st}\) year of the king’s [Mohammed Shah’s] reign,” pp.112-117.

\(^{76}\) Subrahmanyam, “Un Grand Dérangement: Dreaming an Indo-Persian Empire in South Asia, 1740-1800,” 337-78. Also see Laurence Lockhart and De Voulton, “De Voulton’s Noticia,” Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies 4, 2 (1926), 223-45. For the letters sent by Devolton available in the Company records, See NA, VOC 8786, pp. 111-112.

\(^{77}\) NA, O.W. Falck 5. Despite its vague titling as “the letter sent by a certain Frenchman to the factory at Patna,” the letter may for indubitable reasons be attributed to Devolton, the most evident being the translations from a manuscript Verdadeira e Exacta Noticia in the Portuguese language by Lockhart in his article “De Voulton’s Noticia” which is attributed to Joseph Devolton. The manuscript employed by Lockhart appears to contain the same information as the correspondence in question. Lockhart and De Voulton, “De Voulton’s Noticia,” 229-41.

\(^{78}\) NA, VOC 2427, fols. 301r- 302v.

\(^{79}\) See NA, VOC 2469, pp. 536-538; NA, VOC 8787, pp. 896-904; NA, VOC 8786, pp. 117-121. Because the authorship of these letters remains ambiguous, I desist from including them in my discussions.
empire, whose letters came into Dutch possession, and the Company discourse which featured in the annals of the Company written in Hoogly, ranging from the minutes of the Bengal Council to the Memorie of the retiring Director of the VOC possessions in Bengal, which subsequently percolate in the Verhaal.

The Mughal Discourse

When the Mughal correspondents pour out their concerns about the invasion, their letters are redolent with anxiety and apprehension. Aware of the ambiguity of circumstances that struck the empire and the uncertainty of future events, their letters teem with prayers which centred on their ruler, Muhammad Shah. A despondent spectator to a series of Mughal reversals, Raja Jugal Kishor jubilantly announced to his patron on 11 February 1739 that “his majesty has emerged victorious for the first time and if God so decrees, the enemy shall soon be defeated.”80 Mellekhebbiebolla exuded similar optimism when he hoped that strength of the Mughal army would reflect favourably on the outcome of battle.81 Wishing the emperor well was also Muhammad Muazzam who offered a quick prayer for Muhammad Shah before reflecting on the price rise and inflation which had rocked Lahore during the invasion.82 While such imprecations mark these letters off as evident bearers of goodwill, they shy away from offering a critique of empire. They do not bemoan the circumstances that gripped the homeland, save for a single instance: the letter of Sampatram to the Company shortly after the departure of Nadir Shah from Shahjahanabad. He complained that “the invasion was caused only due to the disunity of the nobles, and otherwise,” he reasoned, “who would dare contest the might of Hindostaan [India].” He added that “it is only through guile and deceit that the thunderstorm that destroyed so many souls had approached the city.”83 Surprisingly, Sampatram chose to point an accusatory finger at the nobles alone for the way things stood. The emperor on the other hand not only escapes unscathed but he is perceived as a hapless victim amidst the turmoil at court. Mohammed Shah therefore assumes a curious place in the native discourse. In comparison to the Verhaal, which holds the Mughal responsible for inviting the invasion upon the empire, the Mughal correspondents thought differently.

80 NA, VOC 2469, “Missive from Rai Jugal Kishor to Shuja-ud-Din Khan received in Murshidabad on 15 March 1739,” pp. 551-552.
81 NA, VOC 2469, “Letter from Malik Habib Allah from Shahjahanabad to the Qadi of Hoogly written on 11 February (1739) in the 21st year of the King’s reign and received in Bengal on 15 March (1739),” pp. 544-545.
Evidently indulgent of the emperor, they invoked the ruler only in their prayers and levied not an iota of criticism against him.84

One wonders how such a perspective is to be explained. It is unlikely that the native correspondence is indicative of widespread respect and awe of the emperor among his Mughal subjects. Other contemporary Mughal historians chronicling the invasion or writing about Muhammad Shah did not hesitate to voice their contempt for the emperor. The Seir Mutqaqherin, written in the last decades of the eighteenth century, lamented the virtual inefficacy of Muhammad Shah who, it noted, “thought only of passing his time in pleasures and delices.”85 Towing a similar line of thought was Muhammad Shah’s contemporary Anand Ram Mukhlis, who captured the troubled years of 1638-39 in writing. Mukhlis, as Ernest Tucker reveals held Nadir Shah in greater esteem than he did his own monarch.86 Also valid is the speculation that the “positive” view of the emperor stemmed from fact that the authors of this “war time correspondence” where the correspondents feared that their letters might be intercepted and read, resulting in unhappy consequences for their authors if their views were deemed unsupportive of the regime. The plausibility of this position is also suspect. Jittery though Sampatram might have been that the news he sold the Company might fall into wrong hands, he did indeed trade in highly sensitive information. It is therefore unlikely that he was reluctant to criticize the emperor to the Company. Moreover, Sampatram’s own take on the invasion had a few supporters among contemporary Mughal literati. The Iqbalnama compiled in the same period attributed the misfortunes that had befallen the country to the ominous alignment of the planets on the eve of the invasion.87 Because the devastation was divinely ordained, the critique of Muhammad Shah in the work amounted to no more than a minor rebuke. In effect, the perceptions contained in the Mughal correspondence arguably reflected the actual views of its authors and were not necessarily determined by the precarious

84One wonders whether such a disposition also suggests that these native correspondents were Mughal loyalists. While J.F. Richards discerns such a pattern among “professional administrators” in the Mughal Empire, one reckons that it was a phenomenon more widespread. J.F. Richards, “Norms of Comportment among Imperial Mughal Officers,” in Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam, ed. Barbara D. Metcalf (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 256.
conditions of their dispatch and reception. Quite in contrast to their engagement with the Mughal ruler, one is met with an extraordinary silence when examining the native correspondence for their opinions of the Persian ruler Nadir Shah. While they refer to the advance of the Persian forces and the plunder and chaos that accompanied it, Nadir is all but ignored. This suggests that these correspondents sought only to deliberate on those aspects of the invasion that related to their own ruler, rather than its perpetrator.

In sum, the discourse which featured in the Mughal correspondence adopted a vision that was indulgent of Muhammad Shah. Their engagement with their emperor was counterpoised by their silence regarding Nadir Shah. The Company however, as recipients of this Mughal correspondence and the discourse it contained, had a different take on both the emperor and the Persian.

The Company Discourse of the Dutch Factory in Hoogly (Bengal)

On 25 March, 1744, the Director of the Dutch possessions in Bengal, Jan Albert Sichterman was discharged from Company service.88 Before he sailed to the fatherland, he left behind, a Memorie to his successor, as was customary. This report outlined the dismal conditions of Dutch trade in Bengal and conceded that it was now in a far worse state than what it had been when he had inherited the mantle of Director ten years before.

By what means can one administer a remedy to the decay [in trade] when its causes are beyond our reach and control.... We can only pray that the Almighty spares us the pain he has inflicted on us in the past years.... However, hope for this is scant, as long as the reins of governance remains in the hands of the present King of Delhi. His weakness and incapacity is added to by the disunity of his nobles and viceroys, who fight one another for supremacy….One witnesses the pitiable state of war, home and abroad, which despite affecting all of his lands, has distressed Bengal more.89

The stance of the Dutch factory at Hoogly with regard to the Mughal ruler could not have been better summarised. Sichterman was convinced that Muhammad Shah had to take a significant share of the blame for the Company’s fall in profits in Bengal. So long as the Mughal remained the scapegoat of the Dutchman’s musings, his image in the Company

reports during the invasion years could hardly fare better. The result was a rhetoric drastically different from the summations of the Mughal correspondents. Reports of the Council of Hoogly to the Gentlemen Seventeen and their correspondence with the Dutch factory at Patna all showed the Mughal ruler in poor light. A fairly typical example is a letter dispatched by Hoogly to the Counsel of the Amsterdam Chamber in February 1739 informing him of the political climate in the Mughal Empire: “Because of the slack [emphasis added] rule of the present Mogol [Mughal], the Merhettijs [Marathas] or the Southern rebels have had the audacity to roam the hinterland.”\(^{90}\) The same passage proceeded to record yet another political development: “Several ruinous and unfavourable principles have crept in due to the negligent [emphasis added] rule of the king.”\(^{91}\) This letter exemplified a tendency revealed in almost all the Company reports. They referred to Muhammad Shah as cowardly (lafhartige), and the choice of words consistently used to describe conditions at court and the empire such as debauchery (ongebondenheden) and disarray (wanordres) consolidated their image of the emperor as a failed statesman.\(^{92}\) In view of the unflattering characterization of Muhammad Shah in the annals of the Company in Hoogly, it is not hard to see where the Verhaal (also a product of the Company establishment at Hoogly) in its treatment of the Mughal got its vision of rampant despotism.

The image that Muhammad Shah earned for himself in the Company records was not solely warranted by his actions or inaction during the critical years of 1738 and 1739. It was the result of the Company’s two-decade-long engagement with Muhammad Shah. The emperor was first subject to the Company gaze in 1721 when all opposition was uprooted and his claim to kingship stood uncontested.\(^{93}\) The VOC was optimistic about the consequences of his enthronement for the empire but their enthusiasm was short-lived and as early as 1722, the Generale Missiven expressed serious doubts about Muhammad Shah’s capabilities as a ruler.\(^{94}\) By the time of the invasion, the Company was armed with an arsenal of images with which the Mughal was to be handled. They showed additional flair of incorporating fresh news of the emperor into their existing view. One such piece of information that underwent modification was a description that featured in the letter of Malik Habib Allah. “The king having sensed this [Nadir’s decision to advance into Mughal territory] has departed, with his

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\(^{91}\) Ibid., fol. 9v.

\(^{92}\) NA, VOC 2455, fol. 4r – 5r.


\(^{94}\) Zwaardecroon, Castelijn, De Haan, Faes, Huuysman etc, XIV, 20 January 1722, Ibid., 591; NA, VOC 1951, fols. 1372r-v.
son on the 18th of Shawwal or the 10th of January to Lahoor [Lahore]. The king has instituted an army of 10,000 cavalry under the command of his son and has gifted him a palanquin, a turban laced with precious stones and a carriage bedecked with pearls."\(^{95}\) The episode later incorporated in the *Verhaal* was retold as follows:

When all of this [the fall of Lahore] was brought to the notice of Muhammad Shah, it opened his eyes. He began to consider the threat with greater gravity realising that he had to confront a dangerous enemy and one who was offended by him. He saw that the triumphant king [Nadir Shah], who had earned fame with war and fortune, now approached leading a victorious army to dethrone him. There was general dismay among the subjects and astonishment in his kingdom. For these reasons, he [Muhammad Shah] decided to appoint his son Ametcha as general of his army and fetched him thus in a splendid manner from his palace in a palanquin bedecked with diamonds and pearls and showered him with precious gifts.\(^{96}\)

In the face of Malik Habib Allah’s presumably harmless observation of the “gift-giving” that accompanied the Mughal war-efforts, the attention of the Company writers focused elsewhere. They projected the irony that the spectacle embodied – the sheer absurdity of the emperor plagued by minor trifles such as courtly etiquette while the enemy stood brandishing their swords at the frontier. In consequence, the Company while dependant on Mughal correspondence for the information it contained, devised their own schema of how events and most importantly individuals were to be assessed and represented, which resulted in a profound critique of the emperor. Here, Muhammad Shah was not, as the Mughal correspondents saw him, a ruler who could be sympathised with. In failing to live up to the Company’s sensibilities of the “ideal,” the emperor was instead endowed with a farcical and despotic image tailored to provoke the distaste of the Company’s administrators in Batavia and Amsterdam and of the readers of the *Verhaal*.

For all the attention that Muhammad Shah enjoys in the Company’s writings, Nadir Shah merits no more than a few references. One of the remarks about him pointed to the indelible impression that the Persian’s war tactics made on Hoogly, and the others alluded to the notoriety he came to acquire.\(^{97}\) Like the *Verhaal*, the records were less consistent in their

\(^{95}\)Letter from Malik Habib Allah, p. 544.

\(^{96}\) *Verhaal*, pp. 65-66; NA, VOC 2455, fols. 251r-v.

\(^{97}\)See VOC 2455, fols. 3v-4r. The three references are the “berugten Persiaen veldheer” (the infamous Persian general), “de tyranicque huijshouding van den Persiaanen koning Nadircha” (the tyrannical conduct of the
portrayal of Nadir than they were in their depiction of Muhammad Shah. In contrast to the sharp delineation of finding the Mughal wanting in all the traits that made a good ruler, the representation of Nadir was more ambivalent, vacillating between admiration and horror.

Now that the Company discourse stands explicated, one might ask what accounted for the varying dispositions of the Company to the two sovereigns who graced the pages of their official records and the *Verhaal*. To understand the animosity of the Company establishment in Hoogly towards Muhammad Shah and his nature of governance, it seems worthwhile to reflect on the lively debate that has raged over representation and Oriental Despotism. Functioning on the premise that “all representation is misrepresentation,” one set of scholars endorse the view that “phantasmic” notions of the East such as Oriental Despotism were faulty and were conceived by the European observer to either provide a critique of European politics or provide the necessary rationale for colonial domination. Thomas Metcalf for instance speaks of how Oriental Despotism was creatively used to reflect on worrisome political trends in Europe. Scholars such as Joan-Pau Rubiés however contend this position and question the duplicity of the European intention of engaging the Orient. Rubiés concedes that the concept of Oriental Despotism has little truth to it but he adds that there is no denying the fact that this idea was born out of honest intellectual pursuit on the part of the European observer. Just as the motives of misrepresentation have come under scrutiny, other scholars have even denied the inherent fallacy in European representations of the Orient. Michael Curtis in his recent work suggests that Despotism was indeed an Oriental phenomenon and testimonies of its presence in the Orient that European observers took back to their audiences at home constituted anything but falsehood.

Evaluating the Dutch disposition towards Mughal governance in the light of this debate indicates that there are two approaches worthy of consideration. The first approach is to take Sichterman at his word and attribute the slump in Dutch trade in Bengal to the

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Persian king Nadir Shah) and “den roemzughtige vorst Nadercha” (the fame hungry Nadir Shah). See NA, VOC 2427, fol. 10r; NA, VOC 2455, fol. 154r and NA, VOC 8786, p.758 respectively.

98As Adrienne Ward notes, the debate “focus[es] on the motives, mechanisms and consequences of the representation for the representer.” Adrienne Ward, “Eastern Others on Western Pages: Eighteenth Century Literary Orientalism,” *Literary Compass* 1, 1 (2004), 2-4


102Ibid., 113.

declining Mughal control over the empire – a claim convincingly augmented by the suggestions of modern day historians who argue that Dutch in the 1740’s failed to replicate the dominance they had demonstrated in the Bengal trade in the late seventeenth century. Sichterman’s spirited allegation is bolstered by the coincidence of Muhammad Shah’s reign (from 1719 to 1748) with the proposed period of decline in the Dutch trade. It is reasonable therefore to conceive the critique of the Mughal as having been caused by the frustrations of a mercantile power attempting to thrive amidst unfavourable circumstances. Nevertheless, a subscription to this thesis raises a host of complexities. It assumes that the Company archives quite rightly regarded Mughal rule as weak therefore implying that imperial decline alone was responsible for the ebbing fortunes of the Dutch. It also suggests that the Mughal state was indeed labouring under the despotic ways of Muhammad Shah thereby supporting Micheal Curtis’ simplistic stance “that Oriental Despotism [was] not an arbitrary exegesis…but rather reflect[ed] perceptions of real processes and behaviour in those [Oriental] systems.”

A second approach may be formulated by heeding Ashin Dasgupta’s reminder that approaching the Indian reality through the European peephole alone can sometimes be deceptive. Perceptions of the Company could well derive from a host of other factors apart from the overtly stated ones such as self-serving intent is convincingly demonstrated by Sanjay Subrahmanyam who argues that “knowledge about the Mughals was created at the same time that the Portuguese/Europeans acted out their at times Machiavellian conceptions of politics on the Mughals and other polities in the region,” indicating that their rhetoric reflected political equations on the ground. To see the truth in Subrahmanyam’s observation, one need only to consider the frequency with which Mughal rulers and imperial viceroys became targets of criticism in the Memories or final reports of the Dutch Directors in mid-eighteenth-century Bengal. While Muhammad Shah was the butt of Sichterman’s criticism, Sichterman’s predecessor, Jacob Sadelijn, came down heavily on the Moorse regenten or the Muslim governors who he denounced for their “brutal and avaricious regime,” and a later director, Jan Huijgens lamented that “the constitution of the government” showed no signs of strength and stability. Further, this proclivity of the Company to view the

104Dasgupta, “Trade in Pre-Colonial Bengal,” 63.
105Curtis, Orientalism and Islam, 71.
Mughals with hostility was not limited in space to Bengal or in time to the eighteenth century. James Tracy’s reading of how the VOC perceived and chose to write of their interactions with the seventeenth-century Mughal government from Surat, their factory on the west coast of India betrays similar tendencies. Mughal rulers were either depicted as despots or as weak potentates who were either oblivious of or chose to ignore the extent to which the local administrators sidestepped their own power and authority. Tracy reasons that the hostility that the Dutch came to experience for local authority was fostered by “the continuing warfare between Christendom and Islamdom.” The nature of the Mughal monarchy seen manifesting in the eighteenth century from Bengal however differed from Surat’s view of the Mughals in the previous century, when it was characterised variably by weaknesses and absolutism. The image of a ruthless and arbitrary monarch was virtually absent and had instead given way to a less menacing but equally despised model of the effeminate ruler.

In his article, Tracy also observes that the incompetent functioning of the Company settlement in Surat was often blamed on the short-comings of native authority in the Mughal Empire rather than on the lack of industriousness and mercantile acumen of the Company servants themselves. The suggestion that such indictments of the native government could often deflect attention from Company weaknesses proves indispensable in revealing the other reason for Bengal’s apathy for Muhammad Shah. As C.R. Boxer notes, Bengal had long acquired disrepute as a haven for private trade which with Dutch participation in the opium trade threatened to acquire greater dimensions. And Sichterman, for all the anguish he expressed over the Dutch situation had also dirtied his hands in the thriving private trade during his directorship between 1734 and 1744. He returned to the Republic a Dutch “Nabob,” acquired enviable landed property back home and flaunted a formidable collection of porcelain, crystals and Japanese lacquer work. While there may well have been linkages between the Mughal crisis and the simultaneous decline in Dutch revenues, it must be stressed that projecting blame on Mughal governance was a clever ruse for deviating attention away

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110 Ibid., 269-77.
111 Ibid., 256.
112 Ibid.
embezzlement and private trade on the part of the Company servants that weakened the system.

With regard to Nadir Shah, explaining his near invisibility in the Company records in Hoogly is not difficult. Compared to the familiarity with Muhammad Shah that the Company was occasioned by his long reign, Nadir’s exit from India was as swift as his excursions into the territory allowing the Company no more than a “brief acquaintance” with the man. The more restrained handling of Nadir Shah’s portrayal and his “acquittal” from the image of the despot stemmed therefore from their marginal familiarity with Nadir Shah. Further, Nadir’s invasion, despite posing a threat to Dutch possessions, especially the factory at Patna had failed to materialise into reality, therefore relegating the Dutch to mere spectators while the events of the invasion unfolded onstage at a safe distance from them. Had Nadir decided to march eastwards to Patna following the sack of Delhi, or westwards to the Dutch factory in Surat, the characterization of Nadir Shah would have arguably been different.115 And then too, there was the appreciation that the Company documentation exuded, much of which can be attributed to the Dutch stupefaction at the unparalleled feat that Nadir Shah performed – the rout of the Mughals. And as the Verhaal indicates, the authors of the account were equally aware of the successes that marked Nadir’s early career – the usurpation of the Persian throne and his string of victories against the Turks.116 Engaging in uninhibited speculation, one also wonders whether Hoogly had conducted itself any better than what was expected from a trading post in an empire as they contemplated a force that had virtually destroyed the entity, who they had been haggling with for power, privileges and the lot. Mughal European relations was, as Sanjay Subrahmanyam aptly labels it, one of “contained conflict,” where in fostering trade, the use of violence fell well within their line of vision.117 As the content of the mid eighteenth-century Memories of Dutch Directors in Bengal indicate, both Mughal and local authority made a poor impression on the Dutch administrators at Hoogly and native administrators were often projected as having been antagonistic to Dutch trading interests. For instance, Jacob Sadelijn, the Director in Bengal between 1727 and 1731 confessed that it was time the Dutch showed the regents that they were fully capable of wresting what they wanted

115 A parallel, not altogether inappropriate is the label that the Marathas won themselves as rovers (raiders) in the frequent threats they posed to the Dutch factories in Patna, Surat and Hoogly. The Generale Missiven of 1743 refers to them as rovers and Memorie of Jan Albert Sichterman accuses them of stroperije (theft). See Thedens VIII, 5 April, 1743, Jurrien van Goor, ed., Generale missiven van Gouverneurs-Generaal en Raden aan heren XVII der Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie, vol. 10: 1737-1743 (‘s-Gravenhage: Nijhoff, 2004), 1060. Also see VOC 8795, p. 950.

116 Oosterhammel speaks of how it was then commonplace in Europe to evaluate Nadir Shah positively based on his many achievements. Osterhammel, Die Entzauberung Asiens, 218-28.

through armed confrontation. In contrast to their rhetorical bluster however, the Dutch in Hoogly quite pragmatically realized the futility of challenging the Mughals to battle. Quite naturally then, they perceived the defeat of a dynasty, which they repeatedly confessed did not make the best trading partner, as heralding the advent of a new dynasty and consequently new possibilities for trade and negotiation.

These propositions put forth by the Dutch Directors of Bengal in the period to deploy force against the Mughal Empire are to be seen within and as a part of a larger trend. By the third decennia of the eighteenth century, as Holden Furber observes, the Company’s profit margins failed to impress its shareholders and an enquiry was instituted under the guidance of Gustav Baron van Imhoff to ascertain the causes for decline. In the “considerations” on Company affairs that he later submitted, he asserted that “the Company had in the past carried out a series of conquests to establish it’s might in Asia which had rendered governance more difficult.” He therefore appealed “that the Company be seen not as a merchant but rather a trading nation capable of preserving its authority.” At one level, the clause sought greater power for the Company administration in Asian territories that were already in Dutch control. But couched in the appeal was also the emphasis on the need to protect and further the Company’s interests vis-à-vis the Asian polities they traded with and the kingdoms they traded in, which as one would gather also recommended the use of force. Van Imhoff, was therefore engaging in the same rhetoric as his subordinate, Sichterman who in 1744 (approximately the same time that Van Imhoff submitted his recommendations), had complained about the abject helplessness he experienced in dealing with the downward spiral of Dutch trade and other Dutch directors had reckoned that only force and firepower would turn the tables in their favour. Hence, Nadir was in a sense the embodiment of the deft and successful use of force, that the Dutch could have seen themselves employing. In any case, Nadir was, to the Company, an unstoppable force and result was seething admiration.

The European Correspondence

It has been argued in the prior sections that the invasion correspondence presents a picture of two distinct discourses: the Mughal correspondence whose rhetoric failed to capture the

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118 See NA, VOC 8769, “Memorie by the retiring Director Jacob Sadelijn to his successor Berenaart written in 1732,” pp. 466-467.
119 Holden Furber, Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient 1600-1800 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976), 140-141.
120 J. Steur, Herstel of ondergang: de voorstellen tot redres van de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie, 1740-1795 (Utrecht: Hes, 1984), 44.
121 Ibid.
imagination of their recipients; and that of the VOC factory at Hoogly, who in turn conjured a varying discourse. In this discussion, however, a category of invasion correspondence, namely those authored by European individuals has forfeited attention. In the Company records, there are a mere six letters written by the Dutch Merchant at Patna Bartholomeus Aukema, the Italian residing in Patna, Toretti and the Frenchman Devolton in Shahjahanabad which is half the number of letters dispatched by the Mughal correspondents. Within the broader domain of discourse on the invasion by the self and the other, it would not be wrong to intuitively presume that these letters owing to their “European authorship” should show proximity to the Company discourse. However, these letters defy these presuppositions and exhibit themselves in a manner that neither justifies their inclusion into the native discourse nor their support to the Company’s cause. This is to say that the letters of European authorship are neither structured by the sympathetic undertones of the Mughal correspondence nor the condescension contained in the writings of the Company scribes in Hoogly. While this is sufficiently demonstrated by Devolton’s correspondence, which is devoid of the disparaging references to Muhammad Shah, that the Hoogly records are liberally peppered with, another example highlighting the difference between Aukema’s correspondence and the Company views on his dispatch should explicate this. As the capital Delhi began unravelling bewildering events in quick succession, Bartholomeus Aukema with his strategic presence at Patna, noted that the startling tales he had heard were indeed true: “The news from Delhi confirms the information we have received that the Persian ruler under the name of Nadercha [Nadir Shah] has proclaimed himself king of the land and Mhamet Sjah [Muhammad Shah] has been imprisoned.” In response, Hoogly made known its estimation of the situation: “Your successively received letters dated the 9th, 11th, 22nd of March ….have informed us of the cowardly manner in which the Mogol Mhametcha [Mughal Muhammad Shah] has ceded the throne to the ambitious Nadercha [Nadir Shah]……”

The Company’s systematic campaign to incorporate the two rulers into their self-devised frames of perception saw an unlikely informer in Aukema. In neither painting Nadir Shah as the favoured nor Muhammad Shah as the forsaken, Aukema’s correspondence spoke

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122 Despite constituting only a small section of the invasion correspondence, the Verhaal seems to have substantially gleaned upon Devolton’s twenty-eight page correspondence (the Falck Manuscript) for its description of the Mughal-Persian negotiations in Karnal and the events in Delhi thereafter.
123 While it is to be noted that this correspondence does refer on the acute lack of efficiency of the Mughal troops and Muhammad Shah’s lack of leadership in the time of crisis, they are devoid of the contemptuous appraisals of the emperor that frequent the Hoogly records.
124 NA, VOC 8786, “Missive written by Merchant and Chief Bartholomeus Aukema together with the Council of Patna to Director Jan Albert Sichterman and the Council of Bengal in March 1739, p.766.
125 NA, VOC 8786, “From Bengal to the Merchant Bartholomeus Aukema dated 16 April, 1739,” p.758.
of a certain aloofness in comparison to the characterization tactics that the Company servants downstream in Hoogly relished in. Similarly, it distanced itself from the Mughal correspondence in neither replicating its relenting optimism nor engaging in explicit prayers beseeching the emperor’s deliverance from defeat.

The letters of European authorship thus model themselves as the proverbial fly on the wall. The fact that the Dutch merchant in Patna, despite his affiliation to the Company could steer clear of the motifs of representations that were familiar to the Company scribes in Hoogly raises the question whether one can in fact speak of an institutional discourse where the ways of seeing of the Dutch East India Company constituted a single monolithic whole? One would contend that although this case serves as a poignant reminder that certain irregularities latched themselves to representation tactics of the Company, broader categories such as the Company discourse may still be salvaged. Tracy’s account on Mughal Despotism in Company accounts in seventeenth-century Surat when combined with the current inferences of the views of Mughal despotism from eighteenth-century Bengal presents a picture of a certain innegotiability in the tenor of Company characterization (despite subtle changes in the nature of the portrayals). Company views vis-à-vis the Mughals had persistently remained disparaging and hostile, suggesting both coherence and linearity in the images they had come to hold with regard to the royalty of the realm they traded in. Hence, while it is to be acknowledged that these divergent views such as Aukema’s did occasionally appear in the correspondence of the Company, their documentation otherwise exhibited homogeneity with regard to their perspective of the Mughals.

In sum, the Company discourse despite certain affinities with Mughal accounts, showed inexorable contradictions to the Mughal correspondence it relied on and similarly, followed a different trajectory of representation in comparison to its European correspondents. The Company discourse as formulated in Hoogly thus was both independent of and in blatant contrast to the views embodied in its sources, the Mughal and European correspondence and it was the views of the Hoogly establishment that entered the Verhaal. It was with this discourse that the manuscript version of the Verhaal would to leave the hands of the Company writers in Hoogly, enter into print and later (with a measure of prodding from his patron) inspire Frans van Steenwyk to write Thamas Koelikan.

The Politics of Representation in Van Steenwyk’s Thamas Koelikan

Re-reading Van Steenwyk’s piece in the light of its source, the Verhaal, engenders a distinct notion of familiarity; aspects of the content and rhetoric of the Verhaal are distinctly
reminiscent in *Thamas Koelikan*. Familiar features of the plot such as the motives for the conquest of Mughal India and Nadir Shah’s inclination for peace are retained and the character portraits of the two monarchs as envisaged in the *Verhaal* are also preserved. The play bears testimony to Nadir Shah’s magnanimity and the despotic Mahomet continues to battle his many vices. But just as the reader gets lured by the prospect of the playwright’s unconditional adherence to his source, the image of Van Steenwyk as the avowed loyalist to the *Verhaal* vanishes and Van Steenwyk the dramatist makes an appearance. What ensues is a series of discrepancies and fabrications that Van Steenwyk was earlier and justifiably accused of. Dead and suicidal queens become peace-loving princesses, marriages of political expediency become marriages of love and the invasion of India is mangled and sold to the regular theatre-buff as the siege of Lahore.126 These disparities were foreign to the *Verhaal* and were products of Van Steenwyk’s imagination alone. Therefore, the play in re-enacting a battle in a distant land in itself becomes a space contested by his loyalty to his source on one hand and his creative itch on the other.

What accounted for these distortions that Van Steenwyk so willingly introduced into his text? To be sure, many of the facts that the play ignored and new circumstances that it occasioned may reasonably be explained in view of Van Steenwyk’s piece as a literary product whose objective was entertainment. Moreover, theatre as a performance-oriented genre brought with it certain constraints. Presenting a play in theatrical time meant that audiences could not be told of Nadir Shah’s conquest in entirety or the manner in which unfolded over a span of eight months in Mughal territory.127 Yet, these factors fail to account for the more dramatic departure of Van Steenwyk from his source, the *Verhaal*. This was playwright’s perception of his protagonist where Nadir personified all that there was to be emulated, and exemplified little of what was to be detested. In this catharsis of the Persian, the single most notorious act of Nadir Shah, namely the carnage of Delhi, provoked censure from even the seemingly benign commentators on Nadir Shah (the compilers of the *Verhaal*) is erased. This radical departure of Van Steenwyk from his source evidently derived from his intention to package *Thamas Koelikan* as a lesson in virtue. And instructions on virtue had no place for gory spectacles, and Van Steenwyk was therefore called upon to weed out a few obstacles such as the carnage of Delhi that stood in his way of telling the story of the

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126It is also important to note that the fictitious villain, Alikan in *Thamas Koelikan* is in many ways modelled on the Mughal minister Sa’adat Khan, who the *Verhaal* holds guilty for treachery. Van Steenwyk also attributes to Alikan, acts that the *Verhaal* does not implicate Sa’adat Khan for such as his role in manufacturing the rumour of Nadir Shah’s death. Brouwer, *Achmet en Thamas Koelikan*, 197.

127Ibid.
righteous Nadir Shah. While retaining in Muhammad Shah the traits of an Oriental Despot like the Verhaal does, Van Steenwyk hence strays from his source’s nuanced image of Nadir Shah to project the ruler as virtually faultless. But before estimating Van Steenwyk’s purposes of representation on this one count alone, it is necessary that the circumstances which deemed such portrayals, distortions and erasures be analysed. What explains Van Steenwyk’s literary licence and his representational tactics that warranted his lessons on virtue on one hand, and his quest for “compassionate” statesmen on the other?

Van Steenwyk’s intention of privileging the instruction on morals in Thamas Koelikan strongly reflected the ideological grasp that the drama society, Nil Volentibus Arduum had on Dutch drama in the eighteenth century. In regarding his drama to be a vehicle of moral instruction, Van Steenwyk replicated the society’s conception of theatre as a bastion of virtue and the Schouwburg as an institution entrusted with the responsibility of teaching its audiences to be virtuous, morally sound individuals. Apart from its preoccupation with morality, the play also replicated the dramaturgy of the time in the distinct Gallicism it exhibited. Like the Frenchification of Dutch society which had caused a scholar to sourly remark that “eighteenth-century Dutch culture was an imitation of everything that was French,” Dutch drama was also bitten by the French bug. As discussed in Chapter One, French classical tragedy in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries found favour with playwrights in the Dutch Republic and it was also a preferred style with Van Steenwyk. Not only was his play Leonidas (1788) modelled on the French play Iphigenie (1675) written by playwright and exponent of French Classical Tragedy, Racine but Thamas Koelikan was also written in the same style. Van Steenwyk’s play, like the “Frenchness” of his times and trade therefore, was set in the French Classical mould.

Apart from the Frenchness of form, the play in its preface took a jibe at European rulers by suggesting that they lacked the qualities that Nadir possessed. This suggested that the drama came with strong political undertones. Yet, the fact that Van Steenwyk should direct his message of virtue to kings is baffling because what purpose would such a representation have served the playwright, a citizen of a political space with a “fully

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128 For a discussion on Nil Volentibus Arduum and the impact it had on Dutch theatre, see Chapter One.
132 Brouwer, Achmet en Thamas Koelikan, 104.
The Dutch Republic in 1745, the year in which the play was published and performed was firmly in the Second Stadholder-less era (1702 – 1747), which was a “government without the presence of a monarchical element in the form of a Stadhouder.” It is therefore likely that the playwright sought to provide a critique of monarchy, a form of government beyond the frontiers of the Republic, in states such as France and Prussia in the period. But subscribing to the view that Van Steenwyk was peering over the fence of his little Republic, addressing monarchical concerns still appears problematic. This is because despite the foreword and its allusions to monarchy, the virtues that Van Steenwyk seeks to propagate in the content of his play seem to be republican ones. Republicanism occupied a prominent position in eighteenth-century Dutch discourse and within the broader domain of this ideology its Classical strand disseminated by thinkers such as Lieven de Beaufort was popular in the early eighteenth century. As Dorothee Sturkenboom and Joris van Eijnatten have noted, Classical Republicanism brought with it new ideas about politics and representation. Regents, according to this ideology, were not the only class of people who could lay claim to power and commoners too could become leaders of men so long as they were virtuous. Thamas Koelikan exudes the impress of this ideology. Van Steenwyk chose a protagonist of lowly origins whose right to the throne sprang from his desire to serve his subjects, while the rulers of royal descent, whose claims to leadership derived from birth and illustrious bloodlines such as Shah Tahmasp and Mahomet, were either humbled or overthrown. Moreover, the greatest victory that Van Steenwyk grants Nadir Shah is not the victory over the Mughal dominions but the conquest of Mahomet’s pride. The emperor who initially resents the proposed marital union between the Mughal princess, Milko, and Nadir’s son, Nasser, owing to his disdain in “associating his august house with the lowly family of Thamas Koelikan” is finally forced to toe the line. Similarly, the traits of luxury and ambition, which were elements that Lieven de Beaufort strongly disapproved of, emerge in Thamas Koelikan as the hurdles that Van

Steenwyk’s actors contend with. Luxury had enervated the Mughal Empire, and it was in the conquest of personal ambition that Nadir Shah had emerged supremely victorious. When reinstating Mahomet to the Mughal throne, Nadir urges him to renounce his hedonistic lifestyle, and setting the tone for the play, Van Steenwyk’s dedicatory epistle describes Nadir as “the valiant Thamas Koelikan … who surrenders his self-interest to his superior virtues”. In its content thus, the play replicates a rhetoric that was familiar to Lieven De Beaufort, a Classical Republican of the day.

The second factor that calls into question the perspective that monarchs were Van Steenwyk’s intended audience is the fact that circumstances in the Dutch Republic in the period were themselves in dire need of critique and commentary. Between 1702 and 1747, the United Provinces underwent what Jonathan Israel calls the “Age of Decline.” All areas of the Dutch economy – its trading system, urban economy and agriculture – were riddled by crisis. Contemporaries therefore had enough reason to engage with domestic concerns rather than entertain issues from beyond the frontier. Thirdly, some in the early eighteenth-century Republic associated economic well-being with virtue and moral well-being and as Wijnand Mijnhardt notes, the writer and ideologue “Justus van Effèn perceived the cause of decline as moral.” Van Effèn, a contemporary of Van Steenwyk stressed the importance of virtue in his influential publication, Hollandsche Spectator. As a clear reaction to the Republic’s Francophilia, Van Effèn also used his journalistic writings to spearhead a campaign to generate pride in the average Dutchman about his “Dutchness.” Quite evidently then, any well-read Dutchman of Van Steenwyk’s time was immensely familiar with the concepts of “virtue” and “Dutchness.” And virtue it was that Van Steenwyk sought to

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138 Velema, “That a Republic is better than a Monarchy,” 21-22.
139 Brouwer, Achmet en Thamas Koelikan, 103, 87: lines 1569-70.
140 Despite an adherence of certain facets of the play to De Beaufort’s views, one aspect of the work appears less confirmatory and requires elaboration. In the third act, Van Steenwyk has Nadir persuasively defend the usurpation on the grounds that he became king by popular mandate. Usurpation however was never prescribed by De Beaufort as a means of acquiring political power. The theme therefore is problematic because the playwright appears to support the takeover. Nonetheless, one would argue that the play does not venture beyond the precincts of De Beaufortian ideology because the playwright, in reality, does not condone the act of usurpation. This is evident in the foreword of the play where Van Steenwyk offers an explanation for his standpoint on the takeover as expressed in the corpus of the play. He reasons that Islam took a different and less condemnatory view of usurpation. In this, the playwright reveals his true precepts where usurpation, under normal circumstances was an act worthy of denunciation thereby once again declaring his presumable allegiance to the De Beaufortian ideology.
141 Israel, The Dutch Republic, 959-85.
143 Ibid., 206-09; According to Velema, “the proper interpretation of the republican citizen’s virtue became one of the central issues in Dutch public discourse in the early decades of the eighteenth century.” Velema, “Ancient and Modern Virtue Compared,” 438.
resuscitate making it highly probable that these morals that Van Steenwyk saw as absent and hoped to breathe life into were Dutch ones.

In discerning the purposes of representation in Van Steenwyk’s *Thamas Koelikan* thus, the play functions as a microcosm of an entire cultural orientation revolving around the primacy of virtue that drew from several sources: dramatic conventions and prevailing notions of the roots of Dutch decline. When assessing the political connotations of the play, several factors suggest that the authorial intentions lay in addressing domestic concerns in contrast to Van Steenwyk’s aired intention of preaching to monarchs (evidently from beyond the frontier). Nevertheless, one cannot lightly brush off Van Steenwyk’s mention of the monarchy as an unintended or purposeless reference, but instead consider it implicit to his aims of reflecting on his home government in dealing with Dutch Republicanism. This is to say that Van Steenwyk lauds Dutch republican virtues in *Thamas Koelikan*, an object which was accomplished not merely in the ideals that Van Steenwyk promotes in the play, but also by means of a critique of monarchy in envisioning lessons for its non-Dutch practitioners. This argument is largely substantiated by Wyger Velema’s reading of Republicanism in the eighteenth-century Dutch Republic as having been often complemented and propped up by a parallel trend of anti-monarchism. Velema states that “since the days of Louis XVI…, the French monarchy was viewed as the perfect embodiment of all the evils of monarchical rule and the very opposite of everything that republicanism had stood for.”

Therefore, *Thamas Koelikan* in the engagement with Dutch republicanism provides a critique of monarchism and thereby re-enacts the well-rehearsed strategy of the “affirmation of home-grown values by means of a negative evaluation of another.”

If an explication of Van Steenwyk’s purposes of representation has covered new ground, it reveals that the Oriental space was appropriated, in violation of historical “fact”, to re-enact visions of the national self. Therefore, when recalling Balachandra Rajan’s allegation that it was “self-interest” that drove Dryden to write his drama and that although *Aurang-Zebe* was a play set in the Mughal Empire, it was in reality a commentary on Restoration England, it holds true for Van Steenwyk’s *Thamas Koelikan* as well. Concluding on the above premise alone however is to leave the story partially unsaid. Certain other facets of the story are to be attended to. The basic plot in *Thamas Koelikan* was one that had been experimented

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146Rajan, “Appropriating India,” 67-77.
with before. The English playwright Nicholas Rowe had employed a similar story in his drama which centred on the Oriental ruler who Nadir Shah is often compared to – Tamerlane. In Rowe’s *Tamerlane* (1701), Tamerlane played the part of Nadir in *Thamas Koelikan* while the Ottoman ruler Bajazet was cast as his anti-thesis. Like *Thamas Koelikan*, *Tamerlane* too revolved around a reformer-conqueror who tames the vanquished and sets his house in order.\(^{147}\) To discern how alike *Tamerlane* and *Thamas Koelikan* were in characterization, we only need turn to a commentary on Rowe’s drama in an 1824 edition of the play which observed, “Tamerlane and Bayazet [in the play] are the two opposing powers of good and evil, the angels of light and darkness, the one all gall and vinegar, the other all milk and honey.”\(^{148}\) When the two plays exhibit strong similarities, we can only speculate about whether these commonalities were purely coincidental or whether Van Steenwyk had borrowed from Rowe’s drama. The fact nevertheless remains that the principal template that Van Steenwyk had used was not new to European drama. The theme that Van Steenwyk adopted for his play was also conventional at another level. It was one that the European public was familiar with – of an empire in decline. Tacitus writing in the early second century A.D. had exposed the vermin in the imperial woodwork, Montesquieu in a similar exercise in 1738, recalled the damaging effects of “luxury” on the Roman Empire and Gibbon once again reflected on the theme of fallen empires in the late eighteenth century.\(^{149}\) The template of decadent polities could also be employed for the Orient, because “like the Roman and Spanish they [the Orient] presented powerful images …of the problems besetting universal monarchies,” which the audience despite the “Orientalness” of the play could identify with.\(^{150}\)

Despite the possibilities of identification that Oriental subjects held out in this regard, the play cannot be understood in entirety, without recognising the curious endeavour on the part of Van Steenwyk in engaging the Oriental space as the setting to the play and the Oriental, Nadir Shah as protagonist.\(^{151}\) One would argue that Van Steenwyk’s engagement

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\(^{147}\) For an analysis of Rowe’s play, see Richardson, “Nicholas Rowe’s Tamerlane,” 269-289.

\(^{148}\) Nicholas Rowe, *Tamerlane: A Tragedy*, Orberry ed. (London: W. Simpkin, 1824), iv. Although there were a fair number of plays which dramatized the Tamerlane – Bajazet encounter such as Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* (1587-1588) and the Dutch play *Den grooten Tamerlan* (1657) by Joannes Serwouters, it is Rowe’s *Tamerlane* that *Thamas Koelikan* resembles. I thank Jos Gommans for bringing the parallels between *Tamerlane* and *Thamas Koelikan* to my attention.


\(^{151}\) The play doubt bears connotations of otherness. Van Steenwyk for instance offers an explanation why Milko, an Islamic princess destined to seclusion in the harem finds herself unveiled in the enemy camp. Despite the presence of such arguments which suggest that Van Steenwyk makes no effort to negotiate the difference between the two worlds, he retrieves for the Occidental stage, an exemplar from the other side whose virtues were worthy of emulation. This curious mix of opposites where “difference” could go hand in hand with
with the theme cannot be seen as evolving from the agenda that came with it or the prospect of Orientalness as a novelty alone. Instead, it derives from the understanding that *Thamas Koelikan* was written and staged at a time when Europe was momentarily blinded by Nadir Shah’s exploits. Although we may never know whether the spectators or readers of *Thamas Koelikan* had heard of Nadir Shah, the playwright was acutely aware of the fame of his protagonist and this was the element he sought to capitalise on. He grabbed the attention of his audiences signalling the popularity of his protagonist and in his dedication to his patron, he refers to Nadir Shah as the intimidating yet alluring “Asian Terror”. Apart from riding the waves of Nadir’s popularity which was a pan-European phenomenon, Van Steenwyk’s view of Nadir Shah as an exemplar, as indicated earlier also had its share of sympathisers. Against this background of the European preoccupation with Nadir Shah, one also cannot discount the possibility of the literary piece having been born out of the sheer interest of the patron of the play, Johannes Abeleven and his brother and shareholder of the Amsterdam Chamber of the Dutch East India Company, Arnoldus Abeleven. Such an interpretation is a plausible one because how else does one explain the transport of story of the invasion from the Company records whose spectatorship comprised only of the Haagse Boesogne (the advisory committee of the Gentlemen Seventeen) to the *Verhaal* on one hand, and the passage of the tale yet again from the *Verhaal* to the play *Thamas Koelikan*? Moreover Johannes and Arnoldus Abeleven were “Old Indies Hands” who had had careers in the East, and *Thamas Koelikan* could well have been a product of the brothers’ nostalgia for the Asian shores which in turn had thrived on the interest of their compatriots in the phenomenon called Nadir Shah.

**Conclusion**

Unmasking the mode of representation in the play is to confront the image of a virtuous Nadir Shah on a crusade to liberate despotic Mughal Empire. In analysing the motives for such, it is contended that the characterization of the two rulers derived from the ideological bearings that the play carried, to the consequence that the play flouted certain features of the story that it borrowed from its source – the *Verhaal*. The conceptual freight of the play was characterized by Van Steenwyk’s need to engage with republican ideals by pointing to the failings of monarchism in its want for virtue. But to claim that all representation in Van Steenwyk’s play was modelled to suit the authorial intention of reflecting on the Dutch national self, overlooks


two aspects which were responsible for the play’s presentation into the Amsterdamsche Schouburg: the character of the period in which the play was produced and the efforts of the Abeleven brothers in propelling the story of Nadir Shah’s invasion of the Mughal Empire to take stage. This essay thereby engages the debate on Oriental Despotism and representations of the Orient contending that while self-reflexivity constituted the playwright’s motive in scripting the play, the remarkable popularity of the protagonist in Europe at the time, and the personal interest of the Abeleven brothers could have played no small part in the enterprise.

Reading Van Steenwyk’s *Thamas Koelikan* within the context of information transfer is akin to the appraisal of a globe trotter who had finally discovered the pleasures of sedentary existence. The tale of the invasion had travelled half the world with its origins in Persian edicts and the correspondence dispatched by European (Italian, French and Dutch) and Mughal correspondents stationed in the Mughal Empire suggestive of the multicultural mosaic, within which news of the invasion was produced. This correspondence, in the hands of the Dutch East India Company factory at Hoogly had led to the compilation of the manuscript version of the Verhaal. This work later printed in the Dutch Republic had constituted the source for Van Steenwyk’s *Thamas Koelikan*.

In this linear traffic of the content of the story, the architects of the first tier of information production, namely the European and Mughal correspondents had allowed their standpoints with regard to the two monarchs, Nadir and Muhammad Shah to take root in the work. This was also true of the subsequent vectors who handled the tale in transit. The content of the story thus metamorphosed to assume distinct imprints of the world-view of the authors/compilers at every turn. The Mughal observers revealed a sense of despondency at the outcome of events and pledged their support to their emperor, Muhammad Shah. The European observers were strangely dispassionate about the invasion they chronicled, thereby raising questions about the sharp delineations one usually confronts of the East and West when dealing with encounters between the Self and the Other. A crucial juncture in this passage of information transfer was the reception of the correspondence of the Mughal and European correspondents by Company scribes in Hoogly and the compilation that followed. This stage was momentous because the characterization of the two monarchs was subjected to a perspectival dismantling whereby portrayals inherited from prior sources were transformed or purged. Information was systematised and the work was now imbued with the Company’s own reading of events. It may be reasoned that the portrayal of Muhammad Shah in the Verhaal was dictated by a history of animosity to the Mughal ruler and their anxieties over the difficulties of engaging in trade in troubled circumstances. All the same, the characterization
also deflected attention from the Company’s structural weaknesses such as private trade in the period. The image of Nadir Shah, owing to his brief sojourn in the empire was less delineated in comparison to that of his Mughal counterpart, but it revealed the admiration of the Company for the exploits of the Persian. This presumably reflected the desire of the Company to exhibit a similar show of force, a perspective which was revealed time and again in the Memories of the retiring governors of the Dutch possessions in Bengal in the period. The Company therefore was not the impartial observer who passionlessly wrote of the invasion which took place in their backyard, but had instead allowed their political equations and other factors operating at the ground level to filter into the Verhaal. Van Steenwyk’s Thamas Koelikan as one of the final destinations in the chain of information transfer borrowed many of the Company’s views on the episode, while introducing, dislocating, and transforming many others.

Within the sequence of information transfer, the trope of Oriental Despotism announces its entry in the Verhaal. In view of Bengal’s concerns as explicated above, the account showed Muhammad Shah as the prototypical Oriental Despot while it treated the conqueror, Nadir Shah, ambiguously. Despite the categorical reworking of several aspects of the Verhaal in Van Steenwyk’s Thamas Koelikan, an element that was retained in its unaltered form was the image of the despotic Muhammad. The “Orientalist” imaginings of the Company discourse were thereby carried over in their unadulterated form into the play. As a result, the on-site apprehensions and dispositions of the Company concern in Hoogly were now, by means of the Verhaal and Thamas Koelikan transplanted into the literary and performative space of the Dutch Republic in full view of their literate and theatre-going compatriots. The Verhaal also broke out of the narrow confines of the Republic and its limited Dutch readership in its subsequent English translation, A Genuine History of Nadir-Cha which placed the text within the reach of the Anglophone world. With the Verhaal (in Dutch and in translation) and Thamas Koelikan joining the profusion of works about Nadir Shah in Europe in the mid-eighteenth century, the Company had as a result inadvertently fashioned itself in Europe as a commentator and advocate of the prevalence of Oriental Despotism in Mughal India.

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153A Genuine History of Nadir-Cha. The work was printed again in Dublin the following year. One suspects that De Claustre’s Istoria di Thamas-Kouli-Kan, Sofi di Persia (1741) in its second volume which describes Nadir’s invasion in the Mughal Empire also drew from the Verhaal for its content.