



A City in Transition: Exploring Socio-cultural Changes in Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*

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Abstract: Literature, among other cultural manifestations is an important space to depict historical processes and events. Together, both literature and culture provide a critical interrogation of history. This paper analyses the novelist Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* to understand the socio-cultural changes that were taking place during the 20th century in India. The novel through the lives of various characters reflects upon the social structures and mentalities. It portrays the decaying traditional culture of Old Delhi and how the emerging westernization was eroding social, cultural and political fabric of India. Through this symbolically rich work, Ahmed Ali reflects upon several themes such as, time, memory, identity, culture, colonization and change. Interweaving these themes in the historical and cultural background of British India, the novel depicts a phase in the history of Indian nationalism where there was a decline in a way of life and thought. Consequently, a new set of values were emerging to transform the culture and society of India.

Keywords: Ahmed Ali, *Twilight in Delhi*, Old Delhi, Decay, Colonialism.

1. INTRODUCTION :

Why do you ask my native place,
O dwellers of the East,
Making mock of me for the poor plight I am in?
Delhi, which was once the jewel of the world,
Where dwelt only the loved ones of fate,
Which has now been ruined by the hand of Time,
I'm a resident of that storm-tossed place"
- Mir Taqi Mir

Situated in *Purani Dilli's¹ mohallah²*, Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* is set in the early 20th century. The novel "is in the realistic-poetic tradition and use[s] verse quotations as vantage frames to explicate, moralize, and foreshadow the events within the straightforward prose narrative" (Hashmi, 1990, p. 179). Engaging with the culture of Old Delhi, the novel juxtaposes historical events to depict themes of cultural demise, colonization, memory, time and identity. Episodic and lyrical in nature, the novel is organized in four parts which alternate between the domestic and the outside world (Anjaria, 2011, p. 189, 190).

Cultural demise and transformation of the Indian socio-political landscape are the key concerns of the novel which are exhibited through memories of historical events, personal turmoil that the protagonist Mir Nihal is engulfed in and the changes taking place in India. The revolt of 1857 (The Sepoy Mutiny), Delhi durbar of 1911 and the influenza in 1918 set the historical background which is interwoven with personal experiences, human emotions, cultural antagonism and

¹ Old Delhi

² Neighbourhood or locality



animal symbolism to project the impending decline of civilization. Thus, the novel concludes with the lines, “He lay on the bed in a state of coma, too feelingless to sit up or think. The sun went down and hid his face... And night came striding fast, bringing silence in its train, and covered up the empires of the world in its blanket of darkness and gloom...” (Ali, 2007, p. 275).

2. The Approaching Demise of a Culture: History, Nostalgia and Memory

Delhi was once a paradise,
Such peace had abided here;
But they have ravished its name and pride,
Remain now only ruins and care.
- Bahadur Shah

The title of the novel expresses the core idea of socio-cultural and political change. The approaching ‘twilight’ in Delhi, that is, decline of the Muslim culture; the era of the Mughals, is reiterated through poetic interference of Bahadur Shah, Mirza Ghalib and Mir Taqi Mir. The fissures emerging in the personal life of Mir Nihal; his son, Asghar’s affinity towards the alien western culture, death of his mistress Babban Jan and eldest son Habibuddin and finally his paralytic attack are motifs that fuses personal experiences with the larger historical events. Thus, the personal losses are contiguous with the cultural deterioration of India. However, the decline is forgoing as is the situation of Mir Nihal who is paralyzed but not dead. “A society was dying... I showed that it was moving towards death, yet living, marching on, for it did continue to live right down until 1947-1948. It was the war and then partition that made many changes, that altered the very basis of our thoughts and our attitudes” (Ali & JSAL, 1998/1999, p. 155).

Historical events serve as matters of discussion and are narrated nostalgically. The revolt of 1857 is a crucial event that is fresh in the minds of the older generation of *Purani Dilli*, but the newer generation which has not witnessed the bloodshed of the past remain ambiguous as they cherish the changes taking place. The coronation of George V saw the divided opinions of the people of the *mohallah*. For Mir Nihal and his wife, Begum Nihal it brought back violent memories of destruction, anguish and pain. She notes that during the Mughal rulers’ procession, people were showered with gold *mohurs*³ and points that the *farangis*⁴ would only offer dust and stones. Siddiq the bania, is thankful to the British government for creating thriving conditions for business by shifting the capital to Delhi and holding the Durbar which would lead to continued prosperity. However, Mirza the milkman is more careful in his stance. He points that, “All this show and prosperity is temporary. It will all vanish one day, soon... But I do believe that the rule of the farangis can never be good for us. See how they imprisoned Bahadur Shah, banished him, killed his sons and looted Dilli. All this does not betoken any good...” (Ali, 2007, p. 136).

The Delhi durbar that commemorated the transfer of power to King George V was a staging of colonial authority; a performance of power. However, the fact that the durbar was being held adjacent to the Jama masjid, a religious monument revered by the Muslims and which was also the main site of the 1857 revolt and the defeat of the Mughals was a constant reminder of the suppression of India and the victory of the British. As a consequence, Mir Nihal was reluctant to go and though persuaded by his sons, he stood at a distance, while his mind retraced the fateful, blood-stained memories of the mutiny (Anjaria, 2011, pp. 195-197). Here he realizes the loss of the past and his unsuitability in the present. “This thought filled him with pain, and he sat there, as it were, on the rack, weeping dry tears of blood, seeing the death of his world and of his birthplace. The past, which was his, had gone, and the future was not for him” (Ali, 2007, p. 147).

³ Former gold coin that symbolized the wealth and power of the Mughal ruler.

⁴ Foreigners (here refers to the British).



Central to the nostalgic references is the last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah, who was exiled after the revolt of 1857. This is not only because he was the former king, more so as his exile also marked the demise of political patronage for the Urdu arts (Anjaria, 2011, p. 192) which is an inherent aspect of the identity of Indian Muslims (Alam, 2015, p. 349).

“I'm the light of no one's eye,
The rest of no one's heart am I.
That which can be of use to none - Just a handful of dust am I.”
-Bahadur Shah

The “just a handful of dust” holds political significance as it refers not only to the body after death but also the destruction of the city and the depleted consciousness of its inhabitants. Here, Bahadur Shah's political identity as the ruler who failed to provide leadership to his people post the revolt of 1857 is downplayed by his poetic one as the romanticized image of the imperial splendor and tragic defeat. Long deposed, Bahadur Shah appears a ghost who is imbued in the consciousness of post mutiny Delhi (Anjaria, 2011, p. 193).

3. Symbolism and the Motif of Time

Asgar's affinity for the western culture which is reflected through him opting for a western attire and desire for love marriage symbolizes an erosion of culture and change in time. Although, Mir Nihal was able to kill the snake that attempted to swallow the *shirazi*⁵ pigeon, he was unable to persuade his son to leave the firangi culture. The snake can be understood as the representation of the British who were trying to dominate all aspects to Indian socio-cultural, economic and political life, whereas the pigeon embodied the India. Thus, for the older generation it was possible to preserve the traditional Muslim culture from colonizing power but its impact on the younger generation could not be rid.

The change in time is reflected through the grandchildren of Bahadur Shah, most of who lived in pitiable conditions after the revolt of 1857 and were reduced to begging. Among them, his granddaughter Gul Bano remarks that, “Our days are done, daughter. We have been rendered poor by Fate... We are beggars and the Farangis are kings” (Ali, 2007, p. 139). The youngest son of Bahadur Shah also laments the tide of time, “But today we have no place on the earth, and everyone laughs at our poverty and plight...” (Ali, 2007, p. 150). Like the descendants of Bahadur Shah, Mir Nihal too represents a bygone time. The Britishers hold control over the society, culture and polity of India. There is a moving away of the youth from the traditional to the foreign culture. At this juncture of time, Mir Nihal is a helpless spectator.

The 1918 influenza which takes the life of Asgar's wife (Bilqeece) resonates another shift in time and emblemizes the collapse of the old structure. It represents a dark period that is descending into disorder. “Soon the graveyards became full, and it was difficult to find even three yards of ground to put a person in his final resting-place. In life they had had no peace, and even in death there seemed no hope of rest” (Ali, 2007, p. 230). In this hour of gloom, profit prevailed, as gravediggers flourished. They increased their wages as did the *ghassals*⁶. Similarly, the banias also raised the price of cloth. Thus, depicting the ‘disintegration of the moral fiber and map out a special location, a space in time where death, the dying and living dead throng side by side’ (Kumar, 1976, pp. 33-34).

The creation of New Delhi sets the stage for the final change in time as it shifts the socio-cultural focus from *Purani Dilli*. It is the beginning of a new way of life as people from all parts of India especially Punjab migrate here and bring forth their customs. Thus, it is an intrusion for the residents of old Delhi. The coming of the new puts to the backburner the old culture which is preserved within the ancient walls.

The old culture, which had been preserved within the walls of the ancient town, was in danger of annihilation. Her language, on which Delhi had prided herself, would become adulterated and impure, and would lose its beauty and uniqueness of idiom. She would become the city of the dead, inhabited by people who would have no love

⁵ A rare breed of pigeon.

⁶ People who wash dead bodies.



for her nor any associations with her history and ancient splendour. But who could cry against the ravages of Time which has destroyed Nineveh and Babylon, Carthage as well as Rome? (Ali, 2007, p. 197)

Ahmed Ali clearly emphasizes the that the city, Delhi will outlive and absorb all that is a part of it; the people, animals, objects, empires, memories. “There is subtle evocation of permanence within change...The city, like life itself, will outlive and outlast the most recent, the city of the British, which, like the others, promises a new eternal city. This city, like those of the past, fails to perceive or understand the true immortality of a place and its people” (Anderson, 1971, p. 84).

4. CONCLUSION

Twilight in Delhi is a historically woven tale of the decline of Delhi. Through an in-depth detail of Old Delhi’s lanes, residents, customs and ceremonies, Ahmed Ali records the vanished way of life of pre-mutiny Delhi. The domestic life of the residents coincides with the decline of the old values as the growing western culture invades the traditional fabric of society. In these turning times the older generation becomes powerless and are mere onlookers. However, there is a sense of continuity within the forgoing change.

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