



THE INDIAN REVIEW OF WORLD LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

A PEER REVIEWED AND INDEXED BI-ANNUAL ONLINE LITERARY JOURNAL

<http://www.worldlironline.net>

ISSN: 0974 - 097X VOL.14 NO.I January - June, 2018



Reconstructing the Orient: A Study of Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*

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In his magnum opus *Twilight in Delhi*, Ahmed Ali, one of the leading figures in Progressive Writers Movement, seems to be reconstructing Indian Muslim culture as a commodity to be consumed by the west. Ali takes his readers into a journey of the Orient with its decadent society, its kite and pigeon flying sessions, its zenanas and lovelorn males and females. The Orient which has been created by Ali is not a land of magnificence and charm but is a land of lost glory and fading lustre. The novel begins with darkness and ends with the same erasing and obliterating all the possibilities of hope for the future. *Twilight* showcases Delhi for the western eye -- a land of heat and dust, a land if not of snakes and snake charmers but of pigeons and kites, of beautiful females, of men keeping mistresses and considering it to be a part of culture. Delhi has been chosen as the representative city of India as it has always been a city of great importance in Indian history. Ahmed Ali portrays Delhi in a state of ruin which was once a symbol of strength and splendour and it also portrays his preoccupation with Indian heat and stink --- there are elaborate descriptions of stinking gutters, sweating labourers and unhygienic surroundings with dogs and cats consuming the leftover of man. The novel opens with a description of Delhi engulfed in darkness, a city which lies defeated, a city which has been trampled over; looted and raped.

There are many instances in the novel where the colonial Delhi has been associated with gloom, death and darkness but one image that stays and lingers on is that of Delhi being compared with a "beaten dog":

Like a beaten dog it has curled its tail between its legs, and lies lifeless in the night as an acknowledgement of defeat. (Ali 2010:6)

This picture of Delhi has been created; it seems to adhere to the western imagination. Delhi has been portrayed as darkness personified and in the heart of this darkness through a complicated network of lanes and by lanes, the reader finally arrives at the house of Mir Nihal:

Such a net of alleys goes deep into the bowels of the city shooting from Lalkuan, and going into KuchaPandit turns to the right and terminates at MohallahNiyaryan, which has a net of by lanes of its own. One branch of it comes straight on, tortuous and winding, growing narrower like the road of life, and terminates at the house of Mir Nihal...(6)

There is nothing positive about the house, there is no personal touch and no warmth and vibrancy to it. The only distinction made about the kitchen is that it is "black with smoke" (7). The date palm tree that is growing in the 'centre of the courtyard' is simply unproductive, devoid of fruits, but symbolically enough its sparse foliage is concealing "a part of the sky from view" (7). This description leaves a feeling that this house is far removed from the winds of change and has a suffocating atmosphere --- a house which makes it impossible for its inhabitants to aspire and be free because even the blue sky has been expunged from their vision. Under the shadows of the date palm tree is growing a henna tree, having a life of its own, breaking the monotony of the house by nestling the sparrows and pigeons on its tender branches.

As has already been stated that *Twilight* is showcasing Indian Muslim culture for the West — detailed accounts of marriages with all its ceremonies and festivities serve as tableaux. There is a chapter which begins with the mention of the month of Ramadan but Ahmed Ali delineates and ventures on a discussion of fakirs and

mystics and their distinct traits. The chapter culminates with the festivities of Eid which includes a kite flying session and an ice cream treat for the whole household. These details are targeted for the western readership and thus, writers like E. M. Forster find the novel to be “new” and “fascinating” (Coppola: 20). The native reader finds these details artificial and futile and as Muhammad Hasan Askari puts it that the novel “describes such familiar and ordinary customs, festivals and everyday aspects of life with so much detail that we tire of it.” (Askari: 30)

Summer season has been dealt with great detail in the novel. It’s hot and dreary days and unbearable nights serve the purpose of effectively projecting a decadent social order. Occasional storms not only fill the scene with dust and dirt but symbolically blur the vision and cast a dark spell. This dreary landscape and ferocious weather is not the undoing of the Englishmen and therefore it raises the question --- why this unsympathetic depiction of Indian weather? Ali nurtures his novel with descriptions of misery, death and sorrow. Ali reaches the crescendo with the description of summer of 1918 when Delhi with its city wall demolished and already breathing its last; receives the ultimate blow in the form of First World War and influenza epidemic:

Nature herself was rebellious and seemed angry with the people of Hindustan. Hundreds and thousands of Indians had been killed in the war, acting as fodder to the German guns.... Influenza broke out in epidemic form... heart-rending cries of lamentation and weeping began to rend the air. There was hardly any house where a death did not take place.... (229)

These passages where Ahmed Ali recounts history with its unforgiving nature embracing Indians in its deathly coils are not in any way reflective of Mir Nihal’s tragedy and his personal suffering fails to get alleviated to the level of universal.

Azaan, the call to prayer for the Muslim faithful, is another important metaphor that has been used to reconstruct the Orient. Ahmed Ali punctuates the novel with Azaans which fills the faithful with piety but the novelist misses no time to elaborate that Nisar Ahmad, who calls the Azaan and has a golden voice, “was a shady businessman”. (92)

Early in the novel the readers are introduced to the family of Mir Nihal --- his wife Begum Nihal, his daughter Mehro a young girl of fourteen, his son Asghar and Begum Jamal, the widow of his late brother. Mir Nihal’s other two children Begum Waheed and Habibuddin are introduced later in the novel. After a brief introduction of all the main characters, Asghar ventures to the house of his friend Bari where the novelist takes his readers to a detour of a kite flying session. The effective lines of the Persian poet Hafiz, which first occur as an epigraph in part one, are rendered futile when they are uttered by lovelorn Asghar:

The night is dark, the waves rise mountain high,
And such a storm is raging !
What do the pedestrians know of my plight moving
Upon the shore that’s safe and dry ? (32)

Ahmad Ali has portrayed the women of the novel as the ‘other’ --- the ‘other’ whom Ali hardly knows about, women who live and die within the four walls of their houses, and Ali it seems is appreciating them for their futile existence:

The world lived and died, things happened, events took place, but all this did not disturb the equanimity of the zenanas, which had its world too where the pale and fragile beauties of the hothouse lived secluded from all outside harm, the storms that blow in the world of men. The day dawned, the evening came, and life passed them by. (39)

At length he describes the women of zenana quarters, gossiping, tacking laces, having cat fights but hardly any female character has been dealt with in detail and it seems that Ali has choked the voice of the subaltern. Mehro’s marriage to Meraj – the ugly looking middle aged man with severed features --- is an interesting example of Ali’s portrayal of women of the zenana quarters. They are shown to be oblivious of what was happening around them, to the extent that they were unaware about the disclosure of Meraj’s ugly looks. Mehro’s plight is that she can neither rebel nor demonstrate her grief and has no choice but to accept what has

been decided for her by her loved ones. Ali in a devastating irony comments that what the women cared for in this atmosphere of festivity was showing off their “finest clothes” (188). It was men who were exposed to difficulties and hardships and women of the zenana quarters lived in oblivion quite satisfied with their circumstances:

Inside the zenana things went on almost as before. Mehro’s absence, however, was felt by everyone. Otherwise there was no change. The four walls stood all around, shutting the women in, keeping all fresh air away from their dreary lives which, however, never seem to them monotonous. (200)

Twilight abounds with female characters but most of them are on the verge of mental breakdown and are leading a life of suffocation, pain and agony. Bilqeece is introduced for the first time in Asghar’s dream --- as an object of desire and not as an individual in her own right. Bilqeece and her beauty are defined through Asghar. She is the object of desire and what better way to possess her than to have her as his wife. Asghar starts losing his interest in Bilqeece soon after the marriage, and Bilqeece unable to bear this neglect is pushed towards despair. Bilqeece is not allowed to bloom in this frustrating atmosphere and dies an ineffective death. It’s not just Bilqeece who has to suffer this excruciating pain of neglect from Asghar but the real sufferer in the novel is Begum Nihal. She not only faces an untold misery bestowed by her husband but also faces injustice by the novelist himself. She is introduced in the novel for the first time as “an old lady in her fifties” (7). She and many other female characters in the novel have been denied the basic identity of having a name of their own. Their entire existence is tethered to the name of their husbands. Begum Nihal’s suffering is recounted by Asghar in a moment of self-pity. Ahmed Ali plays down her trauma by placing it as an event of the past and the main focus in the present is on Mir Nihal and his tragedy. Begum Nihal is in fact that henna tree which has dared to survive under the shadow of the date palm tree i.e Mir Nihal. She has endured a lot in the past and has moved beyond personal suffering and has given her best by providing warmth, love and care to her children. Begum Waheed, Mir Nihal’s eldest daughter comes into the frame of the novel only when her help is needed by Asghar and he sends an urgent note to her. Symbolically enough the date palm is described in positive and joyous overtones only once in the novel when Begum Waheed comes to visit them. She and Asghar share a unique bonding, and together they reminisce the emotional trauma and hardships of the past. The novel tends to be very depressing at times, emanating from itself a life of monotony, meaninglessness, loneliness and lifelessness (despite its detailed accounts of Asghar’s and Mehro’s marriages).

Ahmed Ali’s fascination for the character of Mir Nihal is very visible in the kind of praise with which he sketches the character. Mir Nihal is described as “ tall and well built” and lending an aura to his character Ali further adds that “His white and well combed beard is parted in the middle, and gives his noble face a majestic look”. (9) He is described as “an aristocrat in his habits ... a typical feudal gentleman”. (38)

The character of Mir Nihal is lavished with praises even by the critics and is often considered as Ahmed Ali’s ‘great achievement’. (Askari, 35) Tragic dimensions have been added to his character owing to his illness and his incapacity to act. But Mir Nihal is no Lear, neither is he Hamlet, at best he is Prufrock, incapable of being a hero and suffering from monotony.

Mir Nihal primarily has two interests in his life --- one being pigeon flying and the other being his young and beautiful mistress Babban Jan who keeps him entertained by her dancing and her youthful body. Death of Babban Jan and the ‘massacre’ of his pigeons by the cat disturbs him to the extent that he gives up flying pigeons forever and moves on to other interests like visiting his friends, having discussions on Urdu language, alchemy and mysticism. Ahmed Ali’s empathy for Mir Nihal is very evident in the novel and is a disturbing fact.

Mir Nihal is portrayed in the novel as the guardian of the age old traditions who doesn’t allow his son to go to Aligarh Muslim University for his education and is quite upset when he sees him wearing English bump shoes. He is outrageous when he comes to know about Asghar’s inclination to marry Bilqeece simply because she is from Mughal descent and somebody in her family had married a prostitute. But Mir Nihal simply fails to ponder over his own actions and aberrations --- his relationship with Babban Jan and the hint in the novel of his own involvement with Dilchain, the maid of the house.

There is a gradual deterioration in the character of Mir Nihal. In the beginning we see his feat of catching the snake by the hand and killing it in an instant. Towards the end he is seen setting traps to kill the rats (216).

Mir Nihal's illness is not just physical --- he is a victim of self-remorse and self-pity. For him it is his own plight which is all pervasive, be it the death of his beloved mistress or his pigeons or later on the death of his son Habibuddin. Mir Nihal's pathetic and futile existence and his failure to move on with the world around him; has been effectively portrayed in the novel:

Mir Nihal lay on the bed, day in, day out, yearning, remembering, buried under a debris of dreams. ... The world around him moved on or frittered away. He remained where he was, living in the constant twilight of regrets, watching the young die one by one and gain their liberty from the sorrows of the world. (239)

The novel has its own moments of brilliance --- the sections where Ali writes about the coronation of the king and the memory it evokes in the mind of Mir Nihal of the mutiny of 1857. But these sections have not been merged with the novel effectively. It has to be kept in mind that it is Mir Nihal through whose consciousness the readers encounter the mutiny. This fact itself diffuses the desired effect. Mir Nihal has never been shown nurturing any patriotic ideas nor is he contributing in any way towards his country or his culture. He is conscious of this fact and thus exhorts his little grandson "But you will be brave, my child, and will fight them one day. Won't you?". (148)

Mir Nihal's concept of culture is quite misplaced, and it gets manifested through his practice of certain decadent beliefs and customs: he gets apprehensive about western influences and fails to connect growth with culture. A close reading of the novel reveals that both Asghar and Mir Nihal are in love with their own thoughts and ideas, and with their own selves. Asghar's love for Bilqeece was a transitory affair but till the time that he was not having her it was a matter of life and death. Mir Nihal also has his own reasons for his liaison with Babban Jan, even his passion for pigeons has been treated like an art. He abandons his business soon after the death of Babban Jan which reflects his lack of sense of responsibility towards his family. He is much concerned about the purity of his blood but fails to stop the marriage of his beloved daughter Mehro with the disfigured Meraj. He laments at length about the British and their corrupting influence on the Indian Muslim culture without understanding his own contribution to this decay. Mir Nihal fails to integrate himself with the fabric of his society. There is ambivalence in what he professes and eulogises and what he practices in reality.

On several occasions in the novel Ahmed Ali has shown his concern for the Urdu language. But by associating the language with a decadent social order perhaps Ali has pronounced an untimely death for a rich language-- A language which was born in India and possesses all the rich hues of Indian culture. In a world where cultures and languages get enriched through influences and interaction, Ahmed Ali writes about how poets of Delhi remained silent on their way to Lucknow, city of rival culture, in order to preserve the "chastity" of their tongue and ended up getting alienated. The poet referred here is Mir Taqi Mir who was bestowed with the title of Khuda-e- sukhan and is one of the most important poets of Urdu . Ram BabuSaksena while discussing the poet writes that Delhi during the time of Mir faced attacks from Afghans and Marathas and when things became unbearable for Mir, he moved to Lucknow. On reaching Lucknow, Mir went on to attend a mushaira where he was ridiculed as he was dressed differently and didn't match the fashion of Lucknow (Saksena 1990:70). This episode occasioned Mir to write the following verses:

Kyabood-o-baashpucho ho poorabkesaakino
Hum ko gharib jaan ke hans hans pukar ke
Dehli jo ek shahar tha Aalam mein intikhab
Rehte the muntakhab hi jahan rozgar ke
Usko falak ne loot ke veeran kar diya
Hum rehne waale hain usi ujre dayaar ke

These verses where Mir laments the lost glory of Delhi have been written around 1783, i.e. more than a century earlier than the setting of Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* ; which covers the period between 1911-1919, a period of British colonial expansion in Delhi and its shift of Capital from Calcutta to Delhi. Barbara Metcalf while tracing the history of modern Urdu writes that eighteenth century "did indeed see the dissolution of central authority and incursions from Afghans and Persians that were devastating for Delhi and the area crossed by the invaders." But Metcalf further goes on to explain that although this was the case with Delhi but Urdu flourished

in other parts of India during this time. It got enriched with regional influences and cannot be proclaimed as a “product of the north” as it had already bloomed in the Deccan region (Metcalf 2006:64).

Twilight laments about Delhi losing its identity, language and culture. It mourns the death of Urdu language much before it faces any such crisis. Ahmed Ali like his protagonist Mir Nihal perhaps believes in cloistered living and thinks it to be the key to survival .It is assumed that like the women of the house the culture and the language can be preserved within the walls of the city and therefore the expansion of the city and the demolition of the walls by the British is seen with suspicion and a sense of betrayal. Ahmed Ali has not delved into the real concerns of the Muslims living in the British India but has played with the familiar themes that of associating Muslims with decadence. Ahmed Ali has not just chained Urdu to a decadent social order but has further exiled it in the city of old Delhi. Ahmed Ali is not the only one who has fallen prey to this trap, almost forty four years later Anita Desai has repeated the same folly. While critiquing Anita Desai’s novel *In custody* (1984) AminaYaqin argues that Desai’s “vision of Urdu is in stark contrast to the opinion of the renowned Urdu novelist Intezar Husain, who has argued that the cultural tradition of Urdu lies in its shifting regional locations. According to him, this language cannot be associated with one region and one culture because it is by nature hybrid and adaptable to new regions.” (AminaYaqin 2006:119) This quality of hybridity of Urdu language has been lost upon Ahmed Ali and thus his protagonist Mir Nihal is full of pessimism and laments the loss of culture and language and fails to relocate himself in the changing scenario.

Ali Husain Mir and Raza Mir have discussed at length some suggestions of Ali SardarJafri which he has written in his essays ‘TaraqqiPasandShairikeBaazMasaail’. Here it has been made clear that progressive literature has no place for the portrayal of “gham-e zaat (the sorrows of the heart or the self)” and further it has been emphasized that “Poets should write verses of optimism (rajaiyat) and eschew sorrow and lament (gham, udaasi, afsurdagi).” (Mir and Mir 2006:32). Ahmed Ali’s novel *Twilight in Delhi* is punctuated with translated versions of Urdu and Persian verses and barring few verses most of the poetry that Ali has quoted deals with sorrow, heartache, love and beauty. I would again highlight the fact that such a choice of verses is not appropriate for Ahmed Ali who was strongly associated with the Progressive Writers movement. The novel has an abundance of Urdu and Persian verses which convey the heartache and sorrow of Asghar and his love for Bilqeece or the agony of Mir Nihal at the death of Babban Jan. Each section of the novel is preceded by an epigraph which conveys the dominant emotion of the section. The characters in the novel are seen frequently quoting Urdu verses of other poets in order to express their own heartfelt desires and sorrows and this lends a lyrical cadence to the novel but at the cost of sincerity of emotions and realism. The novel’s preoccupation with Urdu has been detailed by using the trope of discussions that Mir Nihal engages himself with his friends NawabPuttan and NawabSirajuddin Khan Saeel “regarding the merits of Zauq and Daagh as poets”.(116)

Ahmed Ali’s choice of language in writing his novel is not only significant but is an intelligent step to ensure wider readership and helps him to arrive at the international scenario. Here we have a classic case of an Urdu writer who decides to write his magnum opus, which is going to lament the loss of Urdu and its culture, in the colonizer’s language. While defending his choice of language Ahmed Ali write:

My search has found a direction, India her neglected cause. This cause deserved a worldwide audience. If presented in Urdu it would die down within the narrow belt rimmed by northwest India. There were many instances to show that British injustices in India were dismissed as local matters. But if a case were brought to London, the home government became involved, which depended on public good faith and was answerable to King and parliament. (Ali 2010: xvi)

The novel professes to engage itself with the issues regarding the onslaught of British Empire and the erosion of the identity of Delhi, its culture and language. On the contrary *Twilight* fails to capture the imagination of Indian Muslims and the Urdu speaking populace but manages to fetch critical acclaim from the western writers as it showcases Delhi, shorn of its glory, on the verge of decay.

In a way Ahmed Ali wittingly or unwittingly contributes to the decay of Urdu language and hastens to write a dirge on its sad demise. Like his protagonists Asghar and Mir Nihal, Ali also is in love with the idea of lament. His choice of English as a language to express his ideas betrays his lack of concern for Urdu language

and his use of Oriental tropes to reconstruct the culture and ethos of Indian Muslims hinders his growth as a progressive writer.

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