

The dark phase of cultural conflict in the novel 'Twilight in Delhi'

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Abstract

Twilight in Delhi is a very fine novel crafted by Ahmed Ali presenting the cultural conflict of pre-independence Delhi. Ali captured the very essence of the Old Delhi in the first part of the novel whereas moving to the last part he painfully portrayed the drastic change of the Old Delhi with a noted shift in the culture and tradition. The plot of the novel develops around the central character Mir Nihal and his son Asghar, with their contradicting ethics. Ali's mastery in creating literary pieces is evident at the point where he changes his characters to powerful symbols to highlight the theme of the novel. Mir Nihal, an upper-middle class person with his ideologies deep-rooted in the rich Muslim culture seems to pose a challenge to Asghar's doctrine with its base on Western culture.

This paper aims to find out the very essence of the novel in the light of the theories of cultural studies. The prime focus of the paper is to trace down the elegance of the rich Muslim culture

and Mughal tradition by mainly focusing on the central character Mir Nihal and to picture the cultural clash in pre-independence Delhi as a result of colonial advent.

Keywords: Culture, Post-colonial, Identity Crisis, Cultural Studies, Past.

Ahmed Ali's naturalistic depiction of the pre-independence Delhi in *Twilight in Delhi* makes it a moving novel. Ali not only pictured the elegance of the vanishing Muslim culture but also presented the impacts of Western culture on Delhi. Ali eminently presents the contradicting picture of a father and son to mirror the conflict between two powerful cultures. As the very title *Twilight in Delhi* signifies Delhi is not presented in its pinnacle of glory, but in its utmost tragedy. The author's very realistic impressions of pre-independence Delhi, elevates the novel to new dimensions. Ali's transformation of Delhi into a living entity in the novel offers the readers new vistas of experience, as disclosed in the lines:

...mourned and sung, raped and conquered, yet whole and alive... Yet ruin has descended upon its monuments and buildings, upon its boulevards and by-lanes. The kerosene lamps no doubt lights its streets and lanes; but they are not enough, as are not enough the market and the gardens, to revive the light that floated on the water of the Jamuna or dwelt in the heart of the city. Like a beaten dog it has curled its tail between its legs, and lies lifeless in the night as an acknowledgement of defeat. (Ali, 5)

One of the important areas of concern of cultural studies is "the question of boundaries between levels of culture and the justification of them" (Longhurst, 7). From the beginning of the novel itself, Ali was very successful in pointing out the struggling conflict between the two cultures. In the very first setting itself Ali was bold enough to firmly

manifest the clash between the two cultures, one is the dominant parent culture of Muslims and the other is the emerging subculture of British in India. Ali tries to prove the fact that “culture is not something we simply absorb- it is learned” (Longhurst, 8). Ali had a clear cut intention while sketching the images of a father and a son, with totally detaching characters. With the introductory scene of the son Asghar, Ali started to elucidate the advent of a new British subculture whereas Mir Nihal, the father was presented with the glory of rich Muslim culture. Ali was very mindful in developing the father-son relationship with the complex web of cultural issues and both the characters symbolize the respective cultures. The problems between Mir Nihal and Asghar can be raised to a new platform and can be comprehended as the clashes created between two different cultures when they come into contact with each other. At this point Ali underscores the notion that “cultures are mutually exclusive blocs that may interface, intersect, and interact along a boundary or zone of contact” (Longhurst, 10). For instance, in the novel *Twilight in Delhi*, the interactions between the Muslim culture and the British culture who arrived as part of colonialism seems to describe the relationship between these two cultures in terms of ‘destruction’ of one culture.

Ali used religion as a vehicle to communicate the cultural legacy of Delhi. The rich Islamic religion delineated in the novel is an evidence of the power possessed by the Mughal Empire as well as Muslim folk. A more interwoven view of the relationship between culture and society is shown in the novel *Twilight in Delhi*. This means that culture may influence societal structure, as well as societal structure influencing culture. For instance societal structure had a tremendous change when the British force turned powerful as a result of the decay of the Muslim culture.

An examination of the family life also reveals some of the issues that we have identified in the study of culture. That is within a family adults have great power over the lives of children because human infants are dependent on adults for their survival for relatively long periods of time. One way of understanding family life is to examine relationships and processes in terms of dominant and subordinate culture (Longhurst, 13).

Ahmed Ali used this approach to point out not only the issues of cultural change but also the drastic effects of generation gap. At the first part of the novel, Mir Nihal seems to be commanding as the supreme power of the family and his contempt for the British culture describes the development of the individual's capacity to negate a different culture. But later the scenario gradually changes and Mir Nihal's power slowly started to fade away as Asghar's prominence increases widely. So Ali also proves "that family structures and organization change over time, not just chronological, but also structural, that is as relationships between family members change as a consequence of age and maturation. In all societies, as children grow to adulthood the power of other adults over them diminishes." (Web)

By fixing the two characters Mir Nihal and Asghar, in the plot Ali eminently illustrated the change from one culture to another. With the arrival of British colonial forces in Delhi everything had dramatically changed. The protagonist of the novel 'Mir Nihal' was never able to accommodate with the new traditions. British brought change to the life style of living and government structure of Delhi but Mir Nihal longs to live in the past memories as Ali relates in the novel. Through gradually strengthening the prominence of Asghar, Ali is actually trying to showcase the emergence of the British subculture. The historical scenario is used by Ali as a tool to emphasize the 'twilight' of Delhi and how Mir Nihal and his family

goes through this twilight, as the story of great decay unrolls. Ahmed Ali by grasping the nucleus of his novel in a single word 'twilight' has crafted a plot in which individual life, culture and Delhi symbolizes the entire gamut of Muslim era. Khademul Islam relates it as,

Delhi, the symbolic center of Mughal power got it the worst in the aftermath of 1857. The sons and grandsons of the last emperor, the sorrowful Bahadur Shah Zafar, who had taken refuge in Humayun's tomb, were shot dead in front of him. An estimated thirty thousand people died in the reprisals. Muslim nobles and commoners alike fled the city. The Jamia Masjid was used as a barrack. All houses, mosques, bazaar and Urdu bazaar within 448 yards of the Red Fort were demolished. In short, Mughal Delhi was wiped out (Islam, 118).

The novel unfolds in such a way that the advent of western culture is portrayed through the changing attitude of Asghar. On the other side Mir Nihal witnesses the decay of his social and cultural values which he had been cherished throughout his life and his life turned to be a totally stressful one as Ali relate "Life has become a burden, the time is ripe for death; The space of existence has shrunk into a narrow cell" (45). Mir Nihal finds the situation truly difficult when he notices the changing attitude of his son Asghar and his adaptability to the emerging subculture of British. It was easy for Mir Nihal to identify Asghar's rebellious nature as a result of the arrival of new British culture. When his son adopted the British fashion and feels proud to wear English dresses and shoes and insisted to marry a girl of his own choice, Mir Nihal saw the pathetic down fall of the rich parent culture as well as the gradual growth of new subculture. Since Mir Nihal was so much entangled to

the splendid past of Muslims and that of the magnificence of Delhi his soul cracks as he saw the ruination of the same. All these painful happenings cause a severe mental shock for him and cause split in his individual and family life. Ali used language as a tool to picture the change in cultures, as the first part of the novel presents the beauty of Urdu literature with the frequent use of Urdu poetry, whereas when the novel shifts to the second part the narration becomes dry to note the dangerous change in culture. Ali purposefully makes the second part of the novel harsh to turn it into an elegy on the departure and death of Muslim civilization, as echoing in the lines of Bahadur Shah's pathetic poem

Ravished were the people of Hind,
So unenviable their fate.
Whoever the ruler of the day saw fair
And free was put to sword (Ali, 140)

As the novel progress, Asghar molds himself as a symbol of the change. Throughout the novel he signifies a need for transformation from the old to new and towards the last parts of the novel asserts the transformation in the society. Mir Nihal's contempt for Western culture acts as a reason for Asghar's attraction toward it. Asghar seems to strongly oppose the older generation's views on the British culture. Mir Nihal's strong rejection of Asghar's affinity towards European fashion and insult faced by Asghar's wife Bilqeece when she wear an English shoe reflects the restless mind of the older generation. But at the inner level small incidents like this also reveals the attitude of youngsters towards western culture. Since the

objective of cultural studies is “to understand culture in all its complex forms and political context within which it manifests itself” each and every events in the novel are significant (Longhurst, 5).

The characterization of the second most important character, Asghar in the novel is cleverly done by Ahmed Ali, by introducing his revolutionary approach. Asghar’s life in a multi-cultural society makes him a typical Indian Muslim youth who is totally directionless. Whereas Mir Nihal is fully immersed in the thought of freedom struggle, Asghar seems to be totally indifferent to the widespread freedom movements of 1919. He was least concerned about it, where he focused his full concerns on his individual life. That is he lived in his own world where other things are negligible and insignificant. At this point Ali is trying to relate the aggressive nature of western culture using the symbol of fully restless Asghar: “He was unconcerned whether the country lived or died” (Ali, 181)

Ali presents the eccentric features of Asghar from the very beginning of the novel to pinpoint his indifference. Mir Nihal’s first comment on Asghar, immediately after his introduction in the novel presents the strange attitude of Asghar which a typical Muslim family in pre-Independence Delhi can never accept. The first face to face encounter between the father and son explores the idea that they both belongs to two entirely different poles, as Ali captures it in the novel:

...Mir Nihal stops and turns to Asghar and says in an angry tone:

‘You are again wearing those dirty English boots! I don’t like them. I will have no aping of the Farangis in my house. Throw them away! ...’ (Ali, 13)

The clash between the two cultures is the setting of the novel. However more than the focusing on the facet of the conflict, Ali travelled through the impacts of such a conflict, which is truly unpredicted. Both the central incidences that are the gradual downfall of Mir Nihal and the trifling victory of Asghar clearly mark a shift in culture. As the Ali brings in the novel, when there is a problem between two cultures within a society a shift in the prevailing culture is necessary. But the question Ali poses is, 'will the shift in culture be beneficial'? On the account of Mir Nihal's life the query seems to be totally insignificant, but the question is truly relevant while considering Asghar who longed all his life for such a change. Ahmed Ali's talent as novelist is marked at this point, where the novel takes an unexpected turn. The twist is reflected through the life of Asghar, who suffered more agonies after the shift of culture than under the strict parental culture. In simple terms, his life turned to be a saga of miseries, grief and sorrow.

When Mir Nihal is not totally responsible for own his fate, Asghar seems to be totally responsible for his own fate. Ali marks the evident shift in culture by showing the realistic pulse of reality by detaching it from the memories of past as well as from the expectations of future. Ali pathetically conceals the shift in the prevailing culture through a painful verse as:

Out of pity someone had put

A lamp upon my grave at night;

But oh, the wind was envious

And with one gust put out the light. (Ali, 108)

Conclusion

Twilight in Delhi, “an irreplaceable record of the vanished life and culture” not only marks the elegance of Old Delhi but also points the dullness of New Delhi (Dalrymple, 2). With the introduction of Mir Nihal’s son Asghar, the plot of the novel turns to be more complicated. Both the characters, Mir Nihal and his son Asghar seems to be in conflicting positions throughout the novel as both stands for two entirely opposite ideologies. While Mir Nihal’s ideologies were flourished in the strong dogmas of Muslim culture, Asghar’s doctrine was totally influenced by the Western norms. Ali brilliantly developed the father-son relation with the complex web of cultural issues. The clash between Mir Nihal and Asghar can be raised to new dimensions by comparing it to the conflict between two cultures. Like Ali presents when there is conflict between two cultures the result will be terrific, it will not be beneficial. For instance, the ultimate tragedy of Mir Nihal as well as Asghar signifies the aftermath of a violent cultural conflict.

Life has become a burden, the time is ripe for death;

The space of existence has shrunk into a narrow cell.(Ali, 28)

Ali creatively crafted the character of Asghar to showcase the influence of western culture on the rich parent culture. Life in a multi-cultural society makes Asghar totally directionless and distracted. Asghar who finds himself restless under the strict Muslim culture got easily attracted to the European culture with its care-free style. Asghar considers the western culture as a solution for all his problems under the parent culture and social taboos. He longs for a new culture which is capable enough to mark a change in the social scale. While others including Mir Nihal got fully engaged to the ideas of freedom struggle,

Asghar seems to be dispassionate to the notions of freedom struggles. So each and every aspects of Asghar symbolizes the selfish motives of the emerging culture. Throughout the novel Ali creatively used the character of Asghar to represent the cultural change in the society.

The Rowlatt Bill has been passed

The English have gone out of their wits.

The inscription did not communicate anything deep or significant to Asghar. He merely looked at it askance, felt a little frightened, and walked on. He had his own sorrows to think of, his own life to set right. He was unconcerned whether the country lived or died; the world might last or come to an end. He did not care. (Ali, 248,249)

Religion plays an important role in the formation of a culture, so Ali used religion as a tool to communicate the very intricate culture of Old Delhi. The grand description of Muslim customs and traditions opens a wide window to the culture of Old Delhi. The old inhabitants of the Delhi shared a special bond with the Muslim religion. They valued the rituals and rites of Muslim religion as a part of their lives. So it is evident that, the elegant culture of Old Delhi is a product of the rich Muslim religion. Ali's splendid description of Muslim tradition adds immense beauty to the novel.

A gentle breeze stirred up, and another party of qawwals began to sing. Their voices rose on the wind and fell, carried away by the breeze. They were singing a poem addressed to Mohammad, and their voices and the sound of clapping came together:
Ya Mohammad, Mohammad, Mohammad...(Ali, 47)

Ali presented the life of Mir Nihal as a never ending record of misery and tragedy. Since he was a man of past, present turned to be a long nightmare for him. One of the major blow's Nihal faced in his life was his son's strong passion towards the new subculture of British. Throughout the novel the character of Mir Nihal shared the powerful notions of older generation and parent culture of Delhi. The older generation was not ready to tolerate the advent of colonial power at any point of time. Ahmed Ali also tried to showcase the fact that whenever an individual encounters colonialism his stern mentality and his rigid adherence to his values don't let him accept the realities of life and ultimately brings tragedy in his life. That is, Muslims ruled on India from many centuries but with the arrival of British, the whole civilization has faced a huge setback and got shattered. Ali in this way doesn't favor imperialism but he want to present the real picture. Mir Nihal who lived in the illusion of the splendid past finds it so difficult to live in the devastating present. The adverse effect of colonialism or imperialism cannot be considered as favorable at any point, but Mir Nihal's personal attitude towards these things seems responsible for his ultimate tragedy. Pathetically, he becomes a victim of paralysis in his last days. Here, the tragic situation of the protagonist embodies the woeful situation of Delhi as a whole city.

His days were done and beauty had vanished from the earth. But life remained over which men had no command and must go on. He was weary and tired, limp like a shaken hand. His world had fallen to pieces all around him, smothered by indifference and death. Yet he was still alive to mope like an owl, and count his days, at the mercy of Time and Fate. (Ali, 275)

Reality is unpredictable, as Ali relates in the novel, reality is nothing but just broken pieces of past. Last part of the novel opens the dark face of realistic picture of Delhi during the colonial advent. As evident from the novel, reality challenges the social order of society and it has a very terrific effect on the inhabitants of Delhi. The cultural conflict between the Muslim culture, which is the parent culture and the western culture resulted in the emergence of a new culture. The new subculture neither shared the sentiments of parent culture nor reflected the spirit of western culture. On the other hand, the new subculture presented a terrific social situation. With the emergence of the new subculture the grand tradition of Delhi parted from the daily life of people. To mark this shift in the society, Ali purposefully brings vast change in the language towards the last part of the novel. The rich Urdu verses vanish from the plot of the novel to illustrate the harsh realities of New Delhi.

The emergence of a new subculture by unplugging the roots of Muslim culture turns the life of Mir Nihal darker. But he became a pathetic image of tragedy when he became a victim of paralysis. But Mir Nihal's downfall does not symbolize the ultimate success of Asghar in life. Even though both of them were in conflicting positions throughout the plot, tragedy was not ready to spare any of them. The answer to the crucial question at the end of the novel, 'Does Asghar satisfied with the new subculture?' reveals the dark facet of reality. Asghar who longed for a new culture also seems to be trapped in the cruel hands of fate. Reality neither touches the sentiments of Mir Nihal nor captures the passion of his son Asghar. Reality turns to be non-beneficial and it in fact poses great challenge to the lives of both Mir Nihal and Asghar. Ghalib's woeful verse seems to reflect the ultimate tragedy of Old Delhi:

My despair does not know
The turning of the wheel of Time;
The day turned disastrous
Knows neither dusk nor dawn.(Ali, 45)

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