

Subverting the British Raj: Delhi as a Metaphor of Resistance in Ahmad Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940)*

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Abstract

Written in the wake of the eventful years of the All India Progressive Writers' Movement and Association during the late 1930s, Ahmad Ali's Twilight in Delhi has generally been regarded as a Delhi Saga. Despite being labeled by the English publisher as a 'subversive' work of an Indian writer, the novel has hardly been explored from the aforementioned pigeonholing. Scholars have mainly examined the novel by exploring the recurring themes of nostalgia and loss looking from purely Eastern romantic perspectives influenced by Persian and Urdu literary traditions. This paper attempts to fill a major lacuna in the studies so far undertaken on this novel. Twilight is marked as a debut which spawned the progressive and subversive literature in South Asia. Taking the city of Delhi as a metaphor of socio-cultural resistance against the Farangis and their Raj, the paper will explore that the overwhelming nostalgia and the great sense of loss are subversive in their nature. Also the novel's emphasis on the past glories of the Indo-Muslim civilization bears in itself a deeper meaning of resistance against the British occupation.

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1. Introduction

Initially published from London in 1940, *Twilight in Delhi* (henceforth called *Twilight*) has generally been seen by literary scholars as a romantic saga of Delhi, recounting the individual and collective niceties, jollities, actualities, and idiosyncrasies in a withering and decaying Delhi during the first two decades of the twentieth century. The novel as a whole explores the life of Delhi during the first two decades of the twentieth century and in part retrospects the tragic and traumatic days of the 1857- non-communal Indo- Muslim milieu of Delhi.

Twilight was published from London during the twilight of the British Raj. It was when the British novelists were recreating the images of British India in their fiction and the Empire was caught between her glory and guilt. On the contrary the Indian novelists were particularly fascinated with ‘the British finale’ and they were occupied with their nationalism and were looking forward to parting of Britain from India. The creative genius was shaping into a completely new mode of writing that was predominantly progressive, subversive, and indigenizing. This mode of writing was an amalgam of the intersection of various cultural, socio-economic and political factors. This was the beginning of the South Asian novel laden with progressive uproars, radical changes, blends of misery and hope and the colonial perplexities of victory and anguish.

In 1939, following the publication of *Angarey*, a bold collection of Urdu short stories which led to the emergence of the Progressive Writers’ Movement and Association, India. Ahmad Ali arrived in London with the manuscript of this novel; he had” already enjoyed a reputation of sorts and notoriety in India as a writer of avant-garde often somewhat subversive short stories in Urdu” (Anderson, 1971, p. 81).

The publication episode of *Twilight* suggests the postcolonial subversive impact and rapport of the novel. Ahmad Ali took *Twilight* to England for publication and showed it to E.M. Forster. He liked it and associated it with *A Passage to India*. The Hogarth Press London agreed to publish it but soon the publisher informed Ali that “the printers found some portions of the book ‘subversive’ and were unable to publish it”. However, the director of the Hogarth Press, Mr. John Lehmann suggested deleting “the chapter and passages the printer found objectionable” so that the book could be published. Ahmad Ali refused to do so because he believed that” they were the historical portions dealing with the War of independence of 1857” and these parts were “basic to the theme of the novel” (Ali, 1994, p. vii). Nevertheless, Ali agreed with a condition that if E. M. Forster thought these parts to be removed then he would agree to revise them. When E. M. Forster came to know of the entire matter, he upheld the reality and the right of the novel to be what it had been originally and he “reacted inevitably and said that the portions were quintessential to the book and did not see how they could be deleted without emasculating the whole”. Interestingly

enough, Virginia Woolf, the then moving spirit of Hogarth Press had interceded (on Forster's recommendations) and the novel got published along with the 'subversive portion' (Ali, 1994, p. vii-ix).

2. Method

Considering Delhi as a character signifying resistance against the Raj, the paper examines *Twilight* as a subversive text. The methodology is based on the textual analysis of the novel within the parameters of the argument in question explicating in light of the notions of resistance comprehended by Frantz Fanon (1925-1961) and Edward Said (1935-2003).

3. Discussion

There is an abundant sense of loss in *Twilight*. It is a story of the fading of "a whole culture, a particular mode of thought and living" as perceived by the writer. The plot starts with nostalgia for the glorious past of the city of Delhi which metonymically represented the non-communal, Indo-Islamic civilization of the Medieval India and progresses with subversion of the colonial subjugation of Delhi culture and cultural denigration of the natives.

Delhi epitomized the true spirit of the medieval reconciliation of the various diverse social, cultural and religious strands prevailing in India. It was the capital of a realm whose demographic composition posed challenges and offered opportunities on a global scale. It was a harmonious blend of Vedic, Buddhist, Turk, Afghan, and Central Asian values. The colonial rule not only posed a most serious despoiling threat to the culture and economy of India but it also transformed the natives' individual and collective consciousness.

The overwhelming sense of nostalgia in *Twilight* can be regarded as a motif for subversion asserting a strong cultural resistance of the people of Delhi to the political and cultural aggression of the British Raj. Particularly, when the capital of the Empire in India was being shifted from Calcutta to Delhi during the start of the second decade of the twentieth century, there was deep resentment among the people. The novel depicts this disillusionment of the people of Delhi and their strong subversion against the Raj. The residents of Delhi resented the changes that the Empire wanted to bring to the city. Delhi was not merely a city for them; it was the cultural saga of the centuries old Indo-Muslim civilization. It could be argued that the Empire was demolishing this living history. Fanon (2004) has observed that the colonialist often "distorts", "disfigures", and "destroys" the past of the colonised (p. 149).

Narrowing the argument further, the recurring nostalgia and deep sense of loss, which are in the foreground of the novel, are deployed as tools for the subversion which according to the novelist is "basic to the theme of the novel" (Ali, 1994, p. vii). More specifically, the novel abundantly refers to the glory of Delhi and its splendid culture and expands the narrative to subversion and resistance. Retrospecting the glorious past, Ali writes of Delhi as the city of dreams and reality and now the beautiful face of this city turns 'to be changed beyond recognition'. The *Delhi Wallahs* pass bitter remarks and denounces the Farangis. Chandani Chowk once a splendid cultural panorama of Delhi — the heart and soul of the city — is now

demolished by the Farangis. It was so vibrant a place that with it associated the sweet memories of almost every *Delhi Wallah*. The disfiguring of the Chandani Chowk enraged the people. Delhi's "uniqueness and oriental atmosphere were destroyed" (Ali, 1994, p. 204-5). The historic city walls behind which there were still the remnants and glimpses of the niceties and beauties being showcased in the havelis and kothas were fallen and in the words of Ali (1994):

"[Delhi] Once the heart of the subcontinent and the symbol of its glory, was dogging the shadow of its memorial, like Time the ruthless destroyer, into the new frontiers which did not accept either its historicity or its collectively representational personality, or even its human identity now lost forever in the forced amnesia of plucked-out memory" (p. ix).

Outside the fairy land of the oriental metropolis of Delhi, far from the grandeurs of the Delhi and Turkoman Gates, Feroz Shah Kotla, and the Lal Qala, the Empire was erecting "a new Delhi" that "meant new people, new ways, and a new world altogether" sweeping the *Ganga-Jamuni* tradition and erasing the "old culture, which had been preserved within the walls of the ancient town" (Ali, 1994, p. 205-6). Consequently, the city, once sentient with the most diverse patterns of life and rituals, was now "in the danger of annihilation" and would become the city of the dead, inhabited by people who would have no love for her, nor any associations with her history and splendour" (Ali, 1994, p. 205-6).

This 'new Delhi' was the beginning of the downfall of the *Delhi Wallahs* who were the custodians of the centuries old cultural splendours of the Indo-Muslim civilization in India. But the *Delhi Wallahs* were prophetically foreseeing the fall of the Raj:

"The seventh Delhi had fallen along with its builder, Shah Jahan. Now the eighth was under construction, and the people predicted that the fall of its builders would follow soon. Its foundation had at least been laid. From the eventful year 1911, which marked in a way, the height of British splendour in India, its downfall began" (Ali, 1994, p. 205).

It is at this point in the novel that the Delhi emerges as a metaphor of resistance laden with a strong sense of nationalism giving her people the hope of freedom and the courage for standing against the Raj. The novel sounds "prophetic rumblings of distant thunder", that will soon dawn a new era of hopes and aspirations and freedom (Ali, 1994, p. 250). This specifically echoes Fanon's slogan of anti-colonial political struggle that comes after the cultural resistance. Fanon (2004) argues that the colonised will soon realize that "the existence of a nation is not proved by culture, but people's struggle against the forces of occupation" (p. 113).

Edward Said (1994) has extended Fanon's argument that "the empire never gives anything out of goodwill. It cannot give Indians their freedom, but must be forced to yield it as the result of protracted political, cultural, and sometimes military struggle that becomes more, not less adversarial as times goes on" (p. 249). This argument can be strengthened by referring to the direct instances in the novel that

show the cultural resistance, subversion, and revolt of the natives against the Raj: the throwing of a bomb at Lord Hardings when he was holding the 'Imitation Darbar' as the Delhi people called it, during the coronation ceremony of George V, the surging of the yet another phase of revolt during the second decade of the twentieth century "was gaining ground all over the country" and "dissatisfaction with the foreign yoke had spread", the natives being "trapped" to fight for the Empire and "acting as fodder to the German guns" in the World War 1, in 1917 the beginning of the Home Rule Movement ignited a fire of anger and disgust in hearts of Indians, and then after the Rowlett Bill the entire country was protesting "for the freedom of their Mother Land (Ali, 1994, p. 241-44).

Ali delineates "the surface of life both in its grotesque and its most exquisite manifestations" and he is aware of the cultural imperative, the bitter memories of the colonial rule and its impact on the natives particularly the Muslims of Delhi and Lucknow, the latter is depicted in his novel *Ocean of Night* (1964). His nostalgia for the glorious past of the golden days of the medieval India is coupled with his deep sense of loss strengthens his subversion and revolt. We cannot overlook a very strong perception of the values of the Indo-Muslim civilization and History in the novel. The novel derives its strength from the deep overwhelming collective perception of the social and cultural forces at work in ancient, proud, diverse but harmonious Indo-Muslim civilization before the British Raj. It can be argued that apparently Twilight in Delhi "is a pale simulacrum of the Delhi culture" but from Fanonian perspective it is subversive and resistive against "the encroachment of an outside civilization" (Gowda, 1998, p. 643-44).

Towards the end of the novel, the nostalgia and yearning of the protagonist, Mir Nihal, get into revolt and subversion. He remembers his early life and times that is "buried under the debris of dreams, [and] memories of days and hours came swarming like flies upon him". . . Delhi had fallen, . . . India had been despoiled; all that he had stood for had been destroyed" (Ali, 1984, p. 250).

But outside in the streets of Delhi, the shouts and the sounds of gun are heard louder and 'Tommies' and the Indian policemen move around, and wherever they would see the mob they would open fire on them. The resistance of the Indian is turning into reaction 'a new wave of freedom had surged across the breast of Hindustan' and 'a fire of anger and hate' ignites 'in the hearts of Indians'(Ali, 1984, p. 250) and every child of Delhi feels proud to recite the following political song which got fame during the Balkan War:

The wish for glory and martyrdom
Has begun to sway our hearts again.
We shall try his skill and see
What strength is in the enemy's hand.

Let the time come we will show
What courage there is in us still.
Why should we tell you now what we
Have in our hearts? –the power of will.

But, traveller on the road of love,
Tire and weary not in the way:
The pleasure of tramping the desert is
Greater the farther is the goal away.”

(Ali, 1984, p. 250-58).

4. Conclusion

In closing, contending characteristically from the Fanonian perspective, the postcolonial writers evoke or create a precolonial version of their own nation, rejecting the modern and the contemporary, which is tainted with the colonial status of their countries. Thus the novel attempted to present cultural resistance and political struggle. Subversion is one such recurring motif that both implicitly and explicitly has overwhelmed the novel. The novel vernacularizes almost exclusively local preoccupation showing the evolution of cultural resistance into political and reactionary encounter with the Raj in the novel. Reflecting on his memories of the War of independence in 1857, Mir Nihal during the Coronation Procession in 1911 in Delhi, pointing at the Farangi riders says to his grandson:

‘See there go the horses and the Farangis’ . . . ‘Don’t you see them? Those are the people who have been our undoing, and will be yours too . . . ‘But you will be brave, my child, and will fight them one day. Won’t you?’

Naseem looked at the horses and the men; and two tears drops hung on his eyelashes and glistened in the sun.

‘You will be brave, ‘Mir Nihal repeated as he wiped the child’s tears with his fingers, ‘and drive them out of the country. . .’ (Ali, 1984, p. 153).

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