

Ambivalence as a Cultural Imperative in *Twilight in Delhi* by Ahmed Ali

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ABSTRACT: In Post- Colonial Studies, the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized is beset by confusions produced as a result of a shared and yet a fractious history of contentious multiplicity. The ambivalent subject-position of the colonized subject is often ignored by the colonizers. Consequently, the colonial discourse circulates an ambivalently stereotypical image of the colonized subject. In the colonial Indian sub-continent, a similar irresolvable complexity features the nature of the relationship between the British and the Indians. Instead of reading Ambivalence as an after effect of colonial enterprise, the paper intends to establish that Ambivalence is present in the Indian Sub-continent by default. It is rather one of the defining features of Indian culture. The indecisiveness, fluid identity, dual and amoebic nature of these people is read in this paper through an analysis of *Twilight in Delhi* by Ahmed Ali.

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The notion of ambivalence has been viewed as one of the many after effects of the colonial rule in the Sub-continent. The paper aims to contend, through a study of Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*, that Ambivalence has always been present as an essential character of the people of the Sub-continent. The concept of Ambivalence in India is not as simple as to be presented as the "double articulation" (Bhabha 126) produced as a result of mimicry of the colonizers by the colonized. It is much more complex than that. Different ethnic groups had been co-habiting India long before the British came. In *Twilight in Delhi*, the characters are presented in a twilight phase of their lives and consciousness. Twilight itself, is not just the physical description of their living conditions but also their consciousness. It is for this reason that the characters in this novel may appear right yet wrong, good yet bad, white yet black, holy yet unholy, spiritual yet physical, lively yet gloomy, sublime yet mundane, English yet Indian, hopeful yet fearful, servile yet rebellious, coward yet courageous, lovely yet hateful, religious yet skeptic, mystical yet worldly, absorbent yet repulsive, thereby suggesting a continual presence of a conscious or unconscious ambivalence which characterizes the life of the people in Delhi (India).

Ambivalence is at the very core of Delhi in *Twilight in Delhi*. The title *Twilight in Delhi* sets the manner in which the societal structure of Delhi, the city, is going to be presented in the novel. The city of Delhi is a symbol of life as well as death. It has been built, destroyed and rebuilt so many times. It stands for life, glory, attraction and at the same time for destruction death and sadness. The glory of the past still reflects through its enervating architect thereby exemplifying Ambivalence for it brings together the new and the old, the contemporary and the historical. The past of the city had not rendered it lifeless and it still throbs with a vibrant life. The grandeur and the romance of the buildings of the Mughal empire gets blurred with the winding streets of the new city. The contrast between the glorious past and the reality of present reinforces a continual existence of the city, an existence which is ambivalent in its character. For instance, during coronation, the city presents a mix of east and west.

"Most fantastic and colourful dresses rustled in the streets of Delhi from long robes to short coats, and gowns to waistcoats, and head gears of a hundred kinds. In and out of this holiday crowd, walked the Tommies in

their drab uniforms, or Englishmen in their plain clothes.” (Ali 134)

Even the architecture is an amalgam of the British and Indian. “In front of the Town Hall and around the statue of the English Queen, one enormous stand was erected;...The stands continued through the Fatehpuri Bazar with its majestic mosque and grateful shadows, and continued to the Mori Gate and beyond.” (Ali 135).

The same ambivalence or duality may also be discovered in the characters of this novel. Here, the spiritual always gets amalgamated with the physical which results in a kind of derailing or a deterioration which tells a lot upon the duality of the characters or sometimes not even duality but a confusion of values which does not let the characters focus upon one aspect only. Or, the characters tend to associate themselves with something sublime but they always derail into something base. So the minarets and the domes of the mohallah are compared to a very physical imagery i.e. of women’s breasts. A similar example follows when Asghar, in his dream-like vision thinks of the Holy Prophet but soon his thoughts travel from the holy to the mundane. His dreams are Ambivalent not only in their literal sense but also in their symbolic significance. He finds himself haloed in a white light and walking over a Milky Way. He feels the sacredness of the path when he realizes that the Holy Prophet too had walked on this milky way. The incandescent stars around him, however, very soon get metamorphosed into beautiful maidens. His impression of having a holy dream dissipates and is replaced by an erogenous desire to dance with and embrace these beautiful women. The presence of the prophet and his worldly lover (Bilqees), the holy and the physical, all in the same vision betokens the Ambivalence of the vision itself.

Ambivalence is presented as such a natural element of Asghar’s character that the reader does not sense the smooth transformation of Asghar’s spiritual experience into a sexual one. This worldly love, too, vanishes after the marriage, signifying more deterioration in his morals. This journey finally ends into something that is “void, deep and dark and dim” (Ali 16). The Milky Way which gave him a feeling of holiness, purity and enlightenment takes him to a path which is dark and dull. From the heights of sky, he falls to an “abysmal depth” (Ali 16) which is dark and hollow. This ambivalence is further intensified by the spatial bathos that Asghar is subjected to in the same dream. “He is lifted up and

up towards the sky, floating in the stratosphere, ... with his back towards the earth and his face towards the sky... Fear overcomes him and he is hurled back and falls through empty space, and a sinking sensation comes upon him.” (Ali 14 -15). Asghar’s Ambivalent position is symbolically presented here as his being lifted upwards and sinking down with his back downward and face upward.

Love in Indo-Pak is a mixture of the feelings of hope, happiness and life as well as of death, sadness and gloom at the same time. The ambivalence of a lover is very much visible in his oscillating state between hope and fear which are also considered to be the foundations of Faith by the followers of Islam. One can see death, darkness, and gloom in Asghar’s letter to his sister in which he relates his love for Bilqees and his desire to marry her. Bilqees, later on, on bearing with Asghar’s cruel behavior had similar feelings. “Two divergent feelings possessed her.” (Ali 203). She remains at a loss as to see whether her lover will accept her or not. “This suspense was killing, this wavering between two worlds.” (203). The weather heightens the emotions and feelings of the lovers. “The broken ends of summer and winter seemed to be united by the pleasant autumn night which created a gentle sadness in the heart...(205)”.

Mir Nihal who has great love for his pigeons and for Baban Jaan cannot express his grief over the death of both. The society he lives in demands him to be manly, not grieving over the loss of delicate things (including a courtesan) thus showing delicacy. In his attempt to not to show his feelings, he suffers a lot and something within him dies. Yet he goes on living in this ambivalent state of life and death. He views this world as a house of many mirrors. He is sometimes afraid of his own various images which come across him in different forms. In this respect, he is a representative of many other Indians who like him have multiple images of their own self and are not may be sometimes able to recognize their own image when it comes affront.

A dark complexion and a golden voice which makes Nisar Ahmed to be identified with Bilal Habshi is also metaphorical and exhibitant of the Ambivalence existing not only in his character but also in the opinion of the people around him. Though he is a shady businessman and sells impure ghee, people considered him as having a right to go direct to the Heaven for calling Aazan in such an awe-inspiring voice. He, who has the ability to fill the hearts of the people with “reverence and awe” (Ali

92) remains unable to purify his own heart. And though his voice rises above the noise of the city “leaping to the stars” (Ali 92) his body remains indulged in the earthly vices. The Ambivalence is manifest also in the opinions of the people who remain divided in their approach towards the British Raj. The conversation between Siddique, the bania and Mirza, the milk seller reflects the same division of opinion. Some of them trust the British as the ones who are bringing prosperity and some think that they are only bringing misery and hard luck to the people. They curse the Farangis and at the same time are dying to see the Great British King in procession. “ ‘You should thank the angrezi sarkar for this,’ said Siddiq, the bania. ‘For it is through it that we are getting all this’. ‘What has the angrezi sarkar to do with this?’ said Mirza, the milk seller, who sat with his legs arched up in front of him. ‘God alone gives us our daily bread; and Him alone should men thank.’” (Ali 136). The perspectives of the Indians on the economic activity in the colonized India remain diametrically opposed. The staunch believers still hold God responsible for their subsistence but the skeptics among them could not simply ignore the material factors accelerating the pace of economic boom and expanding the volume of trade in India. Habib ud din, a government official is all praise for his British masters when the rest of the family, especially the elders “...burned with rage and impotent anger...” (138). Bhabha refers to this feeling as “an uneasy Ambivalence at the heart of the cultural unity”. (Bhabha 135). The characters in the novel, nurture the feelings of patriotism and would appreciate their children when they sing patriotic songs to them but remain unable to do anything. When Nasim recited some of the verses of a political song expressing the feelings of Muslims, he was appreciated by all. “Everyone showered praises on Nasim, not so much for his recitation, perhaps, as for the patriotic sentiments expressed in the poem itself.” (253)

The Ambivalence in their characters incapacitates them. They remain unable to achieve anything in their lives, neither the emotional strength nor the sustenance for practical life. It is the same way that Emerson means “...seeing double means losing focus...” (Sommer 165). According to Summer “Emerson’s coinage of double consciousness amounted to social bankruptcy for Blacks, who were pulled in opposite directions and getting nowhere.” (Summer 165). While contemplating the reasons of the fall of Delhi (India) Habibuddin brings forward the ambivalence in the nature of their last king Bahadur Shah Zafar. “He loved to be looked upon as a martyr, and was too fond of a sufistic and easy life.” Despite having the desire to die as a martyr, he “allowed

himself to be deceived by that traitor, Mirza Elahi Bakhsh, who was an English spy and had sold himself to them.” (Ali 141). His wish wish to be looked upon as a martyr, therefore, results in nothing better than “imprisonment, murder and banishment” (141) for his whole family. Kambal Shah, however, dislocates the locus of their discussion by saying that the downfall of Delhi was brought about because of a curse of a *faqir*. The very practical analyses of the failure of Indians therefore, soon transforms into a “reverence and awe” (142) which would not let them ponder upon anything which may lead them to realize their ambivalent nature.

Asghar is the greatest example of the ambivalence prevailing in India. On the one hand, he is very proud of having English manners e.g., wearing a nightgown, having sofas and couches etc. On the other hand, he imagines himself as a “Rajput knight or a chivalrous Mughal prince rescuing a lovelorn maiden” (Ali 180). He wants to be loved by his wife as Mumtaz Mahal or Nur Jehan loved their royal husbands. He himself wants to act as Jahangir or Shah Jehan. He still acts as an Eastern when he is disappointed on having a baby girl. Bhabha writes about such Ambivalence “The black is both savage...and yet the most obedient of servant... he is the embodiment of rampant sexuality and yet innocent as a child; he is mystical, primitive, simple-minded and yet the most worldly and accomplished liar and a manipulator of social forces.” (Bhabha 82). The stars too have an uncertain meaning to convey. The same stars which once used to convey a message of love and beauty to Asghar, seem insipid and lusterless after his infatuation with Bilqees is over.

The girls in the Indian culture are brought up among many of the fairy tales which promise them a prince charming who will take them into a beautiful world where love and happiness will prevail. After introducing this beautiful world to them, they are thrown into a hard and harsh world which stands in direct contrast to this world of their dreams. Mehr has been dreaming about such a prince charming. The moment she starts thinking about her fiancé Miraj, she thinks of “kings and princes and soldiers.” (Ali 8). She links the world of the fairy tales with her future world. “She associates him with the prince in the story with whom the princess was in love. (Ali 8). And though it is a society in which men hold power, Mir Nihal remains unable to decide for the marriage of his daughter Mehru. “For though women hold a subordinate position in

Indian life, yet in certain matters they can take the law in their hands, and marriage is one of them.” (Ali 71)

The characters in the novel are presented as strict followers of the basic practices of Islam. No matter how urgent the business is, at the call of the mouazzin, the men rush to the mosque to offer their prayers. When the month of Ramazan begins, “the faithful began to fast” (Ali 126) despite the scorching heat or long days. Yet, most of their social codes and practices go against the basic tenets of their religion. For instance, Begam Waheed, after the death of her husband, can go for a second marriage according to Islam, yet is forced to live her life with her deceased husband’s relations. Ahmed Ali marks the Ambivalent state of affairs prevalent in the society, “For though Islam permitted her to marry again, the social code, derived mostly from prevailing Hindu practice, did not favour a second marriage.” (Ali 36). This push and pull towards the religious approach deters them from deriving comfort or solace from their religion. When Begam Nehal comes to know about the relationship between Mir Nihal and Dilchain, she tries to seek refuge in the word of God. Asghar recalls her condition, “She used to sit there staring in front of her, reciting verses. Then in a fit she would tear her clothes and wander about the house, blacking the walls with verses...” (Ali 45). She is then left in a deserted house for a cure but the condition worsened. Asghar relates, “Mother got on to the neem tree, you remember, and dangling her legs recited verses loudly.” (Ali 46). Shams, after losing his wife, “became more mystical and religious than ever” (229). Another character named Hameed is left with the qawwals to be cured for his madness. The mystical poems, however, enhanced his pain. “...his soul contracted into a point with pain, and he was filled with an ecstatic agony, and he beat his hands and head on the floor without being conscious of pain.” (Ali 52). The madness in all these cases becomes greater with the further ripping of the split in the society which is divided between its religious affiliation and the deviation from the same religious dictates.

The characters are driven by two equal forces into two different directions resulting into what Sara Suleri refers to as “the intangibilities of the East”. (Suleri 389) and Bhabha as “identity’s permanent polymorphosity” (Bhabha 135). The character of Molvi Dulhan is quite problematic. He belongs to a mystic order who renounce this world to dedicate their lives to God. He, however, at the same time is interested in Alchemy which is the art of converting metals into gold. Having claimed

to renounce the world, he at the same time is attracted towards its vagaries. In an attempt to stick to one identity, these characters ignore certain aspects of their own selves. “the disavowal and abjection of parts of one’s self, in service of a ‘fixed identity.’” (Nandy 79). Shams thinks it appropriate to flirt with maids as far as the façade of his piety is maintained. “Shams often flirted with the young maidservant who had been engaged, although outwardly he was as pious and religious as before.” (242) Mir Nihal offers prayers right after his discussion with Nawab Puttan on having or not having a mistress. His religious devotion comes in contrast here with a non-religious practice of keeping mistresses. This Ambivalence in the colonized is not “an extension of colonialism’s hidden schizophrenia” (Bhabha 139) as forwarded by Bhabha.

Asghar seems to disapprove the extra marital affairs of his father or vulgarity in any form. He knows what happened between “father and Dilchain...” (Ali 45) and claims it to be the reason for his mother’s loss of sanity and their own misery when they were young. He, however, does the same with Bilqees and his daughter by having an affair with Bilqees’ sister Zohra. He is repulsed by the vulgar antics of Budho, Durgi Chamari’s daughter and his old friend Hameed’s beloved. He looks down upon her dealings with boys, yet wants to enjoy the whole scene. He, too, becomes a case of “...almost but not quite_” (Bhabha131) as put into words by Bhabha when he talks about the ambivalent world of the “not quite / not white”. On seeing his uncle coming that way, Asghar misses the scene and regrets it afterwards. “So he moved on, sorry not to have seen the end of the wager.” (Ali 53). His body here is at odds with itself. One part of it is in conflict with another giving way to an ambivalence in his behavior.

The incomprehension and unreadability of the Ambivalent Indians renders them not just an interesting character but also a mysterious air which the Britishers remain unable to read. The reason behind this is the generalization of the image of the Indians by the Britishers who fail to see the ambivalent nature of their being. The Indians, for instance are excited to see the procession of the English King, who, at the same time, is the cause of their misery. Ali writes, “they were dying to see the big fair. For the residents of Delhi never miss an opportunity of enjoying themselves... Even during the terrible days of 1857, when the gun were spitting fire, they used to climb up on the roofs to watch the fun of cannon balls...” (Ali 137). The firing was as much a fun for them as the

“fireworks during the festival of Shab-barat”. (137). Ashis Nandy remarks, “What is also abjected from view are ambivalence, contradictions and concepts of pluralism...” (Nandy 79). The contradictions can be viewed in the opinion of Mir Nihal’s family when they hear the news of the pavilion being burnt two days before the coronation. Despite being the members of the same family, each one of them reacts differently. “Mir Nihal and Habibuddin felt secretly happy; but Kabiruddin kept quiet out of loyalty to those from whom he got his ‘salt’. Begam Nihal, however, cursed the English, feeling happy at the news.” (Ali 137).

The characters, therefore, remain divided in their external and internal, public and private, familial and communal lives thus exhibiting an ambivalence which features their political as well as religious identity.

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