

Historical Forces at Play: Creative Voices of Mirza Ghalib and Ahmed Ali and Pre-Partition Socio-political Conditions of Muslims

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Abstract

The present paper aims at reviewing pre-Independence sub-continental history and its remains in the works of two literary figures, namely Mirza Ghalib and Ahmed Ali, who belonged to the 19th and 20th centuries, respectively. The prolonged process of British colonization, the sequel of defeats of the Muslim emperors and lords, the gradual loss of cultural, literary, and moral values—were the developments that the artists and writers of the time had to witness. Like all others, they were haunted by the nostalgia of their glorious past. But unlike others, they avoided passivity and went on documenting the history in their works. A detailed review of the works of Ghalib and Ahmed Ali shows how poets and authors made Muslims to realize the loss of their identity and selfhood, and the brutal treatment that they received from the colonizers. Though written in elegiac tone, their writings invoke a glorious past and induce some sense of pride among Muslims, while pointing out their follies as well.

Key Terms: History of the Subcontinent; Mirza Ghalib; Ahmed Ali; Muslims in pre-Independence India; Literature

The area which constitutes Pakistan has always been at the crossroads of history. For thousands of years, politically, militarily and economically, it has been the centre stage of world affairs, attracting traders, adventurers, pilgrims, holy men and warriors. Culturally, it has been the melting pot of diverse races, languages, religions and customs. The ancient Silk Route, part of which is revived in the Karakoram Highway between China and Pakistan, has been a busy trade route. It still conjures up images of romance and mystery and resonates with names such as Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan,

Tamerlane and Marco Polo (Luce Boulnois, 2004). Pakistan's strategic location is where the road from China to the Mediterranean meets the route from India to the Central Asia (Pakistan Overview, p. 1). The traces of many world civilizations and empires are found at this junction. Pakistan's proximity to Afghanistan, China, Iran, India, Central Asia and the Middle East is the single most important factor which has shaped the many turns and twists of history. Through the notorious passages of the Hindukush and many other passes came a number of adventurers and invaders. None could, however, leave behind as lasting an influence as a young Muslim General, Muhammad bin Qasim who, braving the rough waters of the Arabian Sea, came to change the destiny of the Sub-continent forever. His political acumen laid the foundations of an Islamic polity in the Subcontinent, culminating into Pakistan.

In the wake of this Arab conquest came a wave of Sufis, saints and scholars from Arabia, Persia and other regions of Muslim influence. Their plurality of thought shaped a new culture of tolerance and mutual coexistence in the Subcontinent. Thus culture and religion formed a natural symbiosis. Numerous other adventurers came to conquer this land of plenty, yet none could match the glory and power of the Great Mughals. The remains of their splendor are scattered all over the subcontinent, as they were great connoisseurs of art and music. They have left behind great architectural monuments which speak volumes of their skills and tastes. As the sun set on the ailing and crumbling Mughal Empire, another mighty power, the British, took over the destiny of the teeming millions. The concern of my study begins at this point when the fading Muslim glory of almost a thousand years was giving way to the rising sun of the British Empire.

If a single factor needs to be mentioned to explain the present condition of the Muslims of Pakistan and India, it should be the fact that they belong to a warrior race that had ruled the world, with some variations of time and place, from the 8th to the 18th century. The nostalgia of that glory still haunts them and is one of the major causes of the prevailing socio-political situation. For centuries, they controlled the politics and economy of this region and shaped its society and culture. Unlike many other indigenous religions and thought systems, like Buddhism and Jainism, Islam created a distinct

identity for its adherents and refused to be absorbed within the medley and vast multitudes of Hindu India.

The Muslims in the subcontinent could be classified into two main classes:

- (i) Traders and invaders
- (ii) The converts and their descendants

In Muslim India, the former class was in control of economy and governance of the country, even if they were not more than eight (08) million. The latter class was more than eighty (80) million. Muslims constituted but a fifth of British India's population, a minority most unevenly distributed and territorially consolidated only in Sind and in the Western Punjab. The highest proportion of Muslim population was in Sind, where three out of four people were Muslims. The lowest was in the areas of the Central Provinces and Madras, where Muslims were about one-fortieth and one-twentieth of the total, respectively. In the Punjab Muslims were rather less than half of the population, in Bengal about a half. In the North-Western Provinces and Awadh, Muslims formed rather more than a tenth of the population. In the Bombay Presidency, with the exception of Sind, they were even less than that. Over the centuries, professional elite of soldiers, officials, scholars and mystics from Central Asia and from the eastern Muslim world settled in the towns of 'Hindustan'. They created their own urban Muslim service society around them, but were content to treat the countryside not as an area for settlement. However, inland movement of their descendants triggered the conversion of non-Muslim populace. These conversions owe a great deal of debt to the preaching of Muslim Saints, Sufis and other mystics. P. Hardy observes:

Much has been said, and rightly, of the role of Muslim saints in bringing about conversions to Islam by force of personal example. In Bengal particularly, but also in many areas away from courts and fortresses, their understanding, indeed sharing of popular religious psychology, their tolerance, their cultivation of inner religious experience, ... persuaded many to enter the Muslim fold ... Muslim saints did not always insist on a total and immediate abandonment of all old habits and

social ties on accepting Islam, and were tolerant of deviations from the letter of the Muslim law, in say, rules of inheritance. (Hardy, 1972, p. 9-10)

The first census reports of 1870s and 1880s, carried out by the British administration, revealed that the Muslim community was widely dispersed, the greater part of which was in fact of native Indian descent and which in most rural areas and in many towns was indistinguishable in occupation from surrounding non-Muslims.

The death of the last great Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb in 1707, after a reign of forty nine years, proved a turning point in the history of India and the destiny of the Muslims. The wheel of fate, thus far put off by the iron-hand policies of Aurangzeb, started to spin against their will. The war of succession among his sons, political intrigues and civil war further debilitated the Empire. Raids by foreign invaders like Nadir Shah in 1730s and later on by his successor Ahmad

Shah Abdali in 1750s undermined the central authority and the Empire started to crumble into the smithereens of tiny independent principalities. Political cells proliferated and loyalties became divided. Bahadur Shah-I who ruled between 1707 and 1712 was the first Mughal emperor to face uncontrollable revolts. After his rule, the Mughal empire witnessed a decline due to the lack of an able successor. Jahandar Shah was not only incompetent but also very unpopular among people. The British took full advantage of the prevailing hollowness of the Emperor's authority, particularly in Bengal. They played upon the internal differences of the powerful malignant classes. Clive, the Deputy Governor of Fort St. David at Madras, started negotiating with the Hindu malcontents. He also succeeded in winning over the not unwilling Mir Jaafer who had been dismissed from his post of Paymaster General (Bakhshi) by Siraj-ud-Daula, the Governor of Bengal (1756-1757). Because of the intrigues and betrayal of Mir Jaafar, Siraj-ud-Daula was defeated by the British in the Battle of Plassy on 22nd June, 1757, and was executed. Siraj-ud-Daula's death was mourned by many, because he appeared to them, in his idealism and youth, to be a symbol of a forlorn hope. As a result of this victory the British became *de jure* ruling power in Bengal.

It is not out of place to mention here about the policies of the East India Company as to how they combated and finally dismantled

the threatening power of Tipu Sultan at Seringapatam (Mysore). Haider Ali, a military adventurer of genius, an extraordinary man of action, died of cancer on 7 December 1782. He left behind Tipu Sultan, a son, who to the courage and determination of his father, added a national vision. He tried hard to reinforce a national front against the British by corresponding with the Ottoman Caliph. He compelled the British to sign the treaty of Manglore on the basis of mutual restitution of conquests and exchange of prisoners. But in sheer violation of this treaty Lord Cornwallis, the Governor-General (1786-1793) negotiated with Nizam and Maharattas and entered into a "Triple Alliance" against Tipu Sultan. The result was that Tipu was stranded. A double attack was launched against Tipu, from the north-west (Bombay) and the east (Madras). Seringapatam was besieged. The city was stormed on 6 May 1799 and the walls being breached, Tipu was seen leading the defense. He died with a sword in his hand and had been declared a hero and a martyr. With his death British suzerainty was complete in the southern India (see Padmanabhan, 2011).

As the British had wrenched power from the Muslim rulers of India, the ensuing mutual enmity and distrust between them remained deep-seated for a long time to come. The Hindu upper-classes benefited tremendously from this situation. Their economic development under British encouragement made them politically mature. On the other hand, the Muslims kept on plunging into the abysmal position: politically, economically and socially. Especially psychologically they, as a nation, were in a wreck. The colonial administrators of the East India company enforced certain laws which reduced the Muslim population into utter poverty and socio-political non-entity:

1. Law of resumption which divested the Muslims of their land, bringing down the peerage of Muslim landlords from 95% to 5%.
2. Misappropriation of Muslim religious and educational trusts to ensure the elimination of the separate identity of Muslims.
3. Sudden replacement of Muslim Educational system based on Persian language and Arabic script with English system

and language. This was a vital blow to Muslim culture, society and economics.

4. The Muslim recruitment in the army was stopped. Also the doors of civilian employment to the Muslims were closed.

Analyzing the position of the Muslims after their downfall, William Hunter writes:

The truth is that when the country passed under our rule the Musalmans were the superior race, and superior not only in the stoutness of heart and strength of arm, but in power of political organization, and in the science of practical government. Yet the Muhammadans are now shot out equally from Government employment and from the higher occupations of non-official life. (Hunter, 1974, p. 145)

In such dire circumstances, they decided to take dire steps. And thus, without any planning or war strategy, in 1857 they began the fateful war of Independence. The results were devastating. The remains of the fabric of their society, built during the last many centuries, were also destroyed. The last of Mughal emperors was Bahadur Shah-II famously known as Bahadur Shah Zafar in the world of Urdu literature. He was exiled to Burma after War of Independence. Sir Syed Ahmed Khan depicts the doomsday scenario in such bleak colours.

No calamity started from heaven which before reaching the earth did not seek the house of Mussalmans. In all the English newspapers and books, I saw during those days, I invariably marked one thing namely "none is wicked and mischievous except the Muslims, Muslims, Muslims ... (Khan, 1997, p. 67)

The renowned Urdu poet Ghalib (1797-1869) who himself had narrowly escaped the gallows has depicted the plight of his people in *Dastanbuy*. The British were "ruthless in victory; the slightest suspicion was sufficient for a man to be hanged". Ghalib tells us that "the people have lost all their power to endure" and that "in these days we think of ourselves as prisoners and we are in truth, passing our days like prisoners". He further describes the gruesome conditions by saying:

Most of the citizens have fled the city, but some caught between hope and despair, are still living inside the walls. So far no information has been received about those hiding in lonely places outside of Delhi ... The hearts of the helpless inhabitants of the city, and those of the grief stricken people outside, are filled with sorrow, and they are afraid of mass slaughter. (Ghalib, 1970, p. 50)

While writing about the Mughal princes, Ghalib tells us “some were shot... and some were hung by their necks with ropes and, in their twisting, their spirits left them.” Ghalib has given a clear account of differences in the post-Rebellion political fortunes of Hindus and Muslims. He maintains:

In January 1858, the Hindus were given a proclamation of facedom by which they were allowed to live again in the city ... But the houses of dispossessed Muslims had long remained empty and were so covered with vegetation that the walls seemed to be made of grass – and every blade of grass tells that the house of the Muslim is still empty. (p. 58)

What the narrative invokes then is the beginning of the total destruction of the Muslim nobility, hence the Muslim political power, in the post-Rebellion political order. The hallmark of this political cataclysm was fall of the Muslim elite and the flight of Muslims from Delhi. Altaf Hussain Hali, a renowned leader of the post-Independence Muslim literary renaissance, writes that the conditions were exceedingly harsh for the Muslims. “To incriminate a Muslim, there was no need for any proof” (Hali, 2004, p. 8).

However, the awe of Muslim power in the Subcontinent was such that it took the British one hundred years since the Battle of Plassey in 1757 to finally overthrow the Muslim rule in 1857. This is not a mere point of rhetoric since there are very plausible reasons to support the view that the socio-political and economic institutions that the Muslim rulers built in the subcontinent were of such nature that India had truly become a unified country. Prior to the Muslim rule, India had never been a political unit even under the greatest of Maurya dynasty rulers like Chandragupta and Ashoka. It is one of the greatest

ironies of history in India that the Muslims made India one country under a strong central government and ultimately they were compelled to demand a separate homeland for themselves. Before the Sultanate period, India was divided into small principalities. The Arab Muslims conquered it and gave it its name 'Hind', derived from 'Sind', the mighty Indus River. I. H. Qureshi has elaborated upon this point in *The Struggle for Pakistan*:

The conception of a land called India was created by the Muslims, before whose rule its several parts were known by different names. In fact, having seldom known political unity, it was a collection of several countries with their distinctive languages and customs, though it had a certain amount of homogeneity because of a common civilization and outlook on life. (Qureishi, 1974, p. 2)

They turned the vast Indian geography into a single political unit, at the same time preserving its cultural diversity. The great irony is that they have been accused of breaking India's geographical and political unity. Suffice is to say here that the post-Independence political scenario and workings of All India Congress pushed the former rulers of India into isolation and thus they were compelled to think in terms of partition. In the wake of the "Mutiny", as most British historians like to refer to the events of 1857, the Muslims were subjected to a persistent campaign of calumny and veritable vendetta.

The fall of Mughal Empire started a chain reaction in which changes of epic proportions started to beset the society, politics and culture of the whole of India. However, the Muslim community was the worst affected. As a nation their morale dipped extremely low and nostalgia gripped them firmly. The wheel of fate was constantly turning against them, and the visions of their past glory and prosperity haunted them. Out of the nostalgia came the creative response of many writers during the second half of the 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib, an inhabitant of Delhi's power corridors around the War of Independence, writing in Persian and Urdu, was perhaps the most poignant and subtle voice of the 19th century, who, both in his poetry and prose, took up the theme of

decline and fall of the Muslim rule and with it their rich culture. In 1854, he wrote to his friend, the poet Junun,

*Inside the Fort a few princes get together and recite
their verses. Once in a while I attend these gatherings.
Contemporary society is about to vanish. Who knows
when the poets would meet next or meet again at all?*
(in Hyder and Jafry, 1970, p. 28)

Three years had hardly passed when the court, along with its total milieu came crashing down amidst unprecedented upheaval and violence. Prescient poet observer as he was, Ghalib responded to it in the following words of eternal veracity:

*The world is contingent – boast not of greatness
This zenith one day defeat will depress.*
(in Hyder and Jafry, 1970, p. 76)

In one of his letters he laments the lost glory as: “Alas for my fate; born to be struck down by misfortune and to see my granaries reduced to ashes. I had not the means to ride to war like my ancestors” (Varma, 1989, p. 28).

Expressing his gnawing distress on the British occupation which had totally sanitized the Muslim elite’s aspirations in the political sphere, Ghalib bewails:

*They have plucked the pearls
From the banners of the kings of Ajam,
And in place have given me
A treasure-scattering pen*
(Varma, 1989, p. 78-79)

Ghalib had sensed, by virtue of his imagination and intelligence, the eroding foundation of the Mughal edifice and the fundamental change in its concomitant socio-politico-economic institutions. He demonstrates in the following verses the painful feelings of this irrevocable metamorphosis:

*The wind is contrary, the night pitch dark,
And the sea is lashed by storms;
The anchor is broken
And the ship’s master is asleep.*
(Varma, 1989, p. 88)

The scathing sarcasm in the following couplets, in spite of the deliberately ambivalent imagery, says Pavan K. Varma, exhibits clearly the cognizance of the lack luster of the old order.

*Were I not robbed in broad daylight,
How could I sleep so well at night?
No fear of theft remains now
I give blessing to the dacoit
How unfair for us to claim the return of past glory
What has been stolen was but a debt due – 'tis not robbery.*

(Varma, 1989, p. 90)

Another couplet expresses the sense of helplessness quite explicitly:

*Misfortune came, and having come
Made no signs to leave
A checkmate somehow was deflected
And the king got reprieve.
(Varma, 1989, p. 90)
Further he complains to God
Thou hast set over us
The sky for our destruction;
Whatever the robber has from us snatched
Does not reach thy treasury*

(Varma, 1989, p. 90-91)

Ghalib set a standard tone for the coming writers who kept on bewailing the loss of an affluent civilization. The following themes are recurrent in most of the writings of the time.

- (i) Loss of culture
- (ii) Loss of identity and self-hood
- (iii) Utter destruction of Muslim institutions especially, educational and financial system.
- (iv) Atrocities that they suffered at the hands of their colonizers and
- (v) A nation-wide low morale and the resultant nostalgia.

Ahmed Ali was the second prominent creative writer who took up all these themes, first in his short stories, and then in his celebrated novel in English *Twilight in Delhi*. In the introduction to this book, he

himself narrates how the English publishers were reluctant to publish the novel due to certain 'subversive' portions which would give rise to anti-British sentiments. It was only at the interference of his great contemporary British writer E.M. Forster that the book was ultimately published. Ahmed Ali also discusses at length the purpose of writing such a book:

Be that as it may, my purpose in writing this novel was to depict a phase of our national life and the decay of a whole culture, a particular mode of thought and living, values now dead and gone already right before our eyes. Seldom is one allowed to see a pageant of History whirl past and participate in it too. Already, since its publication, the Delhi of the novel has changed beyond nostalgia and recognition. For its culture had been born and nourished within the city walls which today lie demolished; and the distinction between its jealously guarded and well-preserved language and the surrounding world has disappeared in the rattle of many tongues even as the homogeneity of its life has been engulfed by the tide of unrestricted promiscuity. (Ali, 1984, p. x)

The treatment of this major theme by Ali is unique. In fact, before the publication of his first novel Ali had already published a number of short stories that earned him notoriety, particularly due to a collection of short stories, *Sholay*, that he published in collaboration with Sajjad Zazeer and other prominent progressive writers of his time. Ali's story 'Hamaari Gali' (later translated by himself as 'Our Lane') has the same theme in miniature as that of *Twilight in Delhi*. In the short story, he narrates the story of the non-cooperation movement started by Gandhi and actively participated by all segments of society. During this movement, the lives of many were destroyed by the British high-handedness. Ali uses the locale of a lane in the city of Delhi to frame the lives of its inhabitants many of whom are victims of Imperial atrocities. The story paints an atmosphere of gloom and doom: "The sky was overcast with dust, the roads deserted... In a gutter lay a dead pigeon, its neck bent to one side, its stiff, blue legs sticking up towards the heavens, the wings soaked in dirty water, and

one of its eyes still open, was ugly and sickening” (Ali, 1984, p. 11-12). Stray dogs and beggars are a conspicuous presence in that Mohallah. It represents the collapse of the colonial social order in which the rulers are indifferent to the plight of the masses. Poverty, misery and breakdown of the society and a whole culture are underlined thus by Ali:

He [the beggar] looked mean and insignificant like a swarm of flies over a dirt heap or the skeleton of a dead cat. But his voice had sadness and pathos which spoke of the futility and transience of life. It came from far away on winter nights, bringing with it gloom and hopelessness. Never a sadder voice was heard from a man, and it still rings in the ears. Bahadur Shah’s poem that he sang brought back the memory of olden days when this land had not been shackled in its modern sorrows. (Ali, 1984, p. 12)

A similar imagery of sorrow and doom is abundantly employed by Ali in *Twilight in Delhi*. Through a mosaic of images from the life of his protagonist, Mir Nihal, and his extended family, Ali shows us the loss of a vibrant culture. So much so that the plight of the last Emperor of India, Bahadur Shah Zafar, is depicted in glaring colours by rendering his poetic pieces in English and incorporating them into the text. There is utter sorrow and bleakness arising from the loss of personal identity.

The grandeur of a fallen civilization is not mentioned in any objective or impersonal terms. There are more of broken hearts than broken columns of an army, or burning cities or corpses. Ali quotes Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar’s verses.

*I am the light of no one’s eye
The rest of no one’s heart am I
That which can be of use to none
- A handful of dust am I. (quoted in Ali, 1984)*

And then goes on to relate this personal pain of a nation’s king to the nation’s situation:

And, as if to echo the poet-King’s thoughts, a silence and apathy of death descended upon the city and dust began to blow in its streets, and ruin came upon its

culture and its purity. Until the last century it had held its head high, and tried to preserve its chastity and form. (Ali, 1984, p. 3)

Ali uses powerful imagery, almost like symbols, which paint the old Delhi in grey, overwhelmed by the 'heat and dust'. Bemoaning in nostalgia, he expresses the loss of past glory, decay of the past culture and ideology.

But gone are the poets too, and gone is its culture. Only the coils of the rope, when the rope itself has been burnt, remain, to remind us to past splendor. Yet ruin has descended upon its monuments and buildings, upon its boulevards and by-lanes. Under the tired and dim stars the city looks deathly and dark. ... Like a beaten dog it has curled its tail between its legs, and lies lifeless in the night as an acknowledgement of defeat. (Ali, 1983, p. 3)

However, a paradox is perceptible in Ali's position. He is writing of the tragic loss of a great Empire and an ancient, pure culture and at the same time, it seems, he feels the fall was justified. The characters, through which he depicts the loss and the fall, are portrayed as suffering from moral inconsistency and deformity.

There is no tragic grandeur about them. It seems these characters have been embracing false values nurtured for a long time by their ancestors. One finds the male characters eccentric and strayed and the female quite ignorant of the truth of their situation and high moral values.

However, one may say that the loss of values, in fact, is narrated in terms of the loss of innocence. As if these characters have been living in a state of pigeonholes from where they have been dragged by the mighty force of a new power, and they like pigeons, like to close their eyes. Mir Nihal's pigeons in this respect are perhaps an apt metaphor, while he himself is a representative figure, symbolizing Delhi and its culture. One may say that he is the incarnation of the great city in ruins. Through the related motifs of Kite-flying, Pigeon-flying, Dancing girls, and poetry recitation, Ali has underlined the major theme of his novel, which is the socio-political decline of the Muslims of India. Kite-flying, a sign of an ailing society

with a tattering economy, is absolutely an unproductive pastime. It lacks the spirit of creativity and progress. It stands for purposelessness of their life. A large section of the populace is so much obsessed with a passion for kite-flying that it seems to be the only aim of living on earth. Ali mentions ironically:

The sky was full of kites, black kites and white kites, purple kites and blue. They were green and lemon coloured, red and peacock blue and yellow, jade and vermilion, plain or of various patterns and in different colours, black against yellow, red against white, mauve alternating with green, pink with purple, striped or triangular, with moons on them or stars and wings and circles in different colours, forming such lovely and fantastic designs. There were small kites and big kites, flying low and kites that looked studded in the sky. They danced and they capered, they dipped down or rose erect with the elegance of cobras. They whirled and wheeled and circled, chased each other or stood static in mid air. There was a riot of kites on the sky. (Ali 1983, p. 28)

Another unproductive and futile pastime of Delhiites was pigeon-flying. People were so infatuated with a propensity for it that they would fly their pigeons every morning with a worship spirit. Tending pigeons with utmost care, feeding them more fondly as compared to their children seemed to be the sole charm of their life. Every evening the sky got blotted out with the flying-pigeons.

The sky was covered with the wings of pigeons which flow in flocks. These flocks met other flocks, expanded into a huge, dark patch, flew awhile, then folded their wings, nose-dived, and descended upon a roof. The air was filled with the shouts of the pigeon-fliers who were rending the atmosphere with their cries of 'Aao, Koo, Haa!' (Ali, 1983, p. 17)

Developing clandestine relationship with the dancing girls and visiting them at night to idle away time epitomises the decline of higher moral standards of a society. Youth and age of Delhi were regular clients of the dancing girls. Asghar and Mir Nihal, the son and

the father, would allay their grief by attending on Mushtari Bai and Babban Jan respectively.

As they reached the landing and stepped into the courtyard Mushtari Bai (a dancing girl), who was lying on a bed, got up to receive them. As Asghar saw her he suddenly felt lonely and his heart seemed to burst. Mushtari Bai salaamed them and took them inside the room. (Ali, 1983, p. 74-75)

At the death of Babban Jan, Mir Nihal cried bitterly and disconsolately. Ali puts satirically

Who would care for him when she had gone? His wife was there, no doubt; and so were the children. But the world they lived in was a domestic world. There was no beauty in it and no love. Here, at Babban Jan's, he had built a quiet corner for himself where he could always retire and forget his sorrows in its secluded peace. (Ali, 1983, p. 109)

Story-telling tradition is an important part of all oral cultures. In the following scene we see how in times of decline people resort to such folk tales to give themselves moral and psychological prop.

It must be eleven O'clock, and your father has not come back yet', Begum Nihal says to her daughter. You'd better go to sleep. It's very late.... No, mother, ... the story ... 'It's a long story .. so oppressive. (Ali, 1983, p. 5-6)

Similarly, in his short story 'Our Lane' Ali's characters gather at night to narrate stories that tell them how 'miracles' can bring wonders to the oppressed (Ali, 1983, p. 18-19). Here the scene and dialogue are a perfect example of a number of Ali's concerns:

Oral culture and the tradition of narrating stories.

Social pattern of life of the Muslims.

The city of Delhi is the definitive symbol of loss and Muslim sense of nostalgia.

The city, at least six or seven times in history, has been plundered and destroyed.

But the city of Delhi, built hundreds of years ago, fought for, died for, coveted and desired, built, destroyed and rebuilt, for five and six and seven times,

mourned and sung, raped and conquered, yet whole and alive, lies indifferent in the arms of sleep. It was the city of kings and monarchs, of poets and story tellers, courtiers and nobles. But no king lives there today, and the poets are feeling the lack of patronage; and the old inhabitants, though still alive, have lost their pride and grandeur under a foreign yoke. (Ali, 1983, p. 1-2)

Like William Faulkner in *The Sound and the Fury*, which depicts the decline of the Southern American culture by showing how the Compson family gradually falls from grace and loses their values, Ahmed Ali also depicts the fall of a city, and by implication the whole Mughal Empire, by focusing on the downfall of Mir Nihal family. Lawrence Brander sums up the epic structures of *Twilight in Delhi*, thus:

It offers fascinating historical pictures of the Great Durbar when George V visited India in 1911, of early subversive activities against British rule, of the 1914 war as it affected India, of the horrifying influenza epidemic (when the crocodiles could not eat the bodies in the rivers fast enough), and the serious unrest which the old house in the by-lanes of the old city where the family of Mir Nihal lived, witnessed. It is a picture of Indian combined family life even more vivid than that of Bengali family life in the autobiography of Rabindrnath Tagore. (Brander, 1968, p. 77)

In 'Our Lane', the narrator tells us about an old date-palm tree that was once

heavy with fruit, and the bees flocked round it, descending to the ground in search of food. Birds came to and perched on its expansive boughs, and stray pigeons rested in them at night. Now its boughs had withered, leaves seared and fallen, and its trunk ugly and dark, stood like a scare-crow in the darkness of the night. No more did the birds flock over it, nor were the bees attracted to it... (Ali, 1983, p. 8-9)

To my mind, this is a potent symbol that represents the old glory of the bride of cities that was Delhi, but that lost its beauty and the status of the centre of Muslim power and culture in India. Instead

of bees and beautiful singing birds (might be referring to the poets and artisans of Delhi), only ugly ravens are attracted to it, ravens that might be the emblem of foreign powers that looted and plundered this city to its present state in which we find it in the story. In *Twilight in Delhi*, Mir Nihal's, who once belonged to the Muslim aristocracy, personifies that decline of a whole people who lost political power and cultural ascendancy. But the novel is also about the new cultural fusion taking place due the imperial presence of the British. The make-up of the new emerging social reality is beautifully depicted by Ali in 'Our Lane' too: all sorts of men passed below my window. "Sometimes a person dressed all in white went by finding relief from the scorching sun of the summer under his umbrella." But sometimes under the same scorching sun and indifferent to the heat "a person rigged out in English costumes went by stepping lightly over the sprinkled water or jumping away quickly as someone threw more on the road, avoiding the boys and urchins, or glaring at them for staring at him" (Ali, 1983, p. 5).

David Anderson while writing about this aspect of *Twilight in Delhi* notes that it was an important contribution that highlighted:

The fusion of two cultures. Western English culture, colored strongly by post-Darwinian determinism and pessimism, is merged with the Eastern Muslim culture that combines a reverence for life with a sense of hope. This fusion has become particularly important in the Pakistani literary tradition... (Anderson, 1971, p. 81)

Another clear manifestation of "the fusion of two cultures" is evident when we see Asghar, son of Mir Nihal, entering his home late at night walking quietly on his tiptoe. His outfit is an emblem of this fusion.

He is a tall and handsome young man with his hair well oiled and his red Turkish cap cocked at a smart angle on his head. The upper buttons of his sherwani are open and show the collar of the English shirt that he is wearing under it. ... as he enters his pumps creak, Mir Nihal stops and turns to Asghar and says in any angry tone: You are again wearing those dirty English boots! ... I will have no aping of the Farangis in my house. (Ali, 1984, p. 11)

As it has transpired from the above discussion, the colonial settings, with strong political and critical concerns, make Ahmad Ali and Ghalib prominent postcolonial literary figures. Both have documented the same history adopting similar perspective. However, while Ghalib documented history through his letters and poetic genre of Ghazal, Ahmad Ali did so by exploiting the medium of fiction and critical essays (see Ali, 1993). Although at a broader spectrum both the literary figures experienced similar sociopolitical conditions that caused miseries to Muslims of India, yet their individual experiences were different. While Ghalib survived the War of Independence in 1857, Ahmed Ali studied pre-Independence conditions and witnessed Independence and migration in 1947. Both the writers were believers of Islam despite the fact that they documented some complaints to God. Another difference between the works of Ghalib and Ali was that Ghalib used Urdu and Persian as medium of expression while Ali used Urdu and English as his medium. To recap, the writers under study observed the conditions of the people of the subcontinent, worked them through their creative process and documented them remarkably.

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