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Periodizing the National History/ies: A Comparative Study of Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* and Mumtaz Shahnawaz's *The Heart Divided*.

Abstract

The discourse of history plays a pivotal role in building anticolonial narratives. For the Muslims in Indian subcontinent, this discourse is fraught with contradictions and fissures, both at temporal and spatial levels. The arrival of Muslim colonizers in India dates back to A.D. 712. And the converted Muslims after A.D. 712 find it problematic to define the spatial and temporal boundaries of their history. As native Indians, their history, rooted in Indian soil/space, begins with Asoka and Chandragupta Murya. And as Muslims, they find closer affinity with Muslim invaders. Thus the specific time period i.e. A.D. 712 becomes a site of contestation/intersection between the temporal and spatial versions of history/ies.

*In this paper, I intend to analyse how the protagonists, Mir Nihal in *Twilight in Delhi* and Sughra in *The Heart Divided* imagine their history/ies during the era of colonization. Mir Nihal is proud of his Muslim identity which he finds embodied in the spatial metaphor of the city, Delhi. But the city is not related only to the Muslim rulers. Its old name is Hastinapur and its glory dates back to the classical age of Mahabharata, Asoka and Chandragupta Murya. Contrary to this nationalist imaginary, Sughra, in *The Heart Divided*, feels proud of the temporal history that dates back to A.D. 712. As a favourite of her grandfather, she had heard many stories about the Muslim history beginning from the time of caliphates. Thus both the protagonists build their anticolonial imagination on different versions of spatio-temporal history/ies. I would like to explore the politics of de/ privileging one version of history/ies over the other. And how the state of Pakistan is struggling to locate the points of intersection in the postcolonial religio-nationalist imaginary.*

The discourse of history plays a pivotal role in building anticolonial narratives. For the Muslims in Indian subcontinent, this discourse is fraught with contradictions and fissures, both at temporal and spatial levels. The arrival of Muslim colonizers in India dates back to A.D. 712. And the converted Muslims after A.D. 712 find it problematic to define the spatial and temporal boundaries of their history. As native Indians, their history, rooted in Indian soil/space, begins with Asoka and Chandragupta Murya. And as Muslims, they find closer affinity with Muslim invaders. Thus the specific time period i.e. A.D. 712 becomes a site of contestation/intersection between the temporal and spatial versions of history/ies.

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In *Twilight in Delhi*, Mir Nihal, the protagonist is suffering from political disempowerment in the public sphere. He hates the colonizer but he does not have the necessary power to subvert the power hierarchies introduced through colonial, political and cultural episteme. Escaping into the imagined glorious past serves the purpose of fighting the feelings of cultural and political disempowerment; And Mir Nihal does this by withdrawing into the private space. Though the escape is illusory, it yet helps Mir Nihal to create an alternate history that challenges the colonial historical and cultural superiority. Thus, the past serves as the site on which the narrative of identity is re/written. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said argues that in the process of political engagement with the colonizer, the role of the past becomes all the more important because it cannot be seen as dead or concluded. Rather as a living cultural force in the people's imaginary, it continues to influence the present and shaping the future (Said 1). In *Orientalism* Said had already argued that the major component in European culture was precisely what had made that culture hegemonic both inside and outside Europe: the idea that European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures (7). To counter this narrative of superiority, the native subject narrativizes/ builds his/her narrative of identity with his/her past as the only protective enclosure that can challenge the colonial binaries. Thus, the past becomes a boundary, a space and a point of intersection/contestation between the colonizer and the colonized. It is constantly re/lived through folk tales, myths and real/imagined historical deeds of ancestors. The treasure trove of the past becomes epistemic epicentre of anticolonial imagination. It saves the native from falling a prey to civilizational inferiority.

In *Twilight in Delhi*, the city of Delhi embodies the past glory of the Muslim civilization. It also serves the purpose of building a counter-narrative of civilizational superiority over the colonizer. Mir Nihal, the protagonist, when feels politically marginalized in the public sphere, withdraws into the private sphere of life. As a colonizer cannot be allowed to enter into the private domain of one's experience, hence, he dislikes the colonial mimicry practiced by his son, Asghar. When Asghar comes home wearing English boots, Mir Nihal expresses his disapproval, saying, "You are again wearing those dirty English boots! I don't like them. I will have no aping of the Farangis (13)." At least, the colonizer must be kept out of one's private space to preserve one's cultural purity.

Mir Nihal's peculiar conception of history is embodied in the spatial/architectural metaphor of Delhi, the city. In his anticolonial imagination, the city serves as the source of pride and alterity. He is not like the colonizer because he inherits a rich linguistic and cultural tradition represented by the city. In the opening chapter, we see the city submerged into the darkness of the night. I argue that this darkness is symbolic of the colonial oppression. Mir Nihal listens to the calling of the prayer "Azan" which proclaims that the night is coming to an end. It is the time when the old order of darkness has to give way to the light. In the midst of this silence and darkness, the city stands aloof ---- a personification of the glorious past and its present destruction. Mir Nihal expresses his feeling of loss:

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. ...It was built after the great battle of Mahabharat by Raja Yudishtra in 1453 B.C., and has been the cause of many a great and historic battle. Treacherous games have been played under its skies, and its earth has tasted the blood of kings. Where are the Kauravs and the Pandavs? Where are the Khiljis and the Saiyyeds? Where are Babur and Humayun and Jahangir?

Historical, existentialistic and mythological discourse plays a pivotal role in constructing Mir Nihal's anticolonial imagination. The city of Delhi has been built and destroyed many a time. The process of building and destruction is dialectical. Both these forces contest each other to produce something higher than themselves. In other words, it is a movement towards a higher state of existence symbolized in the text as the capacity of the city to regenerate. Imagining Delhi in terms of Hegelian dialectics saves Mir Nihal from utter despondency. In Hegel, the dialectical movement is not useless as it ultimately tries to reach out to the "Absolute Ideal": the absolute spirit of all modes of existence. At a given point in history, Delhi has either been flourishing as the jewel of the world or it has struggled to rise from the ashes. Ahmed Ali in his introduction to the text explains that seven Delhis have fallen, and the eighth has gone the way of its predecessors, yet to be demolished and built again (Ali xxi). As Mir Nihal witnesses the demise of old Delhi and its culture, he feels an existential vacuity which he tries to make meaningful by imagining/interpreting history in a particular way. Thus both myth and history remain an integral part of his anticolonial nationalism.

Mir Nihal takes pride in the mythological origin of Delhi. It was built after the great battle of Mahabharata by Raja Yudihihithira in 1453 B.C., and has been the cause of many a great and historic battle. As a Muslim subject, he does not have any qualms over dating his historical narrative from mythology binding both the temporal and spatial discourses through the umbilical cord of Indian identity. By imagining history through myth, he has been strategically successful in concealing the fissures imagined through this unchallenged linearity. Not a single word is said about the arrival of Muslims in the subcontinent. The politics of silencing the dissident voices provides Mir Nihal an unproblematic national identity. It accommodates the Muslim invaders as well as indigenous Hindu subjects. Hence no Hindu character appears in the text to voice Hindu nationalist concerns. Both Hindus and Muslims are seen as sharing the same mythology and history. Patrick Colm Hogan labels it as fighting historical nothingness through myth. He argues that one way we reconcile ourselves to nothingness is through myth—myth of origins that explains our condition in a way that contingent matters of history cannot; eschatological myth that allows us to imagine, that whatever has been lost can, finally, be restored. We imagine historical reality and historical nothingness by way of myth (515). As said earlier, the nothingness of history and in turn of life is fought through mythologizing the history and the present human conditions. Mir Nihal's relation with the present is re/negotiated through a mythologized history that ignores the inherent contradiction and presents itself as a homogenous tradition needed to confront the colonial other. This peculiar way of looking at history creates more problems than it claims to solve. First of all it creates monoliths. In other words, the native subject imagines a glorious cultural past as the fountainhead of his/her identity and tries to propagate an uncritical view of

his/her past. It tends to essentialize the identity and imposes on the relevant group a unity of views and experiences they do not, and cannot have (Parekh: 35). The colonizer defines itself by imagining the native as “other” and thus constructs such monoliths as “the West.” It does not mean that these two discourses of identity are free of internal contradictions or fissures but they are silenced in the antagonistic relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Seamus Deane labels it as metaphysical essentialism (9) in which both the groups imagine themselves to possess a monolithic identity. He further observes:

In response, insurgent nationalisms attempt to create a version of history for themselves in which their intrinsic essence has always manifested itself, thereby producing readings of the past that are as monolithic as that which they are trying to supplant (9).

Sughra in *The Heart Divided* shares this essentialist monolithic identity construct. Published posthumously in 1957, the text deals with Muslim struggle for freedom. But during the freedom movement, they are faced with a complex question of re/defining their identity. They feel threatened by the Hindu majority. The democratic power structure, after the departure of the British, would turn them into a perpetual political minority; hence the discourse of identity is revised. In *Twilight in Delhi*, Mir Nihal defined himself by othering the British. But now for Sheikh Jamaluddin family, the Hindu also serve as the “civilizational other” to define themselves as members of a different nation—the famous two-nation theory. In this context, it wouldn’t be wrong to say that *The Heart Divided* is a fictionalized account of the official narrative of the Muslim League i.e. the religion being the sole marker of identity and not language and ethnicity; hence they needed a separate homeland to preserve their Muslim identity. The rise of Muslim exceptionalism during the last years of the Raj has been debated by many scholars. There are different theories to explain it. But it is almost a historical fact that the rivalry between Hindus and Muslims had reached to its peak after 1930 ---- the period Shan Nawaz deals with in *The Heart Divided*. In this context, Ayesha Jalal in *The Sole Spokesman* observes:

By the time of British withdrawal, rivalries between Hindus and Muslims had come to dominate Indian politics. When the British Raj was dismantled, the frontiers of the new states were drawn mainly along the lines of religion. In the making of Pakistan, religion appears to have been the dominant nationality. (1)

The text dramatizes the conflict Jalal talks of in the form of strained relations between erstwhile two good friends Sheikh Jamaluddin and Diwan Nath Kaul. Before the salt movement begins in India, the two families symbolic of Hindu-Muslim presence in India have been enjoying cordial relations. Sheikh Jamaluddin and Diwan Kaul had exchanged turbans and had taken vow of brotherhood, and the friendship thus established between the two families had continued from generation to generation until the present day (Nawaz 18). I see this uninterrupted period of friendship symbolic of the historical coexistence of Hindus and Muslims on the Indian soil. The present day in the quoted paragraph becomes the boundary, the point of intersection that questions the genesis of this relationship looking backward and forward. The present is defined by the past becoming the site on which two nations look backward to redefine its contours. For the Hindus, the past

begins with Mahabharata and for the Muslims, it begins with A.D. 712. A new division of "us" and "them" appears in the discourse of the hybrid Hindu-Muslim Indian identity. As said earlier, Mir Nihal in Ahmed Ali avoids talking about this newly theorized division. His is also a hybrid Indian-Muslim identity which does not feel itself threatened by the Hindu majority.

The politics of nationalism is explored through the characters of Sughra, Zohra and Mohni. Sughra and Zohra, belong to the Nishat Manzal ---- the symbolic representation of the Muslims in the subcontinent. Mohni, the Hindu girl also admires the long history of relationship between the two families. Both Sughra and Zohra are confined to the private space of the home which is further divided into Zenana (a part of the house where women live and men are not allowed to enter) and Mardana (the public space in the private space i.e. women are not allowed to enter in this part). We have the similar divide of the private space into Zenana and Mardana in *Twilight in Delhi*. The divide represents the Muslim desire to keep their women confined only to the private space. Mohni, on the other hand, does not have to follow any such divide. She freely takes part in the public space and thus becomes the first to be a part of the struggle for decolonization. She is also a great admirer of territorialized nationalism advocated by the Congress and Gandhi. She insists on the Congress to be the sole representative of Indians regardless of the religious or ethnic identities. She is shocked when she comes to sell the packet of salt and Sheikh Nizamuddin, the present head of the Sheikh says, "It's not the money, I hesitate to give, but.... You see Mohni, we are not in this." (Shah Nawaz 25). A new divide/identity is in the process of making. He explains his idea of national identity to Zohra:

You know, how we Muslims came here; the first of our ancestors as far back as A.D. 712. You know how we ruled here for nearly 800 years, and you know how the country prospered and art and culture flourished in that period. You also know, the way by which the British came here, first as traders and how they exploited our weakness to become our rulers. You also know that the Indian people realized this too late. That when they did, they rose up in revolt, and it was Muslims who led the rebellion which your school books call the Mutiny 1857. (41)

Unlike Mir Nihal who begins his national history from Chandragupta Murya, the Sheikhs take pride in their association with the Muslim colonizers. The arrival is seen as benign and progressive. The mentioning of the Muslim contribution to art, architecture and culture represents the Muslim desire to be seen them as the sons of the soil. But the British are labelled as looters and plunderers. The selective selection of events from the continuum of history helps building an essentialist identity. Commenting on this desire to link the Muslim identity with the Arab and Central Asian colonizers, K.K. Aziz in *The Making of Pakistan: A Study of Nationalism* observes:

Hindu India extolled Asoka and Chandragupta, for which the Muslims could have no feelings of loyalty or even interest. Muslim India looked lovingly to Muhammad Bin Qasim and Mahmud of Ghazna: the Hindus detested the memory of Qasim, who was the first to invade India, and cursed the name of Mahmud, who had despoiled their temples and shrines. (155)

The Hindu voice is not missing in *The Heart Divided*. Pundit Kaul, Mohni's father explains her the arrival of the Muslim invaders as a sad chapter in Indian history. He says:

I need not go into the details of the Muslim conquest of India. I need not tell you, how early invaders plundered and destroyed and, and the later one's settled here and helped the prosperity and culture of the country. Notables among these were the Mughals, but don't forget that while some of the Mughals were fine and just rulers, there was always a certain amount of resentment among the Hindus at being ruled by them for they were looked as aliens. (131)

For the Hindu colonial subject, the nationalist imaginary is free of fissures and contradictions. For him, anybody who comes from outside is a usurper. But for the Muslim subject, it problematizes the idea of a monolithic, essentialist identity. Though they are the sons of India yet their religious imaginary forces them to look beyond borders. So, with Indian Muslims, religion becomes the point of intersection/contestation where territorial and transnationalistic identity claims engage, challenge, contest and revise one another. Sughra internalizes these mutually exclusive discourses of identity/ies.

Beyond the darkness lay the desert and beyond the desert, strange cites that she had not visited. Across the sea was far Arabia and further still Syria and Palestine and Turkey. Would she never see these lands whose very history beat in her blood? The glorious past was so different to the drab present. (Nawaz 115)

The strategy to locate one's glorious past in some imaginary transnational geographical space has created an unbridgeable divide between Hindus and Muslims. The heroes of the one are the foes of the other. And in the Pakistani fiction in English, *The Heart Divided* is the first novel that deals with this existential dilemma of the Muslim identity in the subcontinent.

Conclusion:

My research shows how the protagonists, Mir Nihal in *Twilight in Delhi* and Sughra in *The Heart Divided* imagine their history/ies during the era of colonization. Mir Nihal is proud of his Muslim identity which he finds embodied in the spatial metaphor of the city, Delhi. But the city is not related only to the Muslim rulers. Its old name is Hastinapur and its glory dates back to the classical age of Mahabharata, Asoka and Chandragupta Murya. Contrary to this nationalist imaginary, Sughra, in *The Heart Divided* feels proud of the temporal history that dates back to A.D. 712. As a favourite of her grandfather, she had heard many stories about the Muslim history beginning from the time of caliphates. Thus both the protagonists build their anticolonial imagination on different versions of spatio-temporal history/ies. The state of Pakistan is still caught up in the dilemma of imagining its historio-cultural roots. By starting its history from A.D. 712, it tends to deny its mythological heritage that begins from the classical age of Mahabharata, hence a constant enmity with India and religious involvement within Arabo-Persian tradition. It is only through deculturizing our religious imaginary that we can return to a South Asian identity which accommodates religion but does not deny the continuity of the history of this soil.

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