

## The Politics of Environmentalism: An Ecological Study of *Twilight in Delhi*

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### ABSTRACT:

In this article, we have explored the nature of relationship between literary narrative and physical environment. Our argument is that the representation of plants, animals and buildings in a literary text not only serves the purpose of providing a natural background to human drama but they also contribute to developing a political statement by the authors. Thus, the mentioning of indigenous plants and animals, serves the purpose of highlighting the features of indigenous identity. In *Twilight in Delhi*, Mir Nihal feels grieved over the loss of political power in the public sphere. He devises different strategies to counter the existential vacuity created by the colonial intrusion in the public sphere. Amongst the various strategies that he adopts, the love for indigenous fauna and flora is the one that serves the purpose of negotiating with the colonizer in aesthetic terms. The local plants, animals and buildings are dear to him because he feels spiritually attached to them. Hence, he reacts strongly to the colonial endeavour of building a New Delhi because the cityscape would be changed. The "neem trees" will be cut down. A new boulevard will be built replacing the old which had an oriental appeal for Mir Nihal. Thus, deforestation becomes a metaphor for dehistoricizing. In other words, the neem trees and the precolonial ambience represent indigenous aesthetics and historical consciousness. And Mir Nihal is incapable of fighting this ecological intrusion. He finds a release or imaginary escape in holding the pigeon flying competition. Thus, the

indigenous fauna and flora becomes a site of imaginative resistance which can provide a temporary release from the colonial cultural and ecological onslaught.

#### INTRODUCTION:

Cheryll Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as “a study of the relationship between literature and physical environment” (p. xviii). This relationship is multifaceted. In the article we have explored how the indigenous fauna and flora play an important part in forming and shaping the indigenous aesthetics. Furthermore, it is argued that the physical environment not only serves the purpose of natural background to human life, but also actively participates in defining colonial subjectivity. Hence, in the public sphere dominated by the colonizer, Mir Nihal, the protagonist takes refuge in the love for indigenous plants, animals, buildings and birds. The human and the nature are inextricably linked with each other. In his dreams, the natural objects take the form of female body. Likewise, his son Asghar, also dreams of the stars in the Milky Way taking the form of female breasts. Then, these stars take the female human form of his beloved Mushtari Bai and he dances in the surrealistic world of dreams and fantasy. Our argument is that these reveries and fantasies define the essential features of human relation/subjectivity in the colonial world. Nature serves as a living character and also as a site of resistance and release for the colonial subject. In the article, we have argued that the natural world informs human subjectivity both in the public and private sphere of life. Moreover, the colonial subjectivity finds the indigenous ecology as the site of identity and resistance through which the colonized can either imaginatively or politically participate in a meaningful civilizational dialogue with the colonizer.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUBJECTIVE WORLD AND NATURE

The novel is divided into four parts. The first part deals with the setting of the stage in which the locale, main characters and thematic concerns are introduced. The story revolves around the family of Mir Nihal, a Muslim nobleman who has withdrawn into himself in the traumatic events of 1857. Mir Nihal feels grieves deeply over the fact that Muslims had lost the war of freedom. Asghar, the youngest son, represents the second generation which seems to develop a working relationship with the colonial masters. The stage is clearly divided into the private and the public spheres. The private sphere consists of the house, friend's circle, and the cultural and the religious traditions, this private space has not yet been breached by the colonizer. The public

sphere consists of the political institutions the colonizer has created to govern natives. Mir Nihal feels most disempowered in the public sphere and he tries hard to preserve his power in the private sphere. Nature, in the form of birds, trees, pets and weather conditions becomes an integral part of both the private and the public spheres. The subjective world of the main characters, their desires, ambitions, disappointments and frustrations at political helplessness are conveyed through the imagery borrowed from the world of nature. Thus, nature or ecology becomes an active player in the formation of human subjectivity in the text.

In the stanza that prefaces the fictional text, Ahmed Ali quotes the following verses of Hafiz Shirazi:

The night is dark, the waves rise mountains high  
And such a storm is raging!  
What do the pedestrians know my plight moving?  
Upon the shore that's safe and dry?

Ali develops an organic relationship between the human conditions and the natural world that surrounds it. One is reminded of King Lear in the storm scene, and how the storm in the natural world corresponds to the storm in the inner world of man. In the present context, Ali compares the storm with the presence of foreign powers on the native land thereby establishing a relationship between nature and colonial politics. In the introduction written in December 1993, Ali argued that he had written the novel to discover his identity which had been lost in the process of colonial subjugation. He does so by exploring his relationship with indigenous flora, buildings, animals and climatic conditions. Thus, through the storm imagery he brings forth the inseparable relationship between human subjectivity and the natural ecology that informs and shapes it.

In the opening chapter, Ali juxtaposes the world of nature against the mundane world of human existence. The natural world is in a state of chaos because of unbearable "oppressive heat" (Ali 3). The heat shoots through the streets like pain in human body. And because of this heat, the gutters give out a damp stink due to which flowers "die smothered" (4). Ali gives a detailed description of the narrow streets of Delhi and their occupants who sleep, tired after the day's work and toil. The reader becomes conscious of the state of disorder caused by the oppressive heat in the physical life but the heat also has a metaphorical significance here. It stands for the colonial oppression that Mir Nihal and other occupants of Delhi face. To counterbalance this oppression, Ali brings in the

architectural image of the mosques which raise their heads towards the sky. Ali comments:

Here and there in mohallah the mosques raise their white heads towards the sky, their domes spread out like the white breasts of a woman bared, to catch the starlight on their surfaces, and the minarets points to heaven, indicating as it were, that God is all-high and one... (Ali 4)

In the quoted text, the architectural image of the mosque is compared with the white breasts of a woman, bringing in an interminable relationship between the human and divine. The mosque announces the ultimate greatness of God but in aesthetic terms, it draws its strength from the female body. For Mir Nihal, the city is also like a female body cherished and desired by its occupants. The dwellers of the city are its lovers and take great pride in belonging to the ravished bride of time. Historical forces had always caused havoc to its beauty. Mir Nihal mourns:

It was built after the great battle of Mahabharata by Raja Yudhishtira in 1453 B.C., and has been the cause of many a great and historic battle. Destruction is in its foundation and blood in its soil. It has seen the fall of many a glorious kingdom, and listened to the groans of birth. It is the symbol of life and Death, and revenge is in its nature. (Ali 4)

It is interesting to note here that Ali continuously draws on the imagery of female body to describe the ruthlessness of historical cycles of violence. From the sensual image of bare white breast of a woman to the groans of birth, Ali finds female body as the most appropriate image to capture the horrors of colonization.

The first chapter ends with the arrival of the night. The day was in the grip of oppressive heat but there is a dramatic change in the natural and the inner world of man as the night approaches. Usually the night symbolizes gloom and hopelessness because of the overwhelming darkness but Ali uses the image of night to describe a sense of relief from the day's toil and entrance into the world of romance and love. Hence, the date palm leaves quiver with the arrival of wind which soothes the tired minds. Ali has used dramatic techniques to describe the public and private lives of the characters. The different chapters are structured like scenes in which the natural and animal world play an important role in forging the structural link between one scene and the other. Thus, chapter

one ends with the shooting of the star in the sky and the second chapter begins with the stage shifting to the sky where the drama of romantic reveries of Asghar is played out.

Asghar sleeps on the roof to seek relief from the summer heat and the cool breeze lulls him to an almost a mystic experience. The entire chapter is dedicated to the description of dance of the stars in the starry night. As Asghar fixes his gaze on the sky, he discovers that the big and small stars are dancing. Following the previous pattern of description, Ali describes the stars in Milky heaven in terms of female body. The birth of the new stars is compared with the birth of new maidens born. These heavenly, ethereal maidens are ready to embrace Asghar and ultimately there is a mystic dance to celebrate the eternal human desire for love and romance. Ali notices:

They all come towards him. Their glowing bodies are shapely and naked. Their breasts heave with a gentle motion as they dance, round and round and round, and their long dark hair waves in the breeze. They all come towards him .....He resists, but unconsciously against his will, he too begins to dance and move his legs and arms in the graceful gestures of the dance until he finds that he is dancing alone with his erstwhile sweetheart Mushtrai Bai, the graceful dancing girl. (Ali 15)

Asghar experiences a mystic vision in which the objects of nature, the stars in the Milky Way take the form of female body. Thus, both Mir Nihal and Asghar share the masculinist imaginary in perceiving the world of nature around them. The stars become white breasts transporting Asghar into the idyllic world of love and romance. Thus, they serve as a link between the physical and metaphysical, the mundane and subliminal. He is forced to dance with the stars and while dancing, he discovers that he is in the arms of his concubine Mushtrai Bai. Our argument is that this movement from the natural world to the world of romance has theoretical underpinning regarding the role of nature in the human world. It does not simply provide the background against which the drama of human life is played out; instead it has the agency, the will and power within it to effect changes in the both the subjective and objective world of Man. Furthermore, nature in terms of female body also opens up the possibility of critiquing the political oppression that the characters tend to experience in their public and private lives. Ali has subverted the feminist claim that takes "nature as the quicksand of misogyny" (Alaimo and Hekman 145). His manner of describing nature in

terms of female body capacitates the human subjectivity to participate both in the mundane and divine. Thus, the vision of dancing among stars, reminds Asghar of how Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) had walked on the Milky Way for that eternal moment in Paradise (Ali15). In the next moment, he finds the image of his beloved Bilqees in the dancing stars. The image is formed out of a big star. In other words, the inorganic form of life gives birth to organic life. Ali sees the possibility of rebirth even in the remotest stars of the universe as they contribute in the initiation of the mystic experience which culminates in the unison between the subjective world of man and the objective world of nature. This image pattern i.e. the relationship between human subjectivity and the world of nature informs the entire text. At the time of any existential, personal and political crises, the world of nature responds accordingly.

Begum Nihal's existential crisis, triggered by Mir Nihal's unfaithfulness, (Mir Nihal was having an affair with the housemaid Dilchain) brings her on the verge of nervous breakdown. She loses her sense of everyday reality. Mir Nihal does try to make up for his wrongs, but her condition worsens. Ultimately, she is taken away from home to Roshan Chiragh Haveli owned by Mir Nihal's friend, Bashir. Begum Nihal was reluctant to leave her home but she was forced to leave for rehabilitation. Both Asghar and Begum Waheed accompanied their mother. In their adult lives, they remember the tragic incident in the smallest detail but what is more interesting is that how their memories reconstruct the past in which world of nature remains the protagonist of human drama. Asghar recalls how he felt terrified when "At night the owls cried, the dogs wept, and the donkeys brayed" (Ali 47). Asghar brings in the birds and animals which usually symbolize evil and ugliness. Furthermore, Begum Nihal's obsession with the neem twigs, and her attempt to remain seated on the neem tree is symbolic of human desire to be a part of the world of nature and enjoys its soothing effect on perturbed human soul. Ultimately, the rehabilitation takes place when the divine, the natural and the human act in unison to enable the characters to feel the pre-modern unity of experience. Asghar remembers the past in graphic terms:

A gentle breeze stirred up, and another party of qawwals began to sing. Their voices rose on the wind and fell, carried away by the breeze. They were singing a poem addressed to Mohammad, and as they were a little distance away on the windward side only the refrain could be heard clearly. ... Those were happy days. (Ali 47)

There is a dramatic shift in the image patterns which connote the process of healing and regeneration. The sad moments are remembered in terms of crying of owls, weeping of dogs and braying of donkeys. On the other hand, to celebrate the moment of happiness, Ali mentions the cool breeze blowing to heighten the soothing and healing effect of the nature. Thus, the world of nature has been aestheticized in terms of the demands of human subjectivity. What has been argued in this part of the paper is that in Ali's work, ecology plays the pivotal role in informing human situations. It does not stand aloof from the human world. It serves not only as a backdrop for the development of characters but also remains a centre stage character, a living soul that develops a symbiotic relationship with its human companions.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLITICAL AND NATURAL

In this section, we intend to explore as to how the political and the natural interact each other to inform the native's ecological consciousness. The arrival of the colonizer was not only marked by the change in the power hierarchies but it also resulted in the remapping of the world of plants and animals. In other words, the native experiences a change in the pastoral. He remembers how the survival of the indigenous fauna and flora is threatened by the arrival of colonial modernity. Mir Nihal feels perturbed by the colonial efforts of building a new city along the old one. For this purpose, the British were digging old streets, demolishing the old buildings and cutting down the trees which gave shade and shelter to the residents of Delhi. Thus, the colonial move to build the new city through deforestation has ecological concerns. Mir Nihal feels sad that the city walls were going to be demolished. He laments:

"Worse than all the changes which were felt so deeply by the people, was disfiguring of the Chandni Chowk whose central causeway was demolished and the expensive peepal trees which had given shelter to residents and the poor from scorching rays of sun were cut down. The road looked wide and broad, a real boulevard, but its uniqueness and oriental atmosphere were destroyed. This affected the people more than anything else....With these changes it looked something quite new, not the real Chandani Chowk with which so many memories were associated." (Ali 196)

The quoted text is important in multiple ways in the analysis of the relationship between the native's ecological aesthetics and the colonial intrusion. Mir Nihal is grieved at the destruction of the old

Delhi. The old here connotes the precolonial civilizational consciousness which is the essentialist source of pride for Mir Nihal. It is essentialist in the sense that Mir Nihal refuses to imagine that the precolonial Delhi had also been colonized by Muslim invaders. These invaders also introduced their foreign architectural and arboreal aesthetics into the existing ecological landscape of Delhi. Furthermore, Mir Nihal prides himself in being the member of Muslim civilization and its cultural heritage in India. So, arguably, he seems to celebrate Muslim colonization of India and rejects the British. Thus, he fails to appreciate the fact that no imagined essence of civilization can be frozen temporally and spatially. The dialectical power struggle is the uncontested feature of the rise and fall of civilizations. At one particular point in the history, the Muslim rulers enjoyed being at the power centre hence their aesthetic sense was the dominant mode of the representation of the Indian subcontinent. The argument is that the ecological and architectural imaginary is not apolitical; rather, it is a mode of representing indigenous aesthetics recuperated through the selective intervention of memory. In other words, the colonial subjects remember those aspects of the precolonial experience which are helpful in building his narrative of history and nationalist identity. Thus, ecology also becomes a site of contestation between precolonial and colonial imaginary. In this context, Pablo Mukherjee observes:

“Surely any field purporting to theorize the global conditions of colonialism and imperialism ( let us call it postcolonial studies) cannot but consider the complex interplay of environmental categories such as water, land, energy, habitat, migration with political or cultural categories such as state, society, conflict, literature, theatre, visual arts. Equally, any field purporting to attach interpretive importance to environment (let us call it eco/environmental studies) must be able to trace the social, historical and material co-ordinates of categories such as forests, rivers, bio-regions and species.” (144)

Ahmed Ali, by developing a link between precolonial ecological aesthetics and its erosion through colonialist intervention makes the indigenous plants, rivers, animals and buildings -new sites of anti-colonial imagination. These sites like other markers of national identity, are to be cherished through the channels of the natives' memory. Hence in the quoted text above, Mir Nihal builds the binary of “us” and “them” when he laments that the old road in Chandani Chowk has lost its uniqueness and oriental atmosphere during its transformation into a



wide boulevard. The old Chandani Chowk had peepal tress. Ahmed Ali uses the indigenous lexicon to describe the tree. This is a conscious effort on the part of the writer to offer a mode of resistance by describing a tree in Urdu language. The peepal tress is one of the most scared tress in the Hindu religious imaginary. Bhagavad Gita: Chapter 15.1, mentions the importance of Peepal tree and it is written that "The Supreme Personality of Godhead said: It is said that there is an imperishable Peepal tree that has its roots upward and its branches down and whose leaves are the Vedic hymns. One who knows this tree is the knower of the Vedas." ("Peepal tree in Hinduism"). Thus, the Peepal tree has both cultural and religious significance in the memories of the natives. Hence, cutting it down symbolizes severing the natives from the ultimate source of pride in their civilization. Deforestation becomes a colonial strategy to dehistoricize natives and to create a space for the dominance of colonial aesthetics and image patterns in the natives' daily lives. The change in architectural aesthetics is defined by western boulevards which overtake the old roads covered by shady trees. The colonial cityscape finds it necessary to eliminate the old and make the new bear the stamp of colonial hegemony both in the urban spaces and the new aesthetic forms that will develop after the construction of new buildings and roads. It foreshadows the arrival of "aesthetics committed to politics" (Cilano and DeLoughery 84). In other words, the colonial hegemony cannot be established unless native's aesthetics and ecology is restructured according to the modernist colonial designs. Thus, Mir Nihal's grief over the loss of the native trees and buildings, has political ramifications. He realizes that the familiar world around him is being defamiliarized by remapping the horticulturalist, architectural and geographical spaces. The personal becomes political as these spaces were crucial to Mir Nihal's anticolonial imaginary. Thus, their erosion would further disempower him both in the private and public sphere of his life.

The last part of the text is placed in the context of the First World War coming to an end. The year 1918 is important for Mir Nihal for two reasons. Firstly, the end of the war drives home the realization that thousands of Indian youth were simply the cannon fodder for the German guns. He experiences a tremendous sense of loss as he does not own the war. It was a British war in which Indians had to participate without any cause. Ironically, he feels happy at the Turks victory over the British at Gallipoli. He interprets the Indian participation as a mark of national guilt as they did not have the necessary will and power to refuse fighting for the British. But what is interesting in the text is how Mir

Nihal relates the break-out of an epidemic with the revenge of Nature on the Indians. He observes:

“Nature herself was rebellious and seemed angry with the people of Hindustan. Hundreds and thousands of Indians had been killed in the war, acting as fodder to German guns. But not content with this and, as it were, filled with anger against the inhumanity of man, Nature wanted to demonstrate her own callousness and might. Influenza broke out in epidemic form, and from the houses in the mohallah and around, heart rendering cries of lamentation and weeping began to rend the air.” (Ali 229)

As testimony to Mir Nihal’s inextricable link with nature, his imagination is able to create a link between two apparently disparate events – the First World War and outbreak of epidemic in India. Mir Nihal continues to imagine that there exists an indissoluble relationship between the world of Nature and colonial hegemony. In Greek civilization, the human world was inseparably linked with the external universe. Thus, if Oedipus had committed incest and fratricide, his city was plagued by famine and epidemics. In the same way Mir Nihal imagines that the external universe is not the silent spectator on the affairs of mankind. If the human world is unjust, then Nature will strike back. It is interesting to note here that the colonial modernity would never entertain any such notions of the divine intervention in the affairs of men. It was a secular worldview in which Nature did not enjoy any metaphysical power to punish human beings for their moral or political crimes. Hence, in the colonial imaginary the world of Nature and human world were separate spheres of experiences essentially divorced from each other. Contrastingly, in Mir Nihal’s anticolonial imagination, Nature is an important player in the drama of human life.

#### CONCLUSION

The research has led us to conclude that in the text under consideration, ecology does not only serve as a background to the lives of the people, it also has an important function to perform in their public and private lives. In the private sphere, the indigenous plants, pets and other animals constitute a world that serves to save the characters from the onslaught of the colonial cultural erosion. If Mir Nihal is disempowered in the public sphere, in the private sphere of the home, he can create a semblance of the precolonial existence that enjoys an imagined cultural purity. Hence, the pigeons are given special care because when they fly high, it gives a sense of release and freedom to Mir

Nihal. Moreover, the continuous description of the external universe in terms of female body is symbolic of the primitive belief that human world and the world of nature are not essentially separated from each other.

The disempowerment in the public sphere during colonization also has ecological concerns. The arrival of the colonial modernity severs the imagined relationship between the human and natural. The colonial masters have no love for the indigenous architecture, flora and fauna; hence they initiate a ruthless campaign of deforestation to build a new city which becomes the sign for colonial hegemony. Thus, the precolonial ecological consciousness becomes the new site of mourning over the loss of political power in the public sphere. The cutting of the neem trees becomes symbolic of cutting the fountainhead of the civilizational pride and indigenous historical narratives. New trees are to be planted turning roads to boulevards, thus paving way for the emergence of the colonial aesthetics.

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