

## Private Space as a site for Anti-Colonial Imagination: A Critical Study of *Twilight in Delhi*

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**ABSTRACT:** *In my paper, I intend to conduct a discourse analysis of Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* to demonstrate how living by narratives has a therapeutic effect on our injured sense of national pride. In Ahmed Ali, the protagonist, Mir Nihal feels frustrated at the political and cultural disempowerment in the public sphere. But he is incapacitated to put an active resistance to the colonizer. Thus he develops an aesthetic or in Chatterji's words spiritual mode of resistance in the private realm of imagination. Whenever he feels insulted at the hands of the colonizer, he takes refuge in an imagined past when the Muslim rulers enjoyed absolute political power. He views the Muslim past in India as a linearly constructed discourse in which the Muslims and Hindus enjoyed an exemplary social and cultural harmony. My argument is that it is an attempt to narrativize the past and to create a benign, monolithic Muslim identity. Mir Nihal does not say a single word about the Muslim colonization of India. In my view, it is related to the politics of building historical narratives. Since Mir Nihal wants to regain lost power, his narrative remains silent on the Hindu perspective as it may become fatal for an imagined national unity needed to fight back the colonizer. His idea of nationhood draws strength from the selective narration of the past, the mythological past of India during the reign of Asoka and Chundergupt a Maurya and the arrival of the Muslim.*

**Keywords:** Colonizer, Therapeutic, Private space, Mythological Past, Cultural harmony

### **Anti-colonial Nationalism and Critical Secularism:**

Benedict Anderson defines nation as an imagined political community born from the demise of feudalism and rise of capitalism (Anderson 4). It is imagined because even the members of the smallest possible group which constitute a nation may not be able to see or meet each other during the whole course of their lives. It is only, through their imagination, that they produce and circulate social, cultural, religious and historical narratives. These narratives create a sense of nationhood among the members who believe in these narratives. A shared past, a common language and a culture produced through national language/s make up the locus of national narratives which at a certain epoch in history become canonized. Thus it is the terrain of imagination wherein lie the centripetal force of national integration.

With the demise of feudalism and rise of capitalism, the process of creating national narratives underwent a sea change. Anderson further argues that newspapers, novels and other forms of communication made it possible to circulate these national narratives to diverse groups. Anderson termed it as the “rise of print nationalism” and the first step towards the creation of the idea of a modern nation state. Thus the convergence of capitalism and print technology on the fatal diversity of human language created the possibility of a new form of imagined community which in its basic morphology set the stage for a modern nation (Anderson 46).

In the colonies, the native intelligentsia played a crucial role in forging the ideas of anti-colonial nationalism because they happened to be bilingual. Since they were educated at colonial institutions, they could develop a link between the natives and their masters as they could communicate both in the language of the colonizer and the colonized. Hence anti-colonial literary and cultural narratives produced by native writers drew its strength from western ideas on nationalism and national consciousness. In the words of Ania Loomba, anti-colonial nationalism became a derivative discourse. In *Colonialism and Postcolonialism: The New Critical Idiom*, Loomba argues that anti-colonial nationalism is made possible and shaped by European political and intellectual history. It is a derivative discourse, a Calibanistic model of revolt which is dependent upon the colonizer’s gift of language/ ideas (189).

In *Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Partha Chatterjee critiques the idea that anti-colonial nationalism is a derivative discourse. He laments

that even our imagination has been colonized by insisting that nationalism in the rest of the world has to derive its theoretical strength from the colonizer's idea of imagined communities. He observes:

I have one central objection to Anderson's argument. If nationalism in the rest of world has to choose their imagined community for certain modular forms already made available to them by Europe and Americas, what do they have left to imagine..... Even our imagination must forever remain colonized. (5)

Chatterjee further argues that anti-colonial nationalism creates its own sovereign space within colonial discourse much earlier than starting political engagement with the colonizer. It does so by dividing the world into material and spiritual domains. He observes:

Anti-colonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society before it begins its political battle with the imperial power. It does this by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains—the material and the spiritual. The material is the domain of the “outside,” of the economy and statecraft, of science and technology, a domain where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed. The spiritual, on the other hand, is an “inner” domain bearing the “essential” marks of cultural identity. (6)

I call it private domain because the word spiritual has religious connotations. And in anti-colonial struggle, religious discourse per se has a limited role in defining national consciousness of a political community. There are other factors as well. Language, culture and history play pivotal roles in defining the parameters of anti-colonial nationalism. Thus anti-colonial nationalism takes birth in private sphere of life and consolidates itself by observing cultural practices that tend to be nonwestern. In this context, Chatterjee observes:

The colonial state is kept out of the inner domain of a national culture, but it is not as though this so called spiritual domain is left unchanged. In fact, here nationalism launches its more powerful, creative and historically significant project; to fashion a modern national culture that is nonwestern. If the nation is imagined community, then it is here it is brought into being. (7)

Imagination becomes the terrain of national consciousness. And especially for a minority community, it becomes the only cultural locale where it can build and assert the narratives of national identity. Aamir R. Mufti in *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture*, calls it critical secularism because of its affiliations with the dilemmas of minority existence (13).

Muslims in colonial India were a minority. Hence the literary narratives produced by the Muslim writers deal with the theme of politics of minoritization. The pressure exerted on language, culture and identity in the process of becoming minoritized (Mufti 12) is released through developing modes of resistance in the private sphere of life. This happens to be my core argument in examining *Twilight in Delhi* by Ahmed Ali, as a representative fictional narrative produced during colonial times to help the writer discover his national identity.

### **Private Space as a site of Anti-colonial Nationalism**

Ahmed Ali in *Twilight in Delhi* (1940) deals with the theme of erasures of one's identity in the face of dominant colonial cultural practices. The protagonist of the novel, Mir Nihal, is a member of the decadent Muslim nobility. He takes great pride in his Muslim identity and is deeply worried that his culture is facing a threat of extinction at the hands of the colonizer. In the absence of political power, needed to subvert this cultural erosion, he withdraws from the public sphere to private sphere of life. My argument is that during this process of political and cultural negotiation with the colonizer, the private space becomes an alternative to the public. In other words, private space serves as a protective enclosure to fight back the feelings of political and cultural disempowerment in the public domain.

Private space or what Chatterji calls spiritual domain (6) is constituted of tales of glorious past, language, family and socio religious cultural practices that a native re/constructs to empower himself psychologically and politically. His sole aim in this struggle is to confront colonial cultural and epistemic hegemony which portrays him as essentially inferior to the dominant colonial culture. Thus private space becomes a primary site of resistance against the colonizer. It is a symbiotic relationship which creates monoliths. The native imagines a glorious cultural past as the fountainhead of his/her identity and tries to propagate an uncritical view of his past. This imagining tends to essentialize identity and impose on the group a unity of views and experiences they

do not, and cannot have (Parekh 35). The colonizer defines himself 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 groups imagine themselves to possess a monolithic identity. By metaphysical essentialism, Deane means a way of resisting oppression by looking back at one’s past as being monolithic. He further observes:

Insurgent nationalism attempts to create a version of history for themselves in which the 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)

The essence of the past can be recuperated by writing fictional narratives of the past. Arundhati Roy argues that we can resist empire with our art, our music, our literature and our ability to tell our own stories (Roy 77). Thus aesthetic and creative activity of producing literary narratives can also become a tool of resistance. Ali by telling the story of Delhi not only digs out his past cultural heritage of poetry and architecture but also confronts the colonizer in the aesthetic domain. It is precisely for this purpose that he uses the language of the colonizer to tell the story of Muslim glory embodied in the spatial metaphor of the city. The choice of language had to serve another important political purpose i.e. to tell, the British audience in London, of the brutalities meted out to Muslim population after the war of Independence (1857). But even choosing English as a medium of narration, he has, by bringing in translations from the classical traditions of Urdu and Persian poetry, strategically appropriated the text for expression of indigenous cultural ethos.

In *Twilight in Delhi*, the city serves as a cultural artifact, a symbol, a monolith which gives Mir Nihal a sense of dignity and pride. The spatial metaphor provides him with an image, a narrative, a unique cultural sensibility which helps him assert his cultural superiority over his “colonial other.” But the city is submerged in the symbolic twilight of oppression and powerlessness. The metaphor of twilight can be interpreted in two ways. First of all, it symbolizes the waning light of the past glory of Muslim culture and the arrival of the colonizer. Secondly, it could also mean that Mir Nihal hopes that in future, the present regime will be in twilight zone. And the march of history would witness Delhi regaining its past glory. What binds the past with future is the city itself,

unified, standing erect, with a resolve to confront and challenge the foreign oppressors. Petter Gottschalk in *Beyond Hindu and Muslims: Multiple Identity Narratives in Village India* argues that narratives of past can serve as the tool by which multiple identities can be explored. He further argues that it will be necessary to delineate the reliance of identity on space and time as mediated through narrative (64).

Delhi, the colonized city in the text, is the architectural space that symbolizes the great tradition of Muslim rule in the subcontinent. It also constitutes a pivotal in space in the memory of the author, serving as an alternative to colonial atrocities against the Muslim population in India. Whenever he sees any damage done to the present city space, the past reconstructed through the memory comes to rescue him. In other words, the glory of the past saves him from psychological destruction caused by the present state of degradation and helplessness. As a lover of the city, the embodiment of his anti colonial identity, he has to tell the tale of its beauty and splendor that would help him stand erect as a sovereign subject. Thus, in theoretical terms, the city becomes an objective correlative, a site of contestation between native's subjectivity and imperialistic subjugation.

The structure of the plot is not linear. It can be broadly divided into two story lines that run parallel to each other and intersect at various important places. The city, as it stands in colonial times, with its past history serves as the backdrop to the family drama of Mir Nihal. In the opening chapter, we are introduced to the domestic space of family life where a traditional Muslim day is about to begin. The members of Mir Nihal's family are in deep sleep and as the night approaches towards an end, they are about to wake up. But before they wake up from their sleep, the writer gives a detailed description of the city which also lies indifferent in the arms of sleep (4). I interpret this sleep as a specific point in history when Delhi is not powerful enough to assert its political role on the stage of history. The writer believes that the time of awakening has approached. Delhi has been destroyed and rebuilt many times. But it has an unprecedented political strength and resilience and like a phoenix, it always builds itself from its own ashes. It is also interesting to note that before Ali introduces Delhi in the narrative, he introduces mosques in every street with minarets pointing to heaven, indicating as it were, that God is all high and one (4). In structural and aesthetic terms, it refers to the peculiar Muslim character of the city that precedes any other narrative of identity while describing Delhi. What I have argued here is

that historical time seems to be frozen in the architectural space of Delhi. Ali observes:

But the city of Delhi, built hundreds of years ago, fought for , dies 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..... Yet the city stands still intact, as do many forts and tombs and monuments, remnants and reminders of old Delhis, holding on to life with a tenacity and purpose which is beyond comprehension and belief. (4)

Delhi forges a link of the past with the present. Throughout the text, the colonized Delhi is compared with the mythological Delhi, frozen in historical epochs of time, and nothing can destroy its imagined purity or beauty. According to Paul Ricouer, this type of imagining has strategic significance in the lives of the marginalized communities. He terms the mythical past as cosmic time which remains unaffected in the imagination of the people (3). Furthermore, it also helps these people to create a sense of belonging to each other by comparing their past glory with the present state of political disempowerment. Ancient glory, present misery: the subject of this entire story is “us”. The mighty heroes of ancient India were “our” ancestors, and the feeble inhabitants of India today are “ourselves” (97). It produces feelings of disgust and discomfort with the present times, and the protagonist, Mir Nihal finds refuge in the past. He laments:

Yet gone is its glory and departed are those from whom it got breath of life. Where are the Kauravs and Pandavas. Where are Khiljis and the Saiyyeds?....Gone they are, gone and dead beneath all embracing earth. Only some monuments remain to tell its sad story and to remind us of the glory and splendour. (4)

The narrative of cultural and historical superiority that Mir Nihal weaves around Delhi, views the past as a linear movement of history, without its internal contradictions and fissures. Ricouer terms it as human time because it is constructed in the manner of a narrative (9). This selective internalization of time problematizes the process of identification because what is being imagined, according to Homi K. Bhabha is an image of totality (73). This means a viewing of history and culture as being free of internal contradictions. Fawzia Afzal Khan interprets it as

creating of an illusion of a mythological past, a “Paradise Lost” before the arrival of the colonizer, which can be regained when the colonizer leaves (Fawzia 60).

Mir Nihal locates his identity in the mythological past. His narrative of identity tends to ignore the colonization of India by the Muslim colonizers. The arrival of Muslims into the subcontinent was in itself a colonial project in which a predominantly Hindu population was pushed to liminal spaces. In Mir Nihal’s imagination, pre-colonial India was a site of cultural hybridity in which both Hindus and Muslims had contributed to building an enduring civilization. So Mir Nihal’s conception of “us” is inclusive of all religious discourses in colonial India against “them”, the colonizer. This seems to be an uncritical and essentialistic view of one’s identity. Bhabha considers it a resistance strategy during colonial times. In *Location of Culture*, he observes:

The Other must be seen as the necessary negation of primordial identity—cultural or psychic that introduces the system of differentiation which enables the culture to be signified as a linguistic, symbolic and historic reality (74).

As a linguistic, symbolic and historic reality, Delhi represents the Indian political and cultural glory in the past. Like any other cultural monument, the city has witnessed innumerable changes in its architectural and historical landscape. It has been subjected to destruction by foreign invaders. But it has the resilience to survive both politically and culturally. Treacherous games have been played under its skies and its earth has tasted the blood of kings. But still it is the jewel of the eye of the world; still it is centre of attraction (Ali 4).

The arrival of the colonizer has challenged the social narrative of homogenous time (Chatterjee 8). By homogenous times, Chatterjee means an uncritical view of one’s history. Thus Mir Nihal considers the pre-colonial cultural configurations as monolithic constructions that have been despoiled by the arrival of the colonizer. He is also skeptical of the cultural hybridity which would emerge after the introduction of colonial cultural practices. Mir Nihal observes:

New ways and ideas had come into being. A hybrid culture which had nothing in it of the past was forcing upon Hindustan, a hodge-podge of Indian and Western ways which he failed to understand. The English had been beaten by Turks at Gallipoli.



Even this had not affected his heart. The old had gone, and the new was feeble and effete. At least it had nothing in common with his ideals or schemes of things. (240)

Mir Nihal feels incapacitated to reconcile with the emerging cultural hybridity, resulting in new sites of social interactions. He seems to willingly ignore the fact that human cultures remain in the process of evolution. So the binaristic division between “uncontaminated culture of the past” and “hybrid culture of the present” creates a private space of imagination to assert his uniqueness as a political subject. The other private spaces where he can assert his superiority include religious practices, family traditions, his hobbies and especially the home with himself as patriarchal head. I argue that a potent assertion of one’s role in these private spaces becomes an alternative to political marginalization in the public domain.

Mir Nihal tries hard to preserve the imagined purity of private space by resisting the process of cultural assimilation. He does not like his younger son to wear “Farangi boots.” Here the son’s body becomes a site on which Mir Nihal can assert his political power. It is a strategic move to confront the feelings of political disempowerment on the one hand and establish indigenous identity on the other. Asghar should wear Sherwani, a local address which peculiarly expresses Muslim taste and culture. If the British cannot be pushed out of the public domain, at least, they can be kept away from the private. Mir Nihal bursts out in anger seeing Asghar:

You are again wearing those dirty English boots! I don’t like them. I will have no aping of Farangi’s in my house. Throw them away (13).

Mir Nihal hates colonial mimicry. He seems to be forgetting that a dominant civilization always causes cultural erosion by bringing changes in dress code, architecture, language and other cultural symbols inherited by natives. Mir Nihal makes desperate attempts to protect imagined purity of his private space from colonial intrusion. In this context, Asghar, his youngest son represents the arrival of a hybrid culture as he loves to copy English manners and dress code. He also likes western ideas on individual liberty and freedom. He refuses to marry the girl his parents have selected for him. On the contrary, he asserts his individual right to marry after his heart. His elder brother had never the courage to challenge Mir Nihal’s decisions regarding the family matters. But

Asghar's insistence on marrying Bilqees causes the first crack in the private space that Mir Nihal, as a patriarchal head, has hitherto been successful in preserving. On the issue of Asghar's marriage, neither is he supported by his submissive wife nor does the beloved daughter, Begum Waheed come to rescue him. He feels completely alienated from the family affairs. At last, he realizes that he does not command the necessary power to subvert the process of cultural changes taking place around him.

The text also deals with the theme of knowledge production during colonial times. Mir Nihal is skeptical of Syed Ahmed's project of educating Indian Muslims by making them learn the English language and other modern subjects. Asghar wants to join Ali Garh but Mir Nihal rejects the idea considering it to be fatal for the Muslim community. Asghar protests in the following words:

I wanted to go to Aligarh. It is after all a Muslim institution, but he says that it is the evil doing of Farnjis who want to make Christian and atheist of all of us. (50)

The quoted text shows how Mir Nihal interprets the project of colonization as an attempt to convert the Muslims, either to the followers of Christianity or to become atheists. It is interesting to see how, almost two diametrically opposed discourses i.e. Christianity and Atheism, are mentioned in one breath. I see it as Mir Nihal's aversion for the project of modernity. Mir Nihal is an orthodox Muslim and is worried that the radical interpretation of religion by Syed Ahmed would cause a serious threat to his version of Islam and Muslim nationalism. Hence it is safe not to engage with the Ali Garh Movement. But it does not mean that religion in Mir Nihal's life serves as a source of political resistance. Meelad meetings (religious gatherings at home to celebrate the birth of the Holy Prophet p.b.u.h.) are held regularly, and especially, at the time of any political or family crisis. In these gatherings, the private sphere of the Prophet's (p.b.u.h.) life is discussed. Asghar recounts episodes from the Prophet's (p.b.u.h.) life dwelling on his merciful qualities and miracles, mentioning nothing of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) bringing political change in his surroundings. It is an apolitical version of religion. Thus religion serves as another site of private space where anti-colonial nationalism finds its potent expression.

The small cabin for pigeons is the third private space Mir Nihal has created to withdraw. As a member of decadent Muslim nobility, he takes

pride in collecting rare breed of pigeons. There is a smile of satisfaction and victory when he sees his pigeons flying at the highest point in the sky. Also he is very protective about them. The incident of killing a snake and a cat in pigeon's cabin is of symbolic value. Both the animals may represent the colonizer bent on destroying the protected private space in Mir Nihal's life. He cannot eat his lunch until he has killed the snake. There is a strange light in his eyes after he has protected the cabin from further intrusion (12). Tariq Rehman observes:

He (Mir Nihal) also identifies the cat with the British who have succeeded in altering if not destroying these cherished ways of life by introducing new ideologies and mores which Mir Nihal's generation stands for. (40)

It is to assert his attachment with these old ways of living that pigeon flying competitions are regularly held in old Delhi where Mir Nihal and his friends feel a strange sense of freedom and accomplishment. Mir Nihal often wins the prize as his flock of pigeons is invincible. And the political heights which are denied to Mir Nihal in the public sphere are achieved by these pigeons flying to the highest points in the sky. Ahmed Ali juxtaposes pigeon flying with the Mutiny of 1857 and also the great political event of the coronation of the English King with the carnage that took place before Jamia Masjid. He recalls, how the Muslims who rallied around the mosque to save it from British invasion, got ruthlessly killed. We are told that:

Sir Thomas Metcalf with his army had taken his stand by the hospital on the Esplanade Road, and was contemplating the destruction of Jamia Masjid. The Mussalmans came to know this fact, and they talked of making an attack on Metcalf. .... Hundreds fell down dead on the steps of the mosque and inside, colouring the stones a deeper red with their blood. (146)

The carnage that took place around the Jamia Masjid Delhi makes the saddest part of the Muslim political life during the war of Independence in 1857. Thousands of Muslims were brutally killed and maimed. The remembrance of this incident becomes another spot in Mir Nihal's memory to feed his anti-imperialist feelings. Whenever he passes by the mosque, his heart is filled with the feelings of grief and helplessness. He expresses his solidarity with the heroes who fought to defend the mosque. He remembers painfully:

As this scene passed before his eyes, Mir Nihal could not contain himself and his rage burst out of bounds. There were those men of 1857, and here were the men of 1911, chicken hearted and happy in their disgrace. This thought filled him with pain, and he sat there, as it were, on the rack, weeping dry tears of blood, seeing the death of his world and his birth place. (147)

I see this comparison of the past with present, as a conscious effort, to create an alternative private space, through the channels of memory, against the public. The heroes of the past were infused with the spirit of religious and national pride, and would not debase themselves like the “chicken hearted” Indian Nawabs and kings running like pygmies with the royal cavalcade. As Mir Nihal thought of their slavishness and their treacherous acceptance of the foreign yoke, he was filled with shame and disgust. (144)

This sadness is further intensified when he sees the descendents of Bahadur Shah Zafar, the dethroned king, suffering from extreme poverty and starvation. Some of them had turned to beggars for daily bread and many princesses had married barbers and cooks. Such a catastrophic political change is unacceptable to Mir Nihal but he is helpless. He cannot control the forces of history. The past, which was his, had gone, and the future was not for him (Ali 147). Unfortunately, he lacks the necessary political acumen or courage, to enter into political engagement with the British. He turns towards arranging another pigeon flying competition. This time, the competition is held far away from the old Fort, because it has been tainted by the British soldiers. His intention is to escape the changes taking place in life and to withdraw from the world. (Askari 57).

Mir Nihal’s attempt to define himself by politics of evasion is thwarted by a merciless nature. In extreme hot conditions, pigeons start dying. He feels disempowered and crestfallen. The rare breed of pigeons cannot be replaced. The dust storm raging in the streets symbolizes chaos and disorder prevailing both in public and private domain. Not only the pigeons but also Baban Jan, his mistress falls ill. He feels terrified at the prospect of losing any one of them. But as the novel progresses, one finds that he becomes a fatalist, resigned to human predicament of being entrapped in an infinite circle of life and death. The death of Baban Jan makes him feel old and redundant:

As Mir Nihal looked at the cat he was reminded of his pigeons and Baban Jan. But what did it matter now? They were gone. Yet death was alive and would come to him too and free him from misery and care. He turned his eyes away from the cat. She did not fill him with anger or hate. He was indifferent now. (116)

This indifference, I argue, has political ramifications. The authority he used to exercise in the private domain of his life is waning. Firstly, Asghar defies him by marrying a girl of his choice, and then by wearing English dress. Mimicking the colonizer's manners and dress is an intrusion into the private sphere. Mir Nihal has been resisting it for a long time. But as he gets older, he feels that he has lost power to assert his authority in family affairs. He feels marginalized. In the text, this marginalization is symbolically presented through the dismantling of old Delhi and construction of new one which would represent the colonial power through its architecture.

The construction of New Delhi proves to be the severest blow to his hitherto fixed ideas of national pride and dignity. Old Delhi represented a hybrid culture built both by Hindus and Muslims. Mir Nihal does not see the two communities essentially antagonistic to each other. Both Hindus and Muslims had an equal share in constructing this great city, an emblem of civilizational pride. So the spatial metaphor of the city also serves as a cauldron where religious differences are dissolved to produce a grand narrative of nationalism. Mir Nihal, in a state of ecstasy, traces the architectural genealogy of the city in the mythical past. He is overpowered with nostalgic emotions when he reconstructs the history of the city in his mind's eye:

There it was that the Hindu kings had built the early Delhis, Hastinapur or Dilli; and still in Mahroli stands the Iron Pillar as a memory of Asoka; and other ruins of the days of India's golden age, and dynasties greater than history has ever known. Today it was this very Delhi which was being despoiled by a Western race who had no sympathy for India and her sons, thought Mir Nihal. Already they had put the iron chains of slavery round their once unbending necks (145).

Mir Nihal belongs to the race of the sons of soil. His claim on Delhi enjoys a degree of authenticity denied to the colonizer. For Mir Nihal, the Muslim glory is epitomized in the form of Delhi. Hence its Muslim sons offered a great amount of resistance to save it from falling to

foreign hands. For this reason, he imagines mutiny as a purely Muslim phenomenon. It is interesting to note that when Mir Nihal refers to the events in 1857, the register of language describing identity changes. To express its peculiar Muslim ownership, Ahmed Ali uses the word “Musslamans” instead of “Muslim.” And as said earlier, the atrocities that the Muslim population was subjected to, make the darkest spot in history of colonial subjugation. Mir Nihal remembers these incidents and curses the British in the strongest terms. Thus the memory of the past gives him a paradoxical sense of loss and happiness. He takes pride in the sacrifices offered by Muslims during 1857 and feels dejected at the present political impotence. The whole family feels pleased when they hear the news of the burning of the pavilion built for the English King by a mysterious outbreak of fire. The anger felt because of political weakness is counterbalanced by seeking pleasure in divine interference. Once again, the private becomes alternative to the public. Begum Nihal curses the British:

It is God’s vengeance falling on these good –as-dead Farangi’s, she said. “May they be destroyed for what they have done to Hindustan. May God’s scourge fall on them.” And she began to relate how ruthlessly Delhi had been looted by them at the time of “Mutiny”, and the Musslamans had been turned out of the city, their houses demolished... and the city was dyed red with the blood of princes and nobles, poor and rich alike who had happened to be Musslamans. (138)

The post mutiny period observed a strategic marginalization of the Muslim population in the public domain. The members of the family of the deposed King, Bahadar Shah, were turned to beggars. Gul Bano, the grand-daughter of Bahadur Shah Zafar, now roams in the street of Delhi in search of food and shelter. She seeks alms by singing poems written by the deposed King. As a fatalist, she believes that political decline is an arbitrary act of God, devoid of any rationale. Hence the Muslim Kings cannot be blamed for this historical catastrophe because God runs this universe in an arbitrary manner and we are helpless to bring any change in his scheme of things. Mir Nihal and Gul Bano share many similarities. Both of them are proud of their glorious past and take refuge in the private space of memory. The stories of the past give them a sense of identity and also help them feel part of grand narrative of Muslim nationhood. Nowhere in the text do we find Mir Nihal making an objective and dispassionate analysis of the causes of political downfall.

He also attributes it to the arbitrary will of God. Thus the discourse of religious identity serves as a safeguard against the political inferiority imposed by the colonizer on Mir Nihal. He may not be politically relevant at the present moment but he is one of the descendents of the people who once ruled India and left indelible marks on the Indian history. Bhabha in *Location of Culture* labels this nostalgic remembrance of the past for the sake of asserting one's identity as discursive conception of ideology (3). By discursive conception of ideology, Bhabha means the cultural practices involved in creating a sense of nationhood within a group or a community. The people claiming to be a nation have an imagined link with historical, ideological, literary and cultural narratives that help them binding a discursive nationalist narrative for identity and resistance. In *Nation and Narrations*, Bhabha further comments on the politics of nationalism:

Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation— or narration — might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west. (1)

It is in the mind's eye of Mir Nihal that space for national consciousness and cohesiveness is created and valorized. He builds a narrative of identity rooted in an imagined past glory creating an indissoluble link between past and present through a geographical space, i.e. Delhi and cherished literariness of Urdu language. This approach not only defines his relationship with the present but also initiates a constant negotiation with the past.

The construction of New Delhi is the fiercest blow to Mir Nihal's imagination. The private space, the sacred site of anti-colonial nationalism, is faced with the threat of colonial encroachment. He cannot do anything to stop it. The old city, along with the symbols of its civilizational pride, is to be dismantled. The new colonial city would represent colonial architecture and an ambience of colonial culture. New residents will pour in. And with the arrival of new people, the imagined purity of indigenous culture will be compromised. These are really hard times for Mir Nihal. He imagines:

Besides a new Delhi meant new people, new ways and a new world altogether. ... The old culture, which had been preserved

within the walls of ancient town, was in danger of annihilation. Her language, on which Delhi had prided itself would become adulterated and impure, and would lose its beauty and uniqueness of idiom. (197)

The dismantling of the city is symbolic of eroding all the cultural and architectural symbols that serve as the source of pride for the Muslim civilization. The city and Urdu language make up the social text of Muslim identity; and, both are threatened by the colonial cultural intrusion. The novel ends with Mir Nihal, physically paralyzed, witnessing these changes, incapacitated to pose any substantial political resistance to the colonizer. The private space of family, language, culture and the city is the only site where Mir Nihal could posit resistance against the imperial oppression. The colonizer must be kept out of this sacred space. And the text chronicles Mir Nihal's struggle to preserve the imagined purity of this private domain.



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