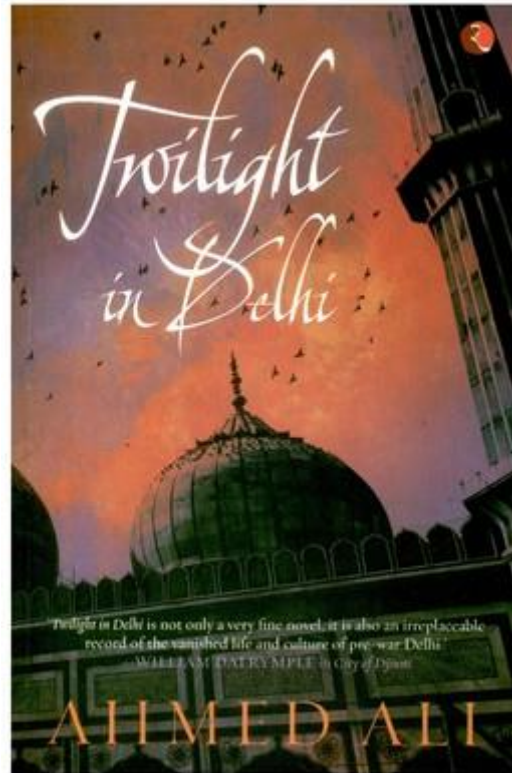


The Image of the Woman Paralleled With the Decline of Delhi

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Abstract

This paper critically analyzes and traces the parallel images that contribute in establishing Ahmed Ali as both a feminist writer who brings out the voice of the suppressed female as well as a writer who laments the change that the Delhi city and the people of India were wrought. In tracing this decline, Ahmed Ali's feminist stance is also revealed, where he likens the beauty of the Delhi city with the beauty of a woman. It is thus, that the image of the woman: the courtesan as well as the domestic woman reign important in the novel. The gradual decline of the position of women, demonstrated in the marriages that take place and in their physical ailments and gradual deaths, is paralleled with the historical changes that take place in this city.

Key Words: Feminism, Hybridity, Subalterns, Marginalization.

1. Introduction

‘Delhi was once a paradise,
Such peace had abided here;
But they have ravished its name and pride,
Remain now only ruins and care’

-Bahadur Shah (quoted by Ahmed Ali in the epigraph of ‘Twilight in Delhi’)

Salman Rushdie’s axiom, “the Empire writes back to the centre” gets currency from Ashcroft’s, Griffiths’s, Tiffin’s celebrated book titled the same, *The Empire Writes Back*, which denotes to the process of probing and re-presenting the colonial discourse which characterises postcolonial writings (McLeod, 28). The postcolonial core of Twilight in Delhi manifests most in its thematic concerns. A postcolonial discourse studies the dynamics of identity, politics, race, power, subordination and dominance, landlessness, displacement or dislocation of culture, and hybridization.

McLeod claims that the utmost feature of any postcolonial text is its posing a direct threat to the colonial centre from the colonised margins. Ahmed Ali’s novel classifies into this postcolonial criterion as he shows the reader the other side of the story, for example, of the hitherto distorted and blunted picture of the 1857 War of Independence which has been dubbed as “Mutiny” by the British colonisers. He confers the new ways of seeing which contest the dominant mode of seeing and voice the colonised people of subcontinent. Homi K. Bhaba attributes this feature as the heart of post-colonialism, “what does need to be questioned, however, is the mode of representation of otherness” (Bhaba, 54). This act can be termed as textual de-colonisation. Actually, British felt Ali’s book as posing a threat to them evident from the denied publication of his book by the leading British publication houses of the times (Ali, xvii).

The first and foremost principle of post-colonialism is the right to autonomous self-government of those being controlled by foreign power (Young, 109). At the coronation, Mir Nihal’s anguished utterance to his grandson is representative of political ethos of Indian Muslims about their self-imposed British rulers. He says, “see there go the horses and the

Farangis... Don't you see them? Those are the people who have been our undoing, and will be yours too... But you will be brave... fight... drive them out of the country" (Ali, 148). Begum Mir Nihal echoes her husband's discontent, "its God's vengeance falling on these good-as-dead Farangis. May they be destroyed for what they have done to Hindustan" (Ali, 154).



Ahmed Ali (1910-1994)

Courtesy: <http://archive.thedailystar.net/2004/08/28/d408282102114.htm>

Post-colonialism carries an utmost importance in the history of a nation because it is “a state of consciousness, a crucial stage in the continuum of cultural process and self-awareness” (ed. Lazarus, 113). Ali himself admits he intends to evoke “racial memory” through his literary piece (Ali, i). Many postcolonial theorists ascribe such function to Post-colonial Literature. Leela Gandhi refers to this point, “post-colonialism can be seen as a theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath. It is a disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering, and crucially interrogating the colonial past” (Morton quoted Gandhi, 123). As Ali writes, “it's [Delhi] human identity now lost forever in the forced amnesia of plucked out memory...” (Ali, xx). Bhaba seconds Gandhi's stance when he says “post-colonial project... seeks to explore the social pathologies _ loss of meaning, conditions of anomie” (Bhaba, 202). Therefore, the postcolonial themes are the usable past, the cultural roots, and displacement. Ali's novel is the prismatic spectrum of all of them. As he himself clearly states,

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:6 June 2015

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“What I had in mind... was the awareness or the consciousness of the past... a certain feeling for the glory that was gone, the failure of the people of India, and of the Muslims especially, to have held on to life, to have been able to look at things in terms of cause and effect. And behind this sadness and sorrow was the reason for the disappearance of this glory: the *bêtes noires*, British imperialism and the British people themselves.”

The postcolonial theory inverts and subverts the binaries and hierarchies. For instance, the Self and Other paradigm is turned upside down. The hitherto tagged Other, Muslims and Indians, is now Self and until now celebrated English Self is turned into Other. Ali uses reductive imagery to portray the English as they are termed as “tommies” and are lurking behind the shadows whereas the Indian Muslims are holding the stage.

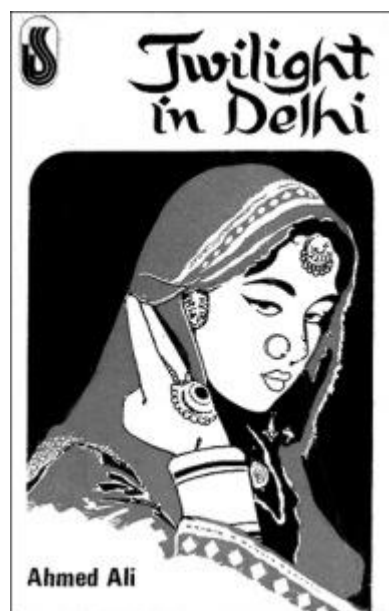
McLeod posits that a post-colonial text is always politically “radical” in its approach. Ahmed Ali’s subversive intention is obvious from his political radicalism. The pained polyphonic symphony of nostalgic past of Mughal-Muslim rule pervades the text which shows that he feels the presence of the absence and wants to regain the lost pre-lapsarian paradise. He writes in his introduction that he intends to stir up “racial memory” through his book and this evoking of the bygone days of Muslim rule on his part unveils his political alignment. Moreover, unlike a colonial text, the postcolonial text is political because it never self-idolises by imposing and insisting that its experience is eternal and of universal relevance. It never claims to envisage a holistic outlook. However, these postcolonial writers contend that their writings are voicing the authenticated experiences of their own people and representing their society. Ali contextualises his novel in geo-political, temporal and spatial boundaries. He dramatises from the War of Independence of 1857, downfall of Delhi and Muslim power, to the coronation of 1911 through pinhole of individual lives of Mir Nihal’s family. A postcolonial text is the one in which the “local concerns” are crucial in its understanding. So, to read *Twilight in Delhi* without conception of Delhi would hamper its understanding. The postcolonial writers contend that their writings are voicing the authenticated experiences of their own people.

Apart from apparent “political imperialism,” “cultural imperialism” is another bane of colonialism. As Ashcroft write, “we use the term postcolonial to cover all the culture

effected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day. This is because there is continuity of preoccupation throughout the historical process initiated by European aggression.” Due to cultural change the postcolonial literature negotiates myth, history, language, and landscape, alongside Self and Other.

The postcolonial feminism is dominant thematic pattern. In postcolonial feminist discourse, women are normally painted as an active agent in the historical and social processes. The colonial construction of male dominated colonies is vigorously contested by postcolonial writers like Ahmed Ali. His women characters are mostly strong like Begum Jamal and Begum Waheed, some of them are passive resisters like Begum Nihal’s cunning way of having her own way in Asghar’s marriage, some of them are symbolic emblem of the postcolonial concept of women as space like Bahadur Shah’s relative and the naked woman in street, and all of them epitomise the celebrated indigenous culture which include cultured courtesans like Mushtari Bai.

In fact, the figure of cultured courtesan runs in many subcontinent writings, for example, in Saida Bai of Vikram Seth’s *A Suitable Boy*. Another sort of postcolonial feminism is the depiction of women as oppressed in social, religious, and cultural contexts. Begum Nihal, Mehro, Begum Waheed, and Bilqueece are silent sufferers of thumbscrews of prevalent patriarchal system. They are the women who are doubly displaced from the centre as a woman and as the colonised. In one way, Ali lays blame on the colonisation for women disempowerment as if the western culture of wielding power strongly altered the local practice of giving significant status to women. Distinguished historians like Romila Tharper, Irfan Habib, and IH Qureshi explain how Mughal women of nobility were empowered in the medieval India. Examples of Razia Sultana, Maha Manga, and Nur Jahan can be quoted here. These authors also suggest the important role of women in the social life which has been altogether ignored by most of the Orientalists.



The re-presentation of indigenous cultural ethos is the core of any postcolonial text. The colonial gaze looks down upon the denizens of Delhi with their leisure and pleasures of kite-flying, pigeon-keeping, qawali-singing, paan-chewing during their imperial rule in India. But here they are celebrated with reverent indulgence, Begum Nihal sits on her cot and “... draws her dome-shaped paan-box, puts lime and katha on a betel leaf, then adds finely cut areca nut, some cardamom, a little tobacco, rolls it up and puts it in her mouth.” Ali’s detailed descriptions of rituals of *Mehfil-e-meelad* and Asghar’s wedding show his heartfelt reverence for his culture. The subcontinent culture does not endorse capitalistic commoditisation of person-to-person contact so here we see Mir Nihal and band of friends like Sirajuddin Khan Saail and Daagh Dehlalwi is not bound by any economic relation and this is another way of “the empire writing back to the centre.” The postcolonial writers also flout the western value of solipsism so Begum Jamal’s departure from Mir Nihal’s house bleeds his heart to death.

The postcolonial theorists agree on the hybridization as a necessary consequent condition of colonial experience. As Frantz Fanon says “black men, white masks”. Asghar represents such hybrid existence of thresholds. His attire and his shunning of some of his ancestral and cultural mores as obvious in his opting to marry with a girl of his own choice and his living in a separate house with his wife show his fascinated adopting of foreign value-systems. Yet, he has to live his life into the convention-bound family which creates an

acute chasm. Due to it, his assimilation he becomes an outsider in his own family as evident from Saeed Hassan's sarcasms. His split self is elucidated by Homi K. Bhaba:

“... the irresolvable borderline culture of hybridity that articulates its problems of identification and its diasporic aesthetic in an uncanny, disjunctive temporality that is, at once, the time of cultural displacement, and the space of the ‘untranslatable.’”

There is a good reason to assume that Asghar's character is closest to Ahmed Ali's heart because he confesses that he feels like a “brown Englishman” who is on a receiving end as he has lost his “identity”, “freedom,” and “culture” (Ali, xiv). The hyphenated post-colonialism shows the inextricable intertwining of the two entities and, therefore, hybridization is imperative.

French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari philosophise the idea of “landlessness” which infers to the forced “exile” of the person from his land. Ali alludes to such land loss of people of Delhi after 1857 war when inhabitants were driven out and again in 1912 when Delhi was replaced by New Delhi and new people were settled there. Deleuze and Guattari coin the term of “reterritorialization” to denote “the violent dynamics of the colonial or imperial propagation of economic, cultural, and social transformation of indigenous culture, at the same time as characterising of the successful process of resistance to deterritorialisation [i.e., appropriation] through the anti-colonial movement.”

Ali refers to both forms of imperialist control of land, literal and figurative, and also portrays the resistant element it such an action ignites. For instance, Asghar is enchained to corrupt influence of colonial culture on indigenous and Mir Nihal is the one who resists and wages the war against it, no matter how hopeless that is. In fact, Ahmed Ali's battles by writing the novel in the first place because this is his bid to eternalise in art what has been made to vanish in the air. Therefore, metaphorically, his novel is exegesis of “reterritorialisation.”

The sub-textual reading of the text surfaces the well-designed symbolic structure which brings Ahmed Ali's postcolonial point home. Apart from it, the inserted poetic pieces

of Bahadur Shah Zafar, the ousted Mughal Emperor, function to evoke and heighten the loss of the colonized. Moreover, its language speaks volume of its post-coloniality.

The distinguishing feature of postcolonial writing is its use of language which is a medium of power. As Ashcroft et al write in *The Empire Writes Back*, “the post-colonial writing is always written out of the abrogation (i.e. discontinuing) of the received English which speaks from the centre, and the act of appropriation (i.e. seizure) which brings it under the influence of a vernacular tongue, the complex of speech habits which characterise the local language.” Raja Rao defines “appropriation” as “to convey language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own.” Ali’s novel abrogates and appropriates the standardised English by inserting untranslatable words like “*paan*” , “*haveli*” and incorporating “creolised” versions of English like Begum Jamal’s “*hai, hais*” (Ali, 97). Ashcroft et al term such subversive acts as creation of “new englishes”.

Another strategic uses of language is to “gloss over the obscure words” and “refusal to follow Standard English syntax.” As Priya Joshi contends, “Ali’s formal and cultural influences in *Twilight in Delhi* tend to be from the Urdu and Persian poetry that flourished in Mughal India. The transaction he engages within *Twilight in Delhi* is an oddly paradoxical one, freely utilizing an imported language and form but vigorously eschewing other cultural influences from them altogether.” Such linguistic tools are ploys to create a gap between the two discourses, introduce the new value systems and thus identities, and to demystify the colonial thought-patterns. In short, postcolonial writers use the dominant mode of expression to unlearn the colonial lessons, accommodate their own point of view, inculcate new ways of seeing, and, most significantly, foreground their sense of identity.

The last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar’s poetic laments are employed as epigraphs and frequently inserted in text. Thus it is a structural device which also constructs the meta-narrative to comment, reiterate, and reinforce the main narrative. The opening epigraph encapsulates the whole idea of the book:

Delhi was once a paradise,
Such peace had abided there;
But they have ravished its name and pride,

Remain now only ruins and care.

Ahmed Ali realises that the colonial devastation is irrevocable yet time and history will forever live through resurrection in art forms such as his own literary effort.

Discussion

Ahmed Ali's novel, *Twilight in Delhi* laments the fall of Delhi and the rise of the British conquerors who stripped the city of its glory and grandeur that was characteristically Indian. The loss of the old values and the style of life that was celebrated and venerated by its people are gradually seen to give way under a new and British style of life. In tracing this decline, Ahmed Ali's feminist stance is also revealed, where he likens the beauty of the Delhi city with the beauty of a woman. It is thus, that the image of the woman: the courtesan as well as the domestic woman reign important in the novel. The gradual decline of the position of women, demonstrated in the marriages that take place and in their physical ailments and gradual deaths, is paralleled with the historical changes that take place in this city. This paper will therefore attempt to critically analyze and trace these parallel images that contribute in establishing Ahmed Ali as both a feminist writer who brings out the voice of the suppressed female as well as a writer who laments the change that the Delhi city and the people of India were wrought with.

Ahmed Ali develops in his novel a contrast between what was and what is, and it is this contrast that gives a sense of transience in the novel and emphasizes upon the changes that take place in the lives of the people. He elaborates upon the position of the women and the lives that these people lived, and with the gradual evolution of the novel, a significant change and regression can be sensed and perceived. In the portrayal of this idea, Ahmed Ali brings out certain images and also deals with relationships as well as marriages that serve to bring out this contrast and transience more prominently.

One of the most significant images that Ahmed Ali portrays in the course of the novel, paralleled with the position of women and the state of Delhi is that of the wall.

Around the beginning of the novel, Ahmed Ali shows how the women are protected within the four walls of the zenana: He writes: 'Walls stood surrounding them on all sides, shutting the women in from the prying eyes of men, guarding their beauty and virtue' (Ali,

2007, p. 39) While the image of the women enclosed within the four walls seems oppressive, yet at the same time it also points to the way the women were guarded and protected, secured within the walls of their house, so as to maintain their purity. It is the sanctity of the woman which is venerated and preserved, and this is likened to the state of the city of Delhi.

Delhi too, as Ahmed Ali elaborates is secured within the city walls. However, with the infiltration of the British conquerors, these walls are slowly destroyed and the city is made vulnerable to the ravages of the foreign people, who strip the Delhi city of its past, glorified identity. Ahmed Ali writes: 'The city walls were also going to be demolished. The residents of Delhi resented all this, for their city, in which they had been born and grew up, the city of their dreams and reality, which had seen them die and live, was going to be changed beyond recognition.' (Ali, 2007, p. 195) With their arrival, the old Delhi thus ceases to exist and a new Delhi is constructed. The demolition of these walls, inevitably bring about the demolishment of all that Delhi stood for. 'The old culture, which had been preserved within the walls of the ancient town' are therefore eventually annihilated (Ali, 2007, p. 197).

The demolition of these walls thus lay bare the glorious city of Delhi to the ravages of the foreign people, and side by side the sanctity of the woman and the position she enjoyed in society is also seen to deteriorate. The walls therefore, in representing the secured and guarded property of the people, are brought down with the arrival of the colonizers. Delhi thus comes to resemble the naked, vulnerable woman who is mentioned in the first part of the novel, as she wanders aimlessly, desirous of being rescued but being perpetually condemned to insults and ridicules. Her vulnerable state thus foreshadows the sad plight of women and the state of Delhi.

Furthermore, the various characters presented in the novel and the relationships between these characters also serve to highlight the gradual decline of Delhi. The marital relationship of Mir Nihal and Begum Nihal, in fact serve to represent the twilight state of Delhi. While their marriage venerates the old values of life, where a woman was protected as well as given certain rights, yet the extra marital affairs of Mir Nihal with Dilchain and the courtesan Babban Jan, seriously deflate the purity of their relationship. Ahmed Ali here too focuses more on the plight of woman, where Begam Nihal is driven to insanity with this breakdown of loyalty from her husband. Mir Nihal's extra marital affairs however merely

serve as the starting point for a series of digressed relationships. The purity of the marital relationship and the respect due to a woman within this relationship deteriorates further and further with the passage of time. Ahmed Ali, through these digressive relationships demonstrates the passage of time, and the replacement of the old values with the new style of life. He pinpoints how the values of the Delhi people are affected with colonization and with the arrival of a foreign race who introduce their culture amongst the Indian natives. Indeed as Ahmed Ali writes, ‘...a new Delhi meant new people, new ways and a new world altogether.’ (Ali, 2007, p. 197)

The new culture, and the new ways of life thus rob Delhi of its earlier traditions and its glorified past. The city takes on a deathly image, telling a tale of its receded history. The subsequent marriages that take place in the course of the novel show a visible digression. Whereas the marriage ceremonies initially took place with the consent of the families, Asghar’s marriage with Bilqeece proves otherwise. The parents of Asghar are forced to bend under the will of their son who chooses a bride for himself, rather than consenting to the will of his parents. His marriage, taking place soon after the coronation of George V thereby becomes a touchstone, representing the changes that shall soon take hold of Delhi. Ahmed Ali therefore brings together the macrocosm and the microcosm: the assertion of the British Empire, paralleled with the changes taking place on a domestic level. With the beautiful city of Delhi, stamped upon by a foreign race, Ahmed Ali also shows how the position of the woman becomes more and more flaccid.

Asghar’s marriage with Bilqeece supposedly fulfills his dream of winning his beloved. However, this dream once fulfilled is replaced with a new dream and a new image of the beloved. Asghar, weary of Bilqeece now goes from woman to woman, satisfying his hunger elsewhere. With this endless lust, the image of the courtesan thus also deteriorates. In the beginning of the novel, Ahmed Ali elaborated upon the two different types of prostitutes: ‘the cultured ones and the whores’. (Ali, 2007, p. 38) Whereas the cultured ones were respected by society and were even asked to civilize young men, by teaching them good manners, the whores merely existed for the satisfaction of a man’s sexual lust. With the death of Babban Jan, Mir Nihal’s mistress, the image of the courtesan thus also begins to deteriorate into that of a whore. The respect due to a woman and the position enjoyed by the courtesan thus deteriorates and their status in fact amalgamates into that of a whore. The

beautiful image of the woman also likened to the city of Delhi, is thus seen to digress to a great extent.

Delhi becomes a city in the hand of the conquerors who strip it of its culture. With the changes wrought by the British people, Ahmed Ali writes: ‘All this made Delhi look more like an exhibition ground than the city which was once the greatest in Hindustan.’ (Ali, 2007, p. 135) Similarly, the woman too becomes an exhibition: a mere satisfaction of the man’s sexual lust. This is seen most explicitly in Asghar’s relationship with other women. Moreover, the woman as a mere fulfillment of a man’s physical lust culminates in Asghar’s relationship with Bilqeece’s sister, Zohra. Soon after the death of Bilqeece, Asghar’s attention is diverted towards the beauty and charm of her younger sister, and he begins to desire his marriage with her. His attraction towards her is limited merely to the physical level and this lust therefore further deteriorates the position of women in society.

This deteriorated position of the woman is also lamented upon by Ahmed Ali in the marriage of Ghafoor with the niece of Sheikh Muhamad Siddiq. Their marriage is basically settled against any logical considerations and the woman is seen to be cast away as a beast of burden. Sheikh Muhammad Siddiq willingly gives up his niece to Mir Nihal’s servant, Ghafoor, merely to rid himself of her and the responsibility that is due of him. Well aware of Ghafoor’s lust for women, no man stands up for the protection of Sheikh Siddiq’s niece, and it is thus that soon after her marriage, she becomes a victim to the throes of death, too young and weak for the ‘strong and virile Ghafoor.’ (Ali, 2007, p. 200) Thus, Ahmed Ali shows how this lust for women is being brought into the domestic household and how the respected woman of the household is also reduced to this degraded position, with no man left to protect and guard her honour. Similarly, Delhi too is subjugated under the power of a foreign rule.

Another instance which relates the fall of Delhi to the decline of the position of women can be seen in the event of Mehroo’s marriage, the youngest daughter of Mir Nihal. The issue of her marriage is introduced in the very beginning; a proposal that comes for her from ‘far away’ (Ali, 2007, p. 8) While, this proposal comes with a promise of material riches, the proposal from Saeed Hassan—the widower of one of Mir Nihal’s daughter—gains little favour. Though he had treated his deceased wife well, yet the family is unwilling to give him yet another daughter. Caught in the lust of material riches, they blindly accept the

proposal of Meraj, and realize the deception that they had become a victim of on the day of the marriage when the groom appears before them, and reveals himself as physically disfigured. In contrast to his deception then comes the traditional proposal of Saeed Hassan, who had no riches to offer, but that of respecting the woman and guarding her sanctity. Though Mir Nihal initially refuses to marry his daughter to the disfigured man, yet he is made to realize the helplessness of their position, where the girl in turn would be suspected to be suffering from some physical ailment. Thus, the woman is led towards her misery.

This blind act of giving up the daughter for marriage thus parallels the infiltration of the British Empire, who too were blindly accepted by the Mughal Empire. Unaware of the subsequent consequences of allowing the British to enter India for the sake of trade, they are eventually made to bend under their rule and accept them as the ultimate conquerors. Ahmed Ali in his depiction of the decline of Delhi therefore deals with these effects of colonization, where the city is thus robbed and looted of its identity, just as Mehroo's individuality is sapped. Mehroo and the city of Delhi are thus made to quietly accept their misfortunes.

Thus, it can be established that Ahmed Ali closely relates the decline of Delhi to the declining position of the female race. Right in the opening chapter of the novel, Delhi is metaphorically portrayed as a female body which has been "raped and conquered" (Ali, 2007, p. 4). Ania Loomba also talks about this in her book on Post-colonialism stating, that 'from the beginning of the colonial period till its end (and beyond), female bodies symbolize the conquered land' (1998, p. 152). Moreover, Ahmed Ali also draws upon the city of Delhi, bringing it in stark contrast with the image of a beautiful oriental bride. This 'bride' however is eventually 'ravished' by the alien race, and like the bride of Mehroo, Bilqeece and also the niece of Sheikh Muhammad Siddiq, she loses her original beauty.

Conclusion

Ahmed Ali can therefore be established as a feminist writer who laments upon the deteriorating position of women and links it with his lament of the loss of the traditional city of Delhi. The novel closely links the historical changes of the city with that of the domestic changes taking place as regards the female position in society. The image of the wall, the traditional ceremony of marriages and the women reduced to a mere object of lust, closely resemble the decline of Delhi. Even with Bilqeece's death, Ahmed Ali links many more

deaths, and thereby turns the city into the grossly image of death. Ahmed Ali thus laments: 'Delhi became a city of the dead.' (2007, p. 232) The city in fact begins to resemble the woman 'gone astray' that Asghar encounters in one of his wanderings, whom Ahmed Ali describes as: 'Her face though pretty, communicated a sense of the barrenness of the soul; and about her ways there was something of the women who have gone astray.' (2007, p. 53) His novel can therefore be praised for its artistic excellence where it inter-relates two of his main concerns and thus provides his readers with a holistic picture of his art, creativity and magnificence of idea.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:6 June 2015

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