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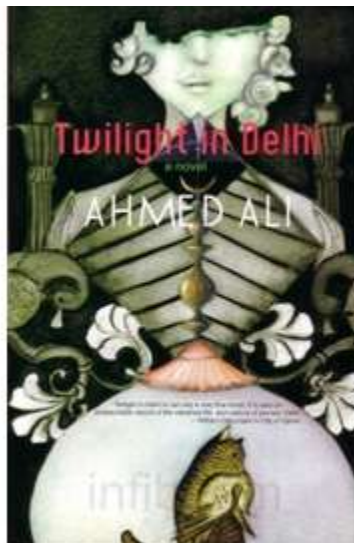
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## The Twilight of Muslims in Ahmad Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*

Shabnum Iftikhar, M.A. (Political Science), M.A. (English Literature, ELT)



### Introduction: Father of Modern Pakistani Literature

Novelist, translator, poet and critic Ahmad Ali died on 14<sup>th</sup> January 1994, thus  
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concluding a most important and eventual chapter of sub-continent cultural and literary history. Ahmad Ali, popularly known as Professor Ahmad Ali, was an epoch-making personality. He was the father of modern Pakistani literature. In fact, his work helped shape twentieth-century South Asian literature in both English and Urdu.

Born and brought up in Delhi in 1910 and educated at Aligarh Muslim University and Lucknow University, Ali started his writing career as a poet and playwright and soon found himself becoming a bilingual (English and Urdu) writer who wrote most of his short stories in Urdu, but his plays, poems and novels in English.

### **Ahmad Ali's *Twilight In Delhi***

Ahmad Ali's "*Twilight In Delhi*" is not just an ordinary book or a critical commentary on the decline of Muslims of India in the previous century, rather this novel is the first two decades of the twentieth century, when Muslims' culture was taking its last breaths. This decline was a decline of a great culture as it had belonged to that nation who ruled over sub-continent for centuries. This is Ali's great artistic subtlety that he describes this gradual downfall and retrogression of his own culture and traditions without any sentimentality. This novel gives a clear impression that Ali's purpose is not to justify the decline of his culture. As a matter of fact, he narrates a simple story of a Muslim family resides in Delhi, surrounded by its rich traditional and cultural values and how these values are destructed by the advent of a new foreign culture and force. By telling a story of central character Mir Nihal, a middle-aged Muslim business man of Delhi, Ahmad Ali covers each and every aspect of Muslims' lives of that time. Thus, Mir Nihal doesn't remain an individual character but he is a representative of a whole Muslim culture, through which Ali does focus on every nook and corner of individual as well as collective lives of Muslims.

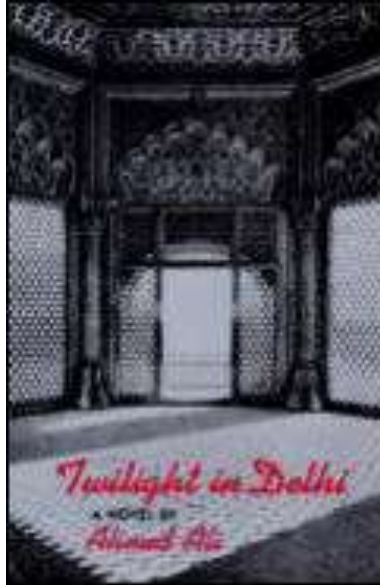
### **Background of the Novel**

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“*Twilight In Delhi*” re-captures the gradually declining twilight of not only Delhi but of the whole Muslims’ culture, which began to derail with the death of Mughal emperor Aurangzeb in 1707 and finally went off track in the aftermath of 1857. The novel narrates the effects of imperialism during the chaotic years of 1857-1919 with the help of novelist’s minute observation of the decaying Muslims’ life and culture. How imperialism does undermine or can undermine the existing or native culture, Ali describes with great honesty. He wrote what he observed as a native of his culture, of his values and of his traditions of that sub-continent where Muslims saw their heyday and then the decline and death of their power and culture. All these compelled Ahmad Ali to record that havoc and downfall in his novel.

### **A Fine Piece of Art – Evoking Pathos**

In the form of “*Twilight In Delhi*”, Ali has created a fine piece of art in English language in the literary history of the sub-continent. His descriptions of Delhi, of Muslims’ life, of day-to-day dying culture and social values and descriptions of gradual but strong after-effects of imperialism are truly matchless. Delhi, the center of Muslim civilization, where Mughals ruled with grandeur and where Delhi itself was an eye-witness of Mughals’ great magnificent regime, to see the decay of that very city of Delhi had been a poignant experience for the people of that era, Ahmad Ali is no exception. He feels free to portray the true picture of that cataclysmic Delhi and the pathetic conditions of Delhiets. In this respect, he has been successful in evoking pathos in the hearts of his readers with his dismal and desperate descriptions. His writing is immensely visual. He has, consciously or unconsciously concentrated on re-creating a world that is real, vivid and close to the actual traditional ways of Delhi.

### **Ali’s Dark Descriptions**

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Ahmad Ali's dark descriptions of Delhi, human beings, their lives, the dilapidation of their social and cultural values and finally their conflicts with themselves and with their innermost thoughts are the master-strokes in this novel. His capacity to paint pictures through words is Ali's most powerful quality as a novelist. He has made it possible for the readers of every age, of any region that they could visualize the twilight of Delhi of that time. This is the reason that "*Twilight In Delhi*" has been regarded a classic piece of literature and has been appreciated by a number of critics throughout the world. From the very outset, the mood of the novel is clearly established by the novelist.

Night envelops the city, covering it like a blanket. In the dim starlight roofs and houses and by-lanes lie asleep, wrapped in a restless slumber, breathing heavily as the heat becomes oppressive or shoots through the body like pain..."

The opening line is evident enough to reveal that twilight has prevailed already in the lives of the Delhiets and the novelist is going to bring that twilight in the lime-light by focusing the central character of Mir Nihal, his life style, his ideology, his innermost thoughts and his approach towards life and towards other people. Ali reveals existing stark and harsh realities of life experienced by the whole Muslim community. In this perspective, he mentally prepares his readers that what he is going to describe about and what they are going to read about. Definitely, he has no intention to describe the splendid past of Muslims, the magnificence of Delhi or the massive empire of Mughals where they ruled over for centuries, rather, he discloses the current plight conditions of Muslims, the decay of their culture, and how do they feel or react, being victims of imperialism.

### **Mir Nihal**

Through the character of Mir Nihal, he crafts his novel step by step that what Mir Nihal does feel and react when he sees the decay of his social and cultural values which he had been cherished throughout his life, when he sees his son Asghar's changing attitude, his adaptability to this new culture, his rebellious nature, which is the result of arrival of British in the sub-continent. When his son does fashion like English men and feels proud to wear English dress and shoes, does insists to marry a girl of his own choice, Mir Nihal attributes all these evils to the arrival of the imperialism. All these happenings together cause a mental shock for him and cause cracks in his individual and family life. Although the novelist reveals Mir Nihal's own flaws of his individual character, the way he deals with some of his personal matters and his incapacity to accept the changing time, Ali's primary purpose remains the same that whenever an individual encounters imperialism, encounters colonial forces, his rigid mentality and his rigid adherence to his values don't let him accept the realities and ultimately bring a catastrophe in his life.

It doesn't mean that Ahmad Ali in this way does favor imperialism. In this scenario, he reveals the reality that individual's inability to create a balance in his thoughts and his

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inflexibility in his approach are the things through which he suffers, Mir Nihal does the same. The adverse effects of imperialism can't be denied and can't be considered favorable at any rate, but Mir Nihal's individual's attitude towards these things is also responsible for his ultimate destruction. Consequently, he experiences paralysis in his last days.

“He lay on the bed in a state of coma, too feeling less to sit up or think.”

### **Ali's Realism**

Ali's dark descriptions combined with realism make a culture of Delhi alive in the novel. He is at his best in showing the bitter realities of that time to his readers with great concentration, he presents positive as well as negative aspects of his characters in the face of odds of life. Obviously, this is Ali's realism that he presents some real characters, belong to last Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar, whose lives cut a sorry figure this much that their circumstances compel them to beg. These characters are not Ali's imagination, but they are real people wandering in the streets of Delhi, whose lives and dignities are ruined by the ravages of time. The ironies of life faced by that time, faced by the Muslim class of that particular time of history and overall desperation have never been captured as convincingly and powerfully by any other novelist except Ali.

As a great realist, his power to present his protagonist Mir Nihal, his family members with all their flaws and weaknesses has made it possible for him to create his characters with their innate idiosyncrasies. It was inseparable for Ali to avoid these facts on the basis of which he was going to create a realistic novel, the genuine people, their genuine emotions, their genuine sorrows and their genuine downfall in the genuine city of Delhi, therefore, nothing is described by Ali randomly or haphazardly as he was fully aware of the fact that he is going to re-create a history, in which there is no choice of error. His novel *Twilight In Delhi* is an immaculate historical novel without any conscious effort to exaggerate. This is his very realism that he exposes some of the hidden facts of his characters' personal life, which were considered taboos of that time. His protagonist Mir Nihal is habitual of going to prostitute, his son Asghar also has a keep with whom he develops intimacy. Notwithstanding the fact, these type of activities are not a part of Muslims' culture, socially or religiously, but in that era, it was a part and parcel of Delhi culture. Ahmad Ali's access to these latent aspects of individual life of Delhi catches the nuances of Delhi very successfully and gives this novel a significant place in the works of realistic literature. Delhi and Delhiets have been as immortalized by Ali in “*Twilight In Delhi*” as Egdon Heath by Thomas Hardy in “*The Return Of The Native*”.

### **Sex/Sense of Diffidence**

Sex is another important theme of the novel. Ahmad Ali handles with great care. The fragility of this aspect demands a careful and mature handling on the part of the novelist, especially by keeping in mind that orthodox society of which Ahmad Ali was a part. He

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throws a light on some of the double-standard behaviors of the culture. Ali with relentless honesty does expose these facts that his characters are deeply depressed and have been going to prostitutes to give exposure to their curbed feelings. He doesn't feel a need to keep up appearances and shows a real face of his society, which is a Muslim society apparently, but to go to prostitutes and have keeps (mistresses) like traditions have been assimilated in the culture.

The major factor behind this double standard was a cultural and social structure of the society where domestic women were not able to express their sexual feelings as they were not trained on these patterns. To fill this vacuum of their lives, males were compelled to visit prostitutes by disregarding all their social and moral values. Therefore, Ali shows that individual's domestic life is devoid of domestic calm and peace.

It is shown in the novel that Mir Nihal and Asghar both have keeps (mistresses). Mir Nihal's world is deranged on the death of his beloved. He feels a kind of flux in his life that can't be fulfilled. Asghar's domestic life remains disturb even after his love marriage, simply because his wife remains unable to remove the gulf between them as she is a domestic lady and is unaware of the tactics of the dancing girls. This is another side of Delhi's personal life of individuals, suppressed and curbed altogether, Ali describes in the novel.

### **Theme and Structure**

"*Twilight In Delhi*" provides a real and accurate portrait of the static and decaying culture of Delhi while the British arranged the coronation durbar of 1911 and drew up plans for imperial city, Delhi. Ahmed Ali's vehement use of symbolism and metaphors does transform "*Twilight In Delhi*" into a motion picture. The decay of culture, passing away of old civilization, ruin of life both individually and collectively and the regrets of the protagonists are conveyed powerfully with all the paraphernalia of narrative mastery by Ahmed Ali.

On a surface level, the novel revolves around Mir Nihal and his family, the day-to-day happenings of their lives but on a symbolic level, *Twilight In Delhi* records of what's going on in the streets of Delhi, what Delhi has lost as a city after the British advent and if we read between the lines, *Twilight In Delhi* is an elegy on the departure and death of Muslim civilization and Muslim era with the frequent use of Urdu poetry by Ali, which conveys the ethos of Indian Muslims.

I am the light of no one's eye,  
The rest of no one's heart am I.  
That which can be of use to none,  
Just a handful of dust am I.

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## The Theme of Regret

These kinds of couplets carry the theme of regret for a dying culture directly. The self-pity in the poetry creates a sense of nostalgia - nostalgia of the protagonist, Mir Nihal and of Muslim culture, nostalgia of Delhi itself and finally nostalgia of the novelist but Ali writes less from romantic than from classical stand point. His rich descriptions of his culture don't reduce the intensity of poignant feelings of Mir Nihal and the grief-stricken regrets for the Mughal past, rather the sense of despair and disenchantment goes parallel throughout the novel. His *Twilight In Delhi* chronicles accounts of time with great accuracy. So, passing away of Muslim civilization in India is one of the major themes.

According to Hassan Askari,

Ahmed Ali has not written a story of a few individuals alone, but of a people, a city, a particular culture, a period of history. His theme is not confined to a few characters and their biographies, but to an entire city. This is in reality, a collective novel, whose hero is the city of Delhi. (Chapter11, Page106)

## Significance of the Title

Critics have rated "*Twilight In Delhi*" as one of the finest novels written in English language. Its plot, structure, theme, characterization - everything is remarkable, but what is more remarkable is its title - with a magnetic and significant attraction, the title catches the attention of the reader promptly. It is not merely a title but the sum and substance of the entire gamut of Muslims' era which Ahmed Ali has presented in this memorable novel. The word "Twilight" means the time of day just after the sunset or before dawn, when the sun is below the horizon. As the novel is aimed at writing about the fall of Mughals and the death of a culture, this word has a close relation with the story, telling in one word, the condition of the inhabitants of Delhi in the earlier part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This twilight was not only experienced by Mughal's kinship but also by any common man who went through this disastrous phase of history. Mir Nihal as a common man was also the victim of this disaster, born and brought up in Delhi, proud of his culture and traditions, felt himself strange in his own city after the advent of colonial forces, when Delhi, the cynosure of the sub-continent was occupied by the Britishers. As his son Asghar gets impressed by this foreign culture, his pride and hopes get shattered altogether. His wife gets blind. The death of his keep (mistress) proves a severe shock for him. Mir Nihal finds himself unable to bear these vicissitudes of life. As a consequence, he gets paralyzed and a permanent twilight prevails in his life. The twilight element seems to engulf every aspect of his individual life. This twilight is symbolic in the context of the novel as through the character of Mir Nihal, Ali presents the sketch of the whole of Muslim society. So, Mir Nihal's paralysis symbolizes the paralysis of a culture, of an entire era and paralysis of Muslim reign. The vary paralysis is all pervading in other

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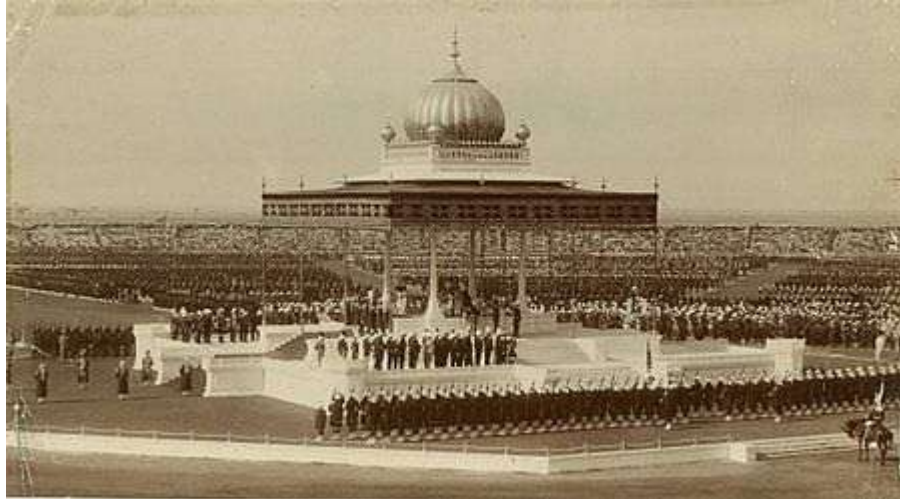
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characters also whom Ali depicts in the novel. Delhi faces this twilight when it loses its cultural hegemony that has been cherished since centuries. Delhi, the evident of grand Muslim past, is being demolished by pulling down the old Mughal walls as the Britishers prepare the city to hold the great coronation for King George V.

### Delhi Durbar of King George V



Courtesy: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Delhi\\_Durbar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Delhi_Durbar)

This historical-cultural scenario is used by Ali as a background to emphasize the ‘twilight’ of Delhi and how Mir Nihal and his family goes through this ‘twilight’ as the story of great decay unfolds. Ahmed Ali by grasping the crux of his novel in a single word ‘twilight’ has created a novel in which an individual life, culture and Delhi are at their low ebb.

According to Khademul Islam, (Chapter13, Page 118)

“Delhi, the symbolic centre of Mughal power got it the worst in the aftermath of 1857. The sons and grandsons of the last emperor, the sorrowful Bahadur Shah Zafar, who had taken refuge in Humayun’s tomb, were shot dead in front of him. An estimated 30,000 people died in the reprisals. Muslim nobles and commoners alike fled the city. The Jamia Masjid was used as a barrack of Sikh Soldiers. All houses, mosques, bazaars-including the legendary Khas Bazaar and Urdu Bazaar within 448 yards of the Red Fort were demolished. In short, Mughal Delhi was wiped out.”

It is that decline, eventual death and twilight, Ahmed Ali has packed in just three words -- -- “*Twilight In Delhi*”.

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