

Gender Issues in Ahmed Ali's Twilight in Delhi

Women consist half of the species. They are the makers of family, society, and nation. Since the ages, women have been relegated to the periphery for being inferior to men. The fetters of the society and culture have led women to imprison themselves in the houses and dream only about their husband, children and family. Mahadevi Verma in her essay entitled Links in the Chain has suggested women to realize their rights and skills. They work as the links in the chain, but this will be possible only when their own feet will be freed from the shackles.

It is only recently that few thinkers and theorists have realized this marginality of women and the movements like feminism work for their rights and freedom. In the light of the feminist approach, my paper aims at interpreting Ahmed Ali's Twilight in Delhi. It is a beautifully written novel in English. Primarily the novel deals with the downfall of Delhi culture due to the arrival of British in the beginning of the twentieth century and simultaneously it gives us a glimpse of Indo-Muslim family life. The novel becomes the storehouse of various images drawn from Delhi and its culture. Not only the pigeon flying and kite flying have been projected as the major part of Indian culture but the subordinated women's life also becomes its chief issue.

This novel covers the period of nine years i.e. from 1910 to 1919. It is set in pre independent Delhi and remarkably deals with the plight of women during that era. The society projected in the novel is male dominated and it brings out the fact that how the feudal lord of the family restrains a large section of the society from actively participating in the works outside the household affairs. Ali makes his novel a mirror of society and tells through the extended family of Mir Nihal that how the Indo Muslim family were divided into two parts: the one called mardana the men's part of the house and another called zenana the women's part of the house. The arrangement of the household was

such due to the purdah system prevalent in Muslim families. The Hindu women's condition was also not good however, the condition of Muslim women was worse. Women observed purdah from the outsiders as well as the male members of the house. This purdah system was actually started to protect women from the eyes of the strangers. However, now it has become so deep rooted in Muslim culture that still women cannot walk out of their houses without hiding their faces behind the veil and the effect of that can be seen in various areas like Chowk of not only Delhi but Lucknow as well.

Women were not allowed to take any important decision in the family as in the case of Begam Nihal who after confronting the secret love of her son Asghar could not think to give her consent without her husband's approval. Nevertheless, finding her son at the door of death and due to the fear of his committing suicide she stealthily settles Asghar and Bilqueece's marriage. She realizes her rights in the case of marriage and says, "For though women hold a subordinate position in Indian life yet in certain matters they can take the law in their hands, and marriage is one of them" (71). This fact reveals that women had the rights but they never realized this out of their modesty.

Mir Nihal, one of the leading characters in the novel, enjoys an extra marital love affair with a courtesan named Babban Jan and keeps telling a lie to his wife. These visits to the courtesans were considered royal in the Mughal period. Begam Nihal who used to wait for her husband's arrival in the night was entirely unaware of this dark side of her husband's character. Not only this but after her mistress' death he gradually washes his hands away from all the duties. Mir Nihal did not have only Babban Jan in his life but in the very early years of his married life, he had a son from his maid Dilchain who died later on, and due to which his wife went mad.

On the other hand, Mir Nihal's son Asghar also visits Mushtari Bai, another famous courtesan and starts having visions of her in the night. The female beauty of Mushtari Bai charms Asghar. But as men, due to their tendency are fickle minded in case of women and keep vacillating from one to another, Asghar also soon loses his interest in Mushtari Bai and turns to Bilquees, and marries her against his father's wishes.

Indian scenario is such that girls, since their childhood, are taught to be humble and docile as they have to be sent to their husband's house sooner or later. As soon as the proposal comes for Mehro's marriage, she starts thinking about her ultimate destiny. The romantic and fantastic images that revolve in her mind take her into another world and she is preoccupied with an idealistic picture of her husband. She thinks:

Mehro lies on her bed and looks up at the stars,...She thinks of a man far away whose proposal has come for her hand. What can he be like? She wonders. She has never seen him...Meraj –that is his name --... And she associates him with the prince in the story with whom the princess was in love. (8)

Not only Mehro dreamt of her future life partner but she was thrilled at his thought also. She was too young to understand the complexity of married life and sexual desires which only romanticized her. Ahmed Ali gives us a peep inside her heart:

She, of course, liked it in her heart of hearts;...that not only disturbed her emotional balance, but also exposed her inhibitions which grow in the repressed lives of the Indian women like cobwebs and mushrooms. To conceal her consciousness of sex, she flew into a temper, without, of course, realizing its unconscious and hidden cause. (40)

Even though it was the time of freedom struggle and women were also breaking the barriers and coming out of their houses, but still the common people kept their daughters and women in purdah and they were always brought and sent in dolis.

Ahmed Ali has presented the conventional women caught in their household affairs. Patriarchy always considers women as irrational, emotional, and sentimental fools and men have this pre-conceived notion that women are good for nothing. They are simply the gossipmongers and only know to kill their time by chatting endlessly. Ali does not remain away from this belief and throughout the novel, he has depicted these details at length:

Everyday Begam Jamal and Anjum Zamani, her sister in law, came down and peeling potatoes or some other vegetable for dinner, or just sitting idle, cutting areca nut into small bits which they collected in circular purses, they let their tongues loose, and talked and talked, of marriage and death, of this and that, but mostly of people and family. ()

Ali is deft at portraying men as paragon and hides their inadequacies. Through the character of Saeed Hasan he tells what to be expected from women and what a man wants in his wife:

A wife should be of moderate stature, neither short nor very tall nor too fat. She could not be short because then she would give birth to many children. She should not be very tall as she would bend down soon after the birth of one child. She would not be too fat for then she will never have a child at all. That is why a man must give preference to one who combines all qualities harmoniously and proportionately.... (57)

Not only the women belonging to the refined, honourable families are our issue in the novel but the courtesans like Babban Jan and Mushtari Bai have their own miserable life. They neither gain sympathy from the readers in the novel nor they are pitied by the people in society. They are only looked at with hatred and contempt. For them it is only their physical beauty, which they use to get money to survive. They are conscious of this fact that in their old age they will be left alone to suffer as Mushtari Bai says, "But when old age knocks at the door, beauty of the body dies: only virtue is beauty which I do not possess" (74). The cursed fate of Mushtari Bai becomes more heart rending when she very philosophically says, "I am that candle which burns its own self, shedding tears of blood, and blackens the walls of the niche with its smoke" (75). This is very ironical that these neglected women of the society who sang and danced only for the Nawabs and the upper classes to entertain them, they themselves remained ruined and neglected throughout their life.

The central attraction of the novel is the passionate love of Asghar for his wife Bilqueece. Bilqueece's beauty forces Asghar to marry her against his father's desire. However, the problem arises when after marriage Asghar finds Bilqueece not as sensuous and passionate as he himself was his dream shattered. Bilqueece worshiped him like her God but Asghar could not pacify himself with the cold attitude of Bilqueece and did not pay any regard to her. On the very first night of their wedding, Asghar finds himself in chaos when he expects the romantic talks and gestures of Bilqueece and gets nothing, not even the response to his own advances. This lack of warmth in his beloved resulted in Asghar's indifference towards her. He started keeping himself away from all the duties of a husband, often shouted at Bilqueece, and busied himself in official works. Surprisingly enough Asghar, who has once left Mushtari Bai for Bilqueece, again moves towards his mistress. The reason for the detachment of Asghar from Bilqueece was not

only her coldness but also the birth of a girl child whereas Asghar expected a son. This negligence of Asghar led Bilqueesha suffer in her heart and ultimately forced her to die. Asghar now left with his only daughter was grief stricken, as he could do nothing to keep his daughter happy. Nothing could bring him solace and comfort. However, destiny has its own role to play and the life has to go on, believing in the same dictum soon after the death of his wife Asghar started planning for his second marriage with no one else but his dead wife's younger sister Zohra. Man does not dare to accept his infidelity; therefore, Asghar gives the excuse of his young daughter Jehan Ara that only for her sake he was getting married. Nevertheless, Zohra's mother, after seeing her first daughter's condition, did not approve the match and rejected the proposal.

The novel Twilight in Delhi forces the readers to look deep into the realities. However, the novel was written in mid twentieth century but still Muslim women's condition is not praiseworthy. They still go through the same agonies and sufferings. A conventional Muslim family still does not allow a girl child so easily to educate and purdah system is so deep rooted in their custom that to break this system is a sin for them.

Works Consulted

Ali, Ahmed. Twilight in Delhi. New Delhi: Rupa, 2007.

Gowda, H.H. Anniah. "Ahmed Ali's Twilight in Delhi and Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart."

Alien Voice: Perspectives on Commonwealth literature. Ed. Avadhesh K. Srivastava.

India: Print House; 1981.