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“Golden hour”: Nostalgia and the demise of the Muslim urban space in *Twilight in Delhi* and *Sunlight on a Broken Column*

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how changing cityscapes of (post)colonial urban transition contribute to the creation of nostalgic longing in *Twilight in Delhi* and *Sunlight on a Broken Column*. Drawing from recent scholarship, it focuses on the memorialization of space and compares the ways in which narrative memory frames the perception of urbanization in both texts. Further, this study also examines the cultural location of this nostalgia and articulates the categorization of a specific Muslim nostalgia, which comes from the recognition of the anticipated political and social exclusion of the community in contemporary India. The article analyses the impact of the transformation of the city with colonization and decolonization on Muslims, as narrated in both texts. Borrowing from Svetlana Boym’s twin concepts of reflective and restorative nostalgia as analytical frameworks, a close reading reveals significantly contrasting literary perspectives when it comes to narrating the flux between modernity and tradition within the Indo Muslim imagination.

KEYWORDS



Ahmed Ali; Attia Hosain; *Sunlight on a Broken Column*; *Twilight in Delhi*; nostalgia; Svetlana Boym

In the city, the past attacked the present, and the future was lost in conflict (Hosain [1961] 2009, 88).

In this world of shadows nothing ever remains the same (Ali [1940] 2008, x).

Introduction: Typologies of Indo Muslim nostalgia

Growing up an Indian Muslim, I was convinced that my people are a sad and stodgy bunch. Long before I embarked on my intellectual trajectory as an academic, I could sense a melancholic tendency within my culture. A shared preoccupation with pathos – an anxiety resulting from the fear of an impending extinction that seemingly started with the Partition – has only grown within the community due to recent political events. I was acutely aware of the ways in which mourning became a culturally inscribed practice, communally observed most notably by Shias during Moharram every year. Moharram usually involves many literary aspects during its observance, from *maatam* (mourning ceremony), *nauha* (lamentation song) to *marsiya* (elegy). I noticed an affective connection between these forms of communal

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mourning, which correlated with shifts in Indo Muslim literary culture in the late-19th and 20th centuries. Even beyond the melancholic memorialization of religious history, South Asian Muslims are purported to have experienced modernity with much anxiety and loss. Zaman (2017), one of the few scholars to delve substantially into nostalgia and South Asian Muslim culture, writes:

For the most part, however, historicist diagnoses – which contain within them an implicit gesturing towards Muslim unreason and superstition [. . .] saw nostalgia as both cause and symptom of fatal Muslim backwardness, evidence of the fact that Muslims were out of place and out of time with the time of the nation. (629)

This article examines the secular life of urban, *ashraf* (upper-caste Muslims claiming foreign ancestry) Muslims of late-colonial India and their relationship with the cities they inhabited. I explore how changing cityscapes of (post)colonial urban transition contribute to the creation of nostalgic longing in two novels of Muslim life, *Twilight in Delhi* by Ahmed Ali ([1940] 2008) and *Sunlight on a Broken Column* by Attia Hosain ([1961] 2009). Borrowing from Svetlana Boym's (2001) analysis of nostalgia and urban space, I contextualize the cultural location of what I call "Indo Muslim nostalgia" through close readings of both texts. Boym's seminal work, though widely known, has not been applied to much South Asian writing.

Nostalgia has its origins in the early modern period (1688, to be precise) as a medical condition identified by the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer. Over time, nostalgia shifted from being a medical diagnosis to an affective descriptor. Psychologists have claimed that nostalgia provides "roots", "continuity", and "texture" to life by serving "a crucial existential function" in reminding us of "experiences that assure us we are valued people who have meaningful lives" (Tierney 2013, n.p.). This focus on reaffirmation and meaningfulness seems particularly notable when expanding this to oppressed minority identities within nation states. Hamilton (2007) puts it best in her article "Happy Memories":

The recounting of happy memories need not involve a denial of oppression [. . .] or 'letting go' of the past. [. . .] Rather than disabling change, such memories may act as an ingredient in formulating alternative futures [. . .] happy memories may be especially important in sustaining political projects of the oppressed (67).

Can nostalgia, an apparently backward-looking emotion that arguably makes memory sentimental and unreliable, have subversive potential? Critics of nostalgia such as Susan Stewart and David Lowenthal have described the nostalgic impulse as an inherently conservative one, favouring simplistic historical narratives. They describe nostalgia as "hostile to history" and "longing for an impossibly pure [. . .] place of origin" (Stewart 1992, 23) and "search for a simple and stable past" as "refuge" from "a turbulent and chaotic present" (Lowenthal 1989, 21), respectively. Recent scholarship has recognized progressive possibilities within nostalgia, starting with Boym. Her distinction between reflective and restorative nostalgia provides a useful, if imperfect, template for organizing the contradictory impulses that nostalgia carries. Other scholars champion nostalgia in ways that do not follow her prescriptivist nostalgia typologies, but instead contend that nostalgia's radical possibilities do not lie in its "use value" but are in fact dependent on the contextual location of the communities that espouse it (Bonnet 2010; Raychaudhuri 2017; Walder 2010). The relationship between the specific form modernity takes on in a cultural

context and those excluded from hegemony is what determines nostalgia's radical possibilities. Santner's (2006) description of melancholy also holds true for nostalgia – an affective posture which can “maintain fidelity to those losses that the reigning ideological formation would like to disavow” (89). My approach to nostalgia is indebted greatly to these understandings of progressive nostalgia positing that Indo Muslim nostalgia is a radical response to the colonial oppression and virulent Islamophobia plaguing the Indian state since its inception. Yet, just as some counter-hegemonic models are more robust than others, some nostalgia is more productive than others too. While my analysis abides by the reflective versus restorative division, it also recognizes the impossibility of offering a neat classification.

Written approximately two decades apart, both these novels engage with Muslim feudal life, urban space, and the use of the English language to articulate local concerns. The preoccupations of both writers are symptomatic of this liminal moment in the Indo Muslim imagination – when an old order is collapsing and a new one being created. While the two texts are ripe for comparison in their anglicization of the Indo Muslim cultural ethos, it is in their treatment of temporally bound sentiments that a marked difference emerges. I aim to also showcase the ways in which Ali and Hosain conform to and problematize Boym's typology of nostalgia. This imperfect mapping of the two texts onto her theoretical categorization is important for recognizing the uses and limitations of Boym's influential model of temporality and affect in the postcolonial context.

Engaging with their North Indian Muslim context is essential when applying the theoretical frameworks discussed earlier to these texts. Both are set in the cities of Delhi and Lucknow, respectively.¹ They were administrative centres of the Mughals and established cosmopolitan urban cultures. Mughal patronage led to the growth of a Muslim middle class. With the advent of colonial rule and the downfall of Islamic empires, both cities became battlegrounds for the most destructive conflicts between British and Indian forces during the Rebellion of 1857. The 19th and 20th centuries saw huge changes to the material and affective foundations of Dehlavi and Lakhnavi culture for Muslim elites, consequently memorialized in contemporary literary culture. Alex Padamsee (2011) observes that extinction and return are major themes in the works of Muslim writers post-1857 (36). The “psychological and material rupture of 1857 on the elite Indo-Muslim imagination” profoundly shaped the collective assessment of Muslims, both within their own community and by the British (32). The Partition in 1947 was the next event which fundamentally altered South Asian Muslims by rupturing them into new nationalized identities. Since *Sunlight* was written after 1947, the Partition prefigures as an overarching force in Hosain's novel. Though Ali's novel was written before the Partition, the political changes of the next decade are anticipated – a sense of loss and fear of replacement drive it.

This nostalgia impels the affective thrust, manifesting in the intimacy of relationships that their characters share with their social worlds. They lament the changes to urban cityscapes and the loss of traditional customs in the face of transitions brought about by (post)colonial modernity. For Boym, nostalgia reflects “the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups [...] personal and collective memory” (2001, xiii). Nostalgia entails bittersweet revisiting of memory with some wishful hope of replicating that temporal sentiment in the present. I see nostalgia occupying a middle ground between memory and affect in becoming an affectively induced memory – a

feeling about a memory. Speaking to that narrative quality, Boym writes that “a cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images” (2001, xix). As mentioned, Boym distinguishes between “restorative” and “reflective” nostalgia. The former “stresses *nóstos* (home) and attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home [...]. Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition (xviii).” Alternatively, “reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity” (xviii). She adds that the two are “not absolute types but tendencies” (41). However, Boym’s distinction cannot fully encompass the contradictory ways in which nostalgia relates to the script she lays down.

Nostalgia performs a unique cultural function for Indian Muslims, especially in the face of an authoritarian state that seeks to purge Muslim-ness from its official archive. Read today, both texts reassert the sense of belonging, ownership, and intimacy that Muslims felt towards the nation, a sentiment eroded by contemporary political rhetoric which sees them as invaders and second-class citizens. However, the double-edged sword of nostalgia complicates the articulation of Muslim cultural expression. This article seeks to reflect on these implications of Indo Muslim nostalgia, and the critical possibilities it can offer or foreclose. Despite the overall growing shift towards reflective nostalgia in Muslim writing in the 20th century, which is indicative of the shift from anti-colonial to postcolonial sensibilities, I observe remarkably different visions of nostalgic longing represented in both novels. While *Twilight* is framed by the logic of restoration (if not its end), *Sunlight* reads as a more reflective, ambivalent text. Without categorizing Ali as a conspiracy theorist or right-wing nationalist, whom Boym cites as examples of the most impactful creators of potent restorative nostalgia, I comment on the conservative tendency within *Twilight* to represent tradition as unchangingly monolithic.

The distinctive features of Indo Muslim nostalgia as a category of community representation in art includes depictions of lives of Muslims from a time when they commanded greater cultural and political primacy. Their status as a minority and the resulting violent precarity is not the defining feature of Indo Muslim nostalgic narratives from the outset. Usually set in the North Indian Urdu-speaking sociocultural milieus, these works involve a self-conscious exploration of the social mores of the community,² an intricately woven network, with diverse caste/class representations. Pathos emanating from the realization of an irretrievable past marks these works since the narrative anticipates a diminished future or extinction awaiting the community. Besides literature, “Muslim social” genre films like *Mere Mehboob* (Rawail 1963), *Umrao Jaan* (M. Ali 1981), and *In Custody* (Merchant 1993) can also be considered examples of Indo Muslim nostalgia (Dwyer 2013). Developing Boym’s idea of reflective nostalgia when analysing the 20th-century culture and politics of South Asian Muslims, Zaman contends the accusation of orthodox, simplistic nostalgia is a wilful misunderstanding of Indo Muslim political thought: “If the trope of nostalgia is to have any analytical value in the history of India’s Muslim, it must be thought of as an expansive nostalgia that contained within it vast spatial and temporal potentialities” (2017, 679). Unlike 19th-century Muslim writers, who were concerned with the decay of Islamic spirituality in Urdu literature, these English language texts have a clear sociological focus.³

The city becomes a nostalgic site, explored through the medium of textuality. Echoing Boym's (2001, xix) "double exposure", the past and present intermingle, conjuring images of Mughal decadence, colonial grandiosity, and the more mundane aspects of a lost Muslim urbanity. While material evidence of history is open to alteration or destruction from the ravages of modernity, both Ali and Hosain freeze a moment in time for their beloved cities of Lucknow and Delhi – making them briefly immutable – despite the undercurrents of upheaval in the distance. In these literary accounts, Delhi and Lucknow of the past are preserved, before their eventual descent into oblivion. This preservation is reminiscent of a snapshot taken right at the sunlight's edge – what the poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz ([1979] 2013, 126) calls "*dhoop kinara*" or golden hour – when the city, bathed in evening light, stands starkly clear in its beauty, just before sinking into darkness.

"Homeless at home": Nostalgia and the extinction of the Mughal city in *Twilight in Delhi*

In his introduction to *Twilight in Delhi*, Ali remarks:

[M]y purpose in writing the novel was to depict a phase of our national life and the decay of a whole culture, a particular mode of thought and living, values now dead and gone before our eyes. Seldom is one allowed to see a pageant of History whirl past, and partake in it too. (xxi)⁴

This statement captures the sentiments of a generation of Muslims who saw, in quick succession, the complete annihilation of a way of life under British imperialism. *Twilight* recounts the changing dynamics of Delhi's urban culture by focusing on the generational trauma of the systemic deracination of Muslims in Delhi after 1857. Though set in the early 20th century and written in English, Ali anglicizes the *shahr ashob*, a relatively neglected form of urban lamentation in Urdu poetry and secular cousin of *nauha* and *marsiya*.⁵

Joshi (2002) points out that "*Twilight* was a singular attempt at vernacularizing the novel with almost exclusively local preoccupations" (213). With his decision to use local names (*Laal Darwaza* instead of Red Fort or using unglossed Hindustani words like *saqi*, *Begum*, *hai hai*, etc.), Ali's language is mostly lithe and seamless, albeit occasionally awkward, which is characteristic of early prose experimentation that mixes Hindustani with English. This formal choice, hailed by many as novel in making English "our own", is essentially a nostalgic gesture towards Ali's roots as an Urdu writer. Even though Ali writes in English, a decision with inherent colonial baggage, his concerns and characters replicate an indigenous literary aesthetic by combining the slow time of oral storytelling narratives with the structure of the western novel (Joshi 2002, 216). Naim Ahmad (1968, n.p.) remarks that the *shahr ashob* brings about "a sense of unendurable grief and irresistible pain gives rise to feelings of helplessness and desperation", sentiments which are expressed repeatedly in *Twilight*. Ali includes dozens of painstakingly translated verses of poetry by Hafiz, Ghalib, and Mir in the novel, with varying degrees of success.

The novel is set during the period between 1911 and 1919. Ali clearly marks out four historical flashpoints: the Revolt of 1857, the Coronation of George V in 1911, the outbreak of the First World War, and the Home Rule Movement of 1919 onwards.⁶

The ostensibly linear timeline simultaneously evokes multiple temporalities. There are frequent call backs to the events of 1857 and the Mughal past of Delhi. Characters painfully recall the ransacking of the city during the siege of Delhi by the British. Bahadur Shah's exile, the murder of his sons, and the destruction of the city leave psychological scars on the collective memory of Delhi's residents. The nostalgic potency of the novel comes from this clever "superimposition" of various timelines as the city of Delhi becomes a site of temporal changes in the novel – an attempt to "revisit time as space" (Boym 2001, xvi).

In the late 1930s, when Ali was writing the novel, the Partition was far from a guaranteed course of action. In the aftermath of 1857, Muslims were repressed colonial subjects but had not yet seen a physical uprooting along the scale of 1947. However, Mir Nihal's identity has already been exiled. Today, it is impossible to read *Twilight* without acknowledging the Partition. The nostalgia evoked, then, is not just related to 1857 but also to 1947, even though the latter is not explicitly predicted in the novel itself. Anjaria (2012) writes: "[B]y focusing on an elderly protagonist, Mir Nihal, instead of a member of the younger generation, Ali constructs an *Altersroman*, or novel of age, in which time brings not development or maturity but decline and retreat" (106). Mir Nihal's growing despondency comes from his "exile-at-home" under colonial rule, whereby he delves further into tradition in order to create a safe haven from colonial modernity. He becomes a religious disciplinarian, experiments in alchemy, mingles with wandering sages at home, and trusts only *hakims* (herbal doctors of the Unani medical tradition) to cure his eldest son's cancer (Joshi 2002, 221). However, he cannot stop the adoption of a western lifestyle by Asghar, his younger son, making his attempt at transhistorical restoration of a pre-colonial Muslim tradition in the domestic space only partially effective. Asghar feels constrained by the demands of his traditional Muslim household; his appreciation of English customs and desire to marry a woman of his choice break the "generational unity" which had defined Muslim feudal life (Joshi 2002, 220). Clinging to nostalgia is Mir Nihal's attempt at undoing the influence of colonialism in his inner world; this nostalgia becomes a deliberate affective choice to articulate the novel's anti-colonial politics.

Another key site for registering colonial transformation in the text is the urban architecture of Delhi. Leading up to the Delhi Durbar, its winding lanes, close-knit homes, and deep drains were deemed too ugly and unsanitary for the coronation. British architects and builders, supervised by Edwin Lutyens, tore down parts of the old city to build New Delhi, the new imperial capital. (Joshi 2002, 217) The original inhabitants of Delhi view these changes with shock and horror as "the city of their dreams and reality" changes irrevocably (143):

The gutters which were deep and under-ground from the times of the Mughals to this day were being dug and [. . .] the dirty water flowed very near the level of the streets [. . .] the expansive *peepal* trees which had given shelter to the residents and the poor from the scorching rays of the sun, were cut down. [. . .] This affected the people more deeply than anything else. (143)

The fair erected for the Coronation causes the author to remark that “all this made Delhi look more like an exhibition ground” than the greatest city of Hindustan (122). The cognitive disorientation triggered by such material changes in the urban character is explored through Mir Nihal. This sense of alienation pulls him tighter into nostalgia’s grip. The “dreams” and “reality” of Delhi – its affective and material structure – stand fundamentally altered in the face of colonial urbanity.

These transformations in Delhi’s urban architecture coincide with changes in Mir Nihal’s personal life. When he learns of Asghar’s intention to marry Bilqeece, a girl from a less-distinguished and possibly lower-caste family, he is horrified as they are not Syeds (upper-caste Muslims claiming ancestry from Prophet Muhammad).⁷ This fear of mixing is related to the concerns about Delhi losing its purity to outside influences. Beyond this, the death of Babban Jan, his mistress, not only marks the end of Mir Nihal’s virility, but also signals the decline of courtesan culture in Chawri Bazaar. He sells off his pigeons and stops pigeon-flying, a hobby sustained by the urban landscape of Delhi where owners taunt each other and compete across rooftops (Joshi 2002, 217). From this point, his character arc becomes more inward as Mir Nihal locks himself in, growing more infirm. He agonizes during the Coronation that “the past, which was his, had gone, and the future was not for him” (147). This sense of temporal asynchronicity resonates with the steady marginalization of Muslims in India.

Ali’s Delhi is populated by various artisans, courtesans, traders, religious mendicants, and beggars. While the main narrative is concerned with Mir Nihal’s family, these smaller characters reflect on the demise of Delhi. We meet Gul Bano, Bahadur Shah’s granddaughter, and Mirza Naisirul Malik, his son, who are now beggars, a complete inversion of Delhi’s older Mughal order. The novel takes an odd route towards the preservation of Dehlavi past in its anti-colonial poetics, both linguistically and politically. The plot reveals its restoratively nostalgic tendencies when Ali regrets the loss of Delhi’s “purity” with the arrival of people from other parts of India. This emphasis on the purity of Delhi’s language and culture is completely at odds with the history of a city that was the centre of many empires and cultures (Shingavi 2013, 169). The novel tends to conflate restorative nostalgia for a homogenous Delhi with the radical, anti-colonial nostalgia of pre-colonial Delhi. Similarly, the mixing of bloodlines between Bilqeece and Asghar parallels the cultural “mixing” that Ali abhors. Ali’s explicit focus on pollution and purity and his creation of extreme binaries between colonial modernity and Dehlavi culture allows for pathos to be the sole guiding emotion of the text’s affective consumption. For Ali, there is barely scope for reflecting, nostalgically or otherwise, on the impact of such transition in more diverse ways.

Delhi’s robustness and durability are a point of celebration, and Ali references tales of Delhi being destroyed and rebuilt seven times, although he assesses that with the arrival of the British, Delhi is truly dying. As Shingavi (2013, 172) notes, the cycle of rebirth that marked Delhi’s history is now over and heads towards extinction. The impossibility of retrieval problematizes Boym’s understanding of restorative nostalgia. There is no anticipation of a rebuilding and no clear reason as to why specifically now Delhi will not survive. Thus, *Twilight* is a novel of many “idiosyncratic” extremes and contradictions (Shingavi 2013, 172). Ali’s critique of patriarchy is undercut by his opposition to miscegenation; his distaste for colonial modernity contrasted with a eulogization of

Mughal feudalism; and his regret for the decline of “chaste” Urdu is expressed in uniquely indigenized English prose. His representation of Muslim Dehlavi culture’s greatness is never truly harnessed as a force to combat British imperialism but is instead characterized by pity and defeatism; Ali’s Delhi is both robustly tenacious and “had already died” (172). Some of these experiments succeed while others do not, but he succeeds in capturing the disorienting rupture brought about by colonial modernity.

The novel’s rich, breathless descriptions of Delhi’s teeming bazaars, kite- and pigeon-filled skies, and narrow lanes are inextricably tied to the decaying, tragic lives of his characters. As highlighted earlier, Ali’s introduction acknowledges a conscious attempt to memorialize the past which will escape the official narratives of the colonial and post-colonial states that rule over Delhi, echoing Boym’s statement that “personal memory [...] linked to the common topos of a city [...] escapes memorialization” (80). Can Mir Nihal’s refusal to participate in the process of nation-building be seen as the precursor to the future marginalization of Muslims in independent India? Despite limitations, Ali’s work remains not just an “irreplaceable record of vanished life and culture” of Delhi, but also the first Indian English novel to memorialize the affective and material architecture of a city from the perspective of Muslims (Dalrymple 2008, n.p.).

***Sunlight on a Broken Column* and “ugly, ill-digested modernity”**

In 1961, nearly two decades after the publication of *Twilight*, Attia Hosain published her only full-length novel, *Sunlight on a Broken Column*. The critical attention that *Sunlight* received has primarily focuses on its depiction of upper-class Muslim womanhood, Partition, or gendered domesticity (Gopal 2009; Kaul 2015; Chanda 2014; Didur 2006). *Sunlight* is also an extraordinary account of the affective and physical inhabitation of space and how this act is complicated by modernity, memory, gender, and religious identity. The question of space and memory in Hosain’s novel has been handled most extensively by Antoinette Burton (2003).⁸ My analysis advances her reading by examining how the memory of a lost “domestic time” is employed in the text, so that inferences can be made about the relationship between the home and the city (122). The protagonist’s perceptive, self-aware deconstruction of her existence in a larger historical moment undercuts the immediacy of intimately felt personal loss. Thus, in my reading, Hosain’s resistance to romanticizing this lost time while still thoughtfully documenting its intricacies enables her to weave in some of the contradictions of modernity for the colonized, gendered subject that Burton alludes to, making it an excellent example of reflectively nostalgic Indo Muslim writing. While *Sunlight*’s Lucknow does not occupy the spatial centrality of Delhi in *Twilight*, the city is nonetheless a powerful influence on how nostalgia marks the text throughout.

The protagonist Laila, much like the author herself, occupies a liminal space between two worlds: one traditional and rooted, the other modern and constantly shifting. She is an English-educated, privileged young woman born into a *taluqdari* (feudal landlords) family. Laila is representative of a new generation of young women whose changed position in society is reflective of the reconstitution of gender relations with the advent of colonial modernity into the the Muslim family.

Laila is the first woman in hers to receive an education from Lucknow's premiere academic institutions. The westernized upbringing of a young woman from a feudal, Muslim home is the next step in the generational changes we start witnessing in *Twilight*. The novel begins at a point when the old order of the family home, Ashiana, is disintegrating with the ailing patriarch, Baba Jan, languishing on his deathbed. Symbolically, the decline of the feudal order is foreshadowed early on with Baba Jan's predicted demise and the ensuing shift in the spatial and power dynamics of the house: "the day my Aunt Abida moved from the *zenana*⁷ into the guest room [...] within call of her father's room, we knew that Baba Jan had not much longer to live" (10).

The narrative voice is looking back on the events of the past but feels oddly linear in terms of the placement of plot points until Part IV, when it cleverly shifts to a "future-past" narrative (Stewart 1992, x, quoted in Burton 2003, 129). This collision of timelines recalls the construction of Indo Muslim nostalgia, where memory and futurity are evoked from multiple directions and overlaid. We consume nostalgic memories from two different time periods, with the conclusion mourning the irretrievability of both. One concerns the loss of an archaic Mughal feudal lifestyle (symbolized by Baba Jan, already dying in chapter 1) and the latter is of the period of transition from declining Mughal feudalism to late-colonial Muslim modernity (exemplified by Uncle Hamid, the "liberal" but distant and autocratic new patriarch). His anglicized tastes, social climbing, and fierce careerism are symbolic of the advent of a new kind of modernity. How does Laila catalogue change from Baba Jan's era to that of Uncle Hamid?

Transition is marked in the novel as the decline of *purdah*⁸ and the change in gendered access to domestic and public spaces. Since my argument is primarily about Laila's exploration of space, her memory of the practice of *purdah* is constitutive of her experience of the private/domestic and what lies outside. During Baba Jan's time, the household was divided into the *zenana* and the *mardana* (outer areas for men and women). Despite its isolation, the *zenana* was not a sequestered physical space in the house but a rich world of female homosociality where Laila found comfort. With the end of *purdah*, Laila experiences not only a new freedom, but also a sense of loss, as liberation is accompanied by anxiety and the protection of seclusion offered by *purdah* ends. Thus, *purdah* makes its appearance as a spatial reflection of gendered anxiety. Certainly, the novel is not a defence of *purdah*. Rather, it can be understood as post-*purdah* Muslim women's writing where the end of seclusion is an inevitable reality.⁹ Despite Laila's pursuit of independence, she is still cognizant of how seclusion under *purdah* "can be and is purposefully mobilized – not necessarily as a foil to the modern but [...] to afford women control over their movements and the terms of sociability" (Burton 2003, 19). Laila identifies Uncle Hamid's adoption of western culture as the main cause of a rift between father and son. "Baba Jan had never been able to forgive his son for adopting a Western way of living, bringing his wife out of *purdah*, neglecting the religious education of his sons and doing all this openly and proudly" (Hosain [1961] 2009, 87). The aesthetic choices that defined Ashiana undergo drastic change, and Hosain describes in extensive detail the renovations of the house's decor. Its old-fashioned furniture is shipped off to Hasanpur (their ancestral village) by Uncle Hamid, and the renovated rooms remind Laila of English homes she "had visited [...] yet they were as different as the copies of a painting from the original" (121). She "missed the ghostliness of the drawing room. It had

a personality, gloomy and grotesquely rich, reflecting one of Baba Jan's eccentricities" (121). The trophies, the *takhts* (traditional sofa or daybed), straight-backed chairs, fine china – all the emblematic pieces of Baba Jan's generation are discarded, distributed between "the rubbish-heap, junk-room and Hasanpur" (120). The older servants move away. Visits from relatives decline as the familial intimacy of Ashiana is replaced with social engagements such as garden parties and political meetings to further Uncle Hamid's career. In her reading of *Twilight*, Priya Gopal (2009) concludes that "[i]n Ali's evocative delineation of its spaces, Delhi has been 'reduced' to a domestic sphere in itself, the public and the political having moved to new spaces and new custodians" (145). Conversely, in the first half of *Sunlight*, colonial rule and westernization move into the space of the urban home and Mughal feudal domesticity is pushed away to the ancestral home in a rural village with its "fulfilment of a deep need to belong" and its "continuity between now and before and after" (88).

Nostalgia gets materially inscribed in Ashiana; the loss of this family home is symbolic of the end of an urban existence when the city was not characterized by precarity, anonymity, or poverty for the *ashraf*. The domestic space of Ashiana is central to the plot; from its hallways, arches, and corridors to its residents and servants. Yet Ashiana cannot be imagined in any city besides Lucknow. This confluence of Awadhi Victorian sensibilities that define the space are inseparable from a particular moment in the city's history. Thus, Laila's nostalgic memories of home cannot be accessed without acknowledging its Lakhnavi context. Beyond Ashiana's high walls the local textures of Lucknow can be recognized. Readers learn about Baba Jan's friends in his feudal circle, each a member of the privileged nobility of Oudh. Laila describes them: "the four men loved the city to which they belonged, and they lived and behaved as if the city belonged to them" (Hosain [1961] 2009, 35). In chapter 10 of Part I, the Moharram processions in Lucknow frame Baba Jan's impending demise as Ashiana stands inseparable from his legacy and the city's influence on the home:

"Our circumscribed sorrow found universal echoes at night spreading and quivering in a circle round the city [. . .] the rhythmic abstraction of sobbing sound [. . .]: 'Ya Hasan. Ya Husain, Hasan, Husain, 'Sain-'Sain'."

How better could Baba Jan have demonstrated his power than by choosing the very time for moving towards death when the city's black-clad, bare-armed women, and barefooted, bareheaded men sorrowed for the martyred grandchildren of the Prophet? (Hosain [1961] 2009, 67).

Laila's experience of the city is fundamentally constituted by her gender. She cannot be a part of the crowd like Mir Nihal was at the Delhi Durbar, neither is her Lucknow filled with serpentine lanes, crowded bazaars, or the wafting scent of jalebis (a type of sweet). We glimpse the city from a distance; Laila can never claim the ownership that Baba Jan exercised over Lucknow. For her, the city becomes a liberating influence, a progressive space that pushes her away from Ashiana's overpowering hold over her conscience. Laila's exposure to multiple political views at university allows her to develop her own. Notably, it is during the grand celebrations held at the city's historic Baradari by the Oudh Taluqdars in honour of the Viceroy that Laila meets the man for whom she leaves her family. Her romantic introduction to Ameer is framed by the monument, the fireworks display, and a play between darkness and light – each element serving to enhance the dreamlike quality of

their rendezvous (Kazmi 2019, 111). Their romance blossoms in the hills, or in furtive car rides far away from the high walls of Ashiana. Emancipation is associated with what lies outside the home – the public, cosmopolitan urban space.

However, in the novel's final section Laila's association with the city is explicitly sketched:

My eyes saw with the complex vision of my nostalgia and sadness the loved arches and domes and filials, the curve of the river, [...] the unfamiliar names and changed lettering of the road signs, the ruined Residency [...] without its flag, the proud Club that had been a palace and was now a Research Institute, the pedestal without its marble Empress and with a vagrant lying across it in deep sleep, the faded feudal mansions, the Mall with new shops and cinemas [...] a new annexe to its school where children no longer sang "God Save the King" the government House flagstaff carrying the tricolor [...]. The three-storeyed cement block of cheap flats, built by Agarwal where the Raja of Bhimnagar's palace and garden had once been, came into view with washing hung across the balconies [...]. I was nearly home. (270)

This is the closest that Laila comes to clearly expressing restorative nostalgic longing, wishing to recreate the past and rejecting the present, disgusted as she is by the massive changes she sees around her. She stands traumatized in Ashiana's desolate rooms – beholden to yet strangled by her memories of the past. Her response is symptomatic of the difficulties of neatly categorizing the two kinds of nostalgia as opposites, instead of seeing restorative and reflective tendencies as part of a continuum. Residues and remnants continue to haunt once the city of Lucknow becomes – invoking Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis's (1978) "porous city" – a palimpsest with one history overwritten across another, a paradoxical result of radical modernization (163). Hosain represents Laila's return to the house with apprehension, "sadness and nostalgia" in relation to the familiar and unfamiliar buildings on the road to Ashiana. Lucknow rejects colonialism by renaming buildings and roads; familiar markers of Laila's childhood are abandoned or destroyed. She becomes a misfit in independent India's "ill-digested modernity", this time because of her religious and class identity, embodying a counter-state position that refuses to unreservedly endorse postcolonial nation-building.

Laila is a symbol of a past that modern India has discarded, a numerical minority with shrinking cultural influence. Despite her progressive upbringing, Hosain's protagonist fulfils the destiny imposed on Muslim women in popular culture, that of being anachronistic for their times. Laila's disorientation overwhelms her so that her "tomorrows were always yesterdays" (Hosain [1961] 2009, 319). In an evocative moment, she stares at a derelict mirror in a now abandoned Ashiana, "longing for release from the ghosts that kept me [her] from acceptance of the present" (Hosain [1961] 2009, 313; see also Kazmi 2019, 114). As Laila stares at a reflection of herself in a mirror, her literal perception of herself is weighed down by memories of her past.

Anurada Digwaney Needham (1993), in an otherwise insightful article on *Sunlight*, speculates that Laila's support for secular nationalism is a result of her respect for her cousin, Asad (107). This reading fails to consider Laila's own political convictions – her decision to remain in India is rooted in her disapproval of Islamic conservatism and commitment to secularism, albeit shaken after Partition. The profoundly destabilizing effects of postcolonial modernity and the Partition leave Laila struggling to piece herself together; anxious and unsure but moving ahead – as she must – in pursuit of her own

emancipation. Significantly, while Laila chooses to stay on in India, she does not return to Lucknow. This is indicative of the overpowering influence the local topos holds over her conscience, forcing her to start afresh far away.

Laila finds it difficult to fit in anywhere, whether in the sequestered space of the home or the liberal company of her cosmopolitan peers. She experiences a profound need to feel “complete”, reflective of the desire to escape the fragmentation which postcolonial modernity imposes on her. This unease informs the affective consumption by the reader vis-à-vis the novel’s shift in temporal structuring and use of free indirect discourse. Laila’s anxiety stems from her struggle to place herself outside traditional familial structures, in whose familiarity she finds comfort but whose oppressiveness she resents. While *Twilight* uses the mourning of *shahr ashob* to represent the anti-colonial politics of Delhi’s disintegration, *Sunlight* uses the amorphous, indeterminate quality of anxiety to anticipate the Othering that the postcolonial Indian nation will mean for Muslims.

Conclusion: Restorative and reflective Indo Muslim writing

Both Hosain and Ali speak of a shared pain but in very different registers. Ali’s largely restorative approach does not adequately deconstruct the historical moment it mourns. Instead, it naively accepts these histories as part of a monolithic “tradition”. While Hosain’s Laila displays a deep attachment to her heritage, her assessment of it is not an uncritical evaluation. She criticizes patriarchal familial structures, colonial rule, religious hypocrisy, and feudal exploitation – albeit stopping short of complete revolt. Laila’s rejection of the oppressiveness of her context is made possible largely due to her gendered, colonized subjectivity. As their gender led women to experience marginalization long before the arrival of colonialism, most women writers from the Global South do not usually partake in masculine romanticization of the pre-colonial past.

This difference is related to *Twilight*’s presentation of an anti-colonial path that distances itself from popular nationalism’s majoritarian turn. While it anticipates the end of British rule and the creation of the Indian nation state, *Twilight* does not directly address the possibility of Muslims belonging. Ali tellingly ends the text with the symbolic image of a paralysed protagonist lying in bed traumatized by his past, a sign of what lies ahead in the fate of Delhi’s Muslims. Mir Nihal’s nostalgia is not emancipatory but traps him deeper into immobility, dejection, and delusion. Partially aligning with Boym’s restorative nostalgia, Mir Nihal wants a return to origins but holds no hope for restoration. Boym’s typology does not fully align with a character who cannot restore or recreate, but instead wishes to return. Laila uses her past as an archival repository from which to extract meaning, while also recognizing the limitations of this endeavour. The novel’s ending demonstrates that while Laila remains shaped by nostalgia in myriad ways, she searches for possibilities through it. Her journey “reveals that longing and critical thinking are not opposed to one another, just as affective memories do not absolve one from compassion, judgment, or critical reflection” (Boym 2001, 49).

Despite the novels' differing approaches to nostalgia, they create a spatio-temporal matrix through which memory is consciously filtered through affect. The city is populated by temporal markers and their loss is indicative of change that elicits distinct but comparable responses in both texts. The decline of *ashraf* Muslims renders Mir Nihal and Laila as characters inhabiting a lost time, both longing to belong. The texts are noteworthy examples of how the work of progressive politics can be complicated by the memorialization of the past, with their greatest strength lying in the ability to paint Muslim urban life in rich, masterful strokes – a fitting tribute to this “golden hour” of history.

Notes

1. The growth of many of Indian metros is rooted in histories of colonial expansion. Kolkata (Calcutta), Chennai (Madras), and Mumbai (Bombay) are such examples. This coincided with the decline of historical urban centres like Tanjore, Murshidabad, Delhi, and Lucknow.
2. *Purdah and Polygamy* by Iqbalunnisa Hussain ([1944] 2019), *Zohra* by Zeenuth Futehally and Rumanna Denby ([1951] 2009), and *In Custody* by Anita Desai ([1984] 1999) are other examples.
3. Key examples are *Ab-e-Hayaan* by Muhammad Husain Azad ([1880] 2001) and Altaf Husain Hali's ([1879] 1997) *Musaddas*.
4. Ahmed Ali was one of the founding members of the influential socialist All-India Progressive Writers Association (AIPWA) but was eventually disenchanted by their politics. *Twilight in Delhi* was his first major literary work after separating from the Progressive Writers' Movement (PWM).
5. Refer to the succinct overview of the genre by historian Rana Safvi (2018) on See also Tignol (2017) *Sahapedia*. See also Tignol (2017).
6. Joshi refers to three flashpoints from this list, except for the First World War.
7. Zenana is a secluded household space for women.
8. *Purdah* (literally meaning “curtain”) is a religious and social practice of female seclusion prevalent among some Muslim communities. This includes physical separation of the sexes and concealment of the female form. A similar practice among North Indian Hindus is *ghunghat*.
9. A shift from the rhetoric of early Muslim women's writing like Iqbalunnisa Hussain's ([1944] 2019) *Purdah and Polygamy*, and “Sultana's Dream” by Begum Rokeya Hossain ([1905] 2005), which are primarily criticizing the oppressiveness of a prevalent social practice and using this criticism as constitutive of their narrative of Muslim womanhood.

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