

TWILIGHT IN DELHI

Ahmed Ali

(1940)

Story

This historical novel is set in the period between 1910-1920 in Delhi, at the height of the British Empire and the 'twilight' of the Mughal Empire. At the time, 'New' Delhi had not yet been built, and Calcutta was still the capital of British India. King George V was coronated Emperor of India at a grand ceremony in the city in 1911.

The plot focuses on a large Muslim family and their relatives in old Delhi. The head of the family is Mir Nihal, who is old enough to have witnessed the end of the Mughal Empire in the 1850s, when an uprising was mercilessly crushed by the British army (with, it has to be said, mainly Indian soldiers). The main drama concerns the possible marriage of his son, Asghar. Begum Nihal (Mir's wife) is concerned that he should be married soon, before he gets up to no good, and Mir agrees to speak to him on the subject. The problem is that Asghar has his heart set on Bilqeece, who is from a lower status family, and he knows that his parents will object. In order to persuade them, Asghar enlists the support of his older sister, Begam Waheed. Begam Waheed then goes to their mother, Begam Nihal, and the two ladies agree that the marriage is better than no marriage. Mir, however, is afraid that such an alliance will lower the family's status in the eyes of others, but, typically, he does nothing. A servant, Dilchain, secretly tells Begam Nihal's sister-in-law about the gossip, and then she, too, is brought into the scheme to make the marriage happen even without Mir's permission.

Now we learn that Asghar has a mistress but that he is sincerely in love with Bilqeece. When he discovers that his mother, and her allies, are preparing the groundwork for his controversial marriage, he agrees to leave the city (and thereby remove him from his father's sight) and spend some time in Bhopal, where his sister lives. The idea is that he will wait there until everything is ready for his marriage in Delhi.

Meanwhile, the ineffectual Mir is more worried about the extreme heat which has caused the demise of some of his beloved pigeons. He is further upset when he learns that his mistress is dying and hurries to her. Unfortunately, in his haste, he has forgotten to lock the pigeon cage and a cat kills some of his birds. Overcome by these several losses, he gives in regarding the marriage and tells Asghar to marry whomever he wishes.

A year has passed and King George V has arrived with his queen to host a massive event where all the princes and rulers of India will pay him obeisance. Just as Mir is preparing to take the family to see this extravaganza, he has a flashback of the 1857-58 uprising that was brutally suppressed by the British. He makes his excuses and turns away from the coronation. Walking back home, he comes across a beggar, whom he recognises as a former prince, now deposed and destitute.

Asghar and Bilqeece are married and set up home within the household of Asghar's parents. The newly-weds are nervous around each other, having never been together before, and Bilqeece finds it difficult to fit into the large family. Things between them improve when Asghar sees the problem and they move out to find a place of their own. They set up house in the English style, which annoys Mir, but everyone is happy when a daughter is born. The happiness is short-lived, however. Bilqeece's father passes away, she gets depressed and finally dies of tuberculosis. Zohra, Bilqeece's younger sister, comes to help the Asghar with parenting and housekeeping. Asghar falls in love with her and wants to marry her, but his mistress gossips to Zohra's mother about how badly Asghar treated his first wife. As a result, the marriage is called off. In the final episodes, Asghar's older brother comes home and soon dies of a mysterious illness. The novel ends with Mir reflecting on the misfortunes of his family and then dying in his sleep.

Themes

Decay It is indeed 'twilight in Delhi,' in fact, probably well after midnight for the collapsed Mughal Empire. When the story begins in 1910, the last Mughal Emperor has been long forgotten and his heirs lay around in dusty palaces or apartments, pensioned off and functioning as political puppets of the British authorities. However, there are still living memories of the faded glory of the Mughals and the imperial culture that they patronised, not only in Delhi, but all over north India and in parts of the south, as well. Ali does not hesitate to devote long descriptions to this decay, commenting that the city of Delhi is 'mourned and sung, raped and conquered, yet whole and alive, and lies indifferent in the arms of sleep.' The author is not interested in optimistic predictions of a future India, which he compares to a beaten dog: 'It has curled its tail between its legs, and lies lifeless in the night as an acknowledgement of defeat'. For Mir and his family, also, the dark night is approaching. He has lived long enough to have witnessed the cultural decline of Urdu literature and traditional north Indian music, dance and architecture. With the coronation of King George V on the horizon, Mir has no hope of a resurrection. As British flags fly everywhere, he has nowhere to look for hope. Even his son and his new wife display the cultural decay he laments by choosing western-style furniture for their home. Death and decay are like a lingering smell throughout the novel, which opens with Mir's moody premonitions and ends with him dying in his sleep.

Tradition and modernity A related theme is the contrast, or perhaps clash, between tradition and modernity. The author dramatises the cultural contrasts in the form of a father-son relationship. For example, Mir is constantly pained at the invasion of western tastes and objects into the everyday life of his city. He often rails against the 'hodge-podge' of cultures that he cannot understand. In an early scene, he criticises his son for wearing 'British boots,' instead of the traditional sandals. In another scene, Mir is filled with disgust at the change in 'men's hearts,' lamenting the loss of honour and the current prevalence of 'the chicken-hearted.' In the next paragraph, his son, Asghar is said to be 'unconcerned whether his father lived or died.' This inter-generational conflict drives the main action of the novel, which is the wish by the son to marry the woman of his choice rather than someone chosen for him by his parents (as was traditional).

Colonialism Although the novel is set in a decade of violent revolutionary politics, when British officials were shot and killed, it would be hard to describe *Twilight in Delhi* as a 'political' novel. There is only one explicit 'political' scene, when the son of a milk-seller is shot dead by the police. Instead, the novel describes a population that might be concerned about that changes take place but they do not seek to overthrow British rule or to challenge it. A typical example is Saeed Hasan, Mir's son-in-law, who is decidedly nonchalant about who rules India. In the author's words, 'Life went on peacefully for him, without a care who sat on the throne, like most Indian fatalists.' Mir's son, Asghar, is similarly unconcerned with British rule. When he passes some graffiti that denounces a recent piece of legislation, the author comments that 'it did not communicate anything deep or significant to him.' Other male characters, including Mir, like to debate the influence of British rule on their society, suggesting various reasons why the Mughal empire was defeated. but no one is involved in the anti-colonial campaign that was widespread at that time. The fact that a 'new' Delhi is about to be built, however, is a major source of anxiety. Old walls and neighbourhoods will be razed, while a two-hundred-year-old sewer system was to be refitted but would only cause filth and stench on the streets. Only Mir expresses anti-British and anti-colonial attitudes. On the day of the coronation of King George V in Delhi, as he watches the procession of princes who have come to bow before the English monarch, Mir laments 'the slavishness and treacherous acceptance of the foreign yoke. It filled him with shame and disgust.' Mir's shame is very far from the directed anger of Gandhi's movement, and it reflects the paralysis of nostalgia that pervades this novel.

Characters

Mir Nihal Mir Nihal is the narrative centre of this story. He embodies the nostalgia that the novel conveys about a faded past for the Mughal Emperor. He is also the patriarch of an extended family, whose misfortunes and disagreements form the drama of the novel

Asghar Asghar is Mir's younger son and the second leading character in the story. He is young and drawn in sharp contrast with his father, clashing with him about attitudes to culture change. The

father-son conflict is dramatised in the debate about whom his son should marry, a debate that consumes the entire extended family.

Begum Nihal Begum Nihal is Mir's wife, who does not openly oppose her husband but sometimes schemes against him behind his back. She is indulgent toward Asghar, her son, especially in supporting his choice of a bride. As the story develops, she grows blind, which perhaps reflects her limited role in the novel.

Bilqeece Bilqeece is the beautiful, young and innocent girl whom Asghar wishes to marry. She is from a lower status family, which is the source of the opposition to the marriage from Mir, Asghar's father. She is eventually married to Asghar and learns to love him, but the marriage has no emotional rapport and begins to crumble. She dies half-way through the novel

Zohra Zohra is Bilqeece's younger sister who takes her place after Bilqeece dies. She first begins to look after her dead sister's daughter but is gradually drawn into a love relationship with Asghar. In the end, however, she rejects him because of rumours about how he treated her sister. She then marries another man.

Begam Waheed Begam Waheed is Asghar's widowed sister, who lives with her children in her dead husband's parents' home in a distant city (Bhopal). Although widowed at nineteen, she is prohibited from remarriage and becomes a sad figure, who 'weeps silently in an alien land.' However, she plays a key role in reconciling the warring factions within the family over the issue of her brother's marriage.

Mir Nihal (Sensitive)

Character Mir Nihal is the central character of the novel around whom all action flows. He is sixty-two and retired, spending all his time with his pigeons and his mistress. He is described as tall and well-built, wearing a white muslin coat that reaches to his knees and an embroidered cap. He has a well-combed, white beard parted in the middle. Mir is a man of feeling and little action, which some critics have suggested is a sign of weakness. 'A moral coward,' is how one described him, citing his anti-British attitudes but lack of concrete steps to alter the political reality. Other critics see in Mir a poetic character, a man capable of feeling rather than changing history.

Certainly, Mir is sad at the passing of the Mughal Empire and he does nothing about it except feel shame and remorse. In this respect, Mir is a carefully crafted embodiment of the Mughal culture itself, whose passing he laments. He drifts through the novel, observing, criticising and complaining, and we can sympathise with him, to some extent, at least, because he actually witnessed the fall of the Mughal Empire in 1857.

Like the empire he embodies, Mir seems incapable of change, preferring to live in the past instead of adjusting to present realities. His refusal to accept his son's choice of a bride is the beginning of a chain of events that brings unhappiness to everyone he knows. He opposed the bride simply because she is from a low-status family, and he doesn't want to dilute the (largely imagined) 'royal blood' of his own family. This, again, is another example of him being stuck in the past. But there is also a softer side to Mir's character. He does, in the end, relent and accept the family consensus that Asghar should marry the woman he has chosen. His patient care for his pigeons is touching, and he shows genuine feeling for his mistress and his grandson. Lost in the past, unable to function in the present, Mir is a man of great sensitivity.

Activities Mir is retired and spends most of his time looking after his pigeons. He keeps them in a cage on the roof, where he releases them and then controls their flight by a complex series of whistles. Sometimes, he competes with other pigeon-fliers, who are his neighbours, trying to coax birds from their flocks to join his. During the day, he often strolls about old Delhi, shopping for fruit and vegetables, or visiting old friends, with whom he indulges his love of reading and listening to Urdu poetry. Some days, he visits his mistress, who provides him with a haven from the domestic worries at home. It is through his meandering that the author shows us the varied sights and personalities of old Delhi.

Illustrative moments

Sensitive Mir's sensitive nature dominates the novel, which is saturated with his sad reflections, his memories, his recitals of poetry, his loves and his failures. There is a very tender description of his view of his pigeons when they perch on his shoulder and begin to peck at his beard. Mir 'stood there, his heart contracted into a point with pain, wanting to burst out of its sides, lost in an engulfing sense of futility.' However, an even more touching scene is his reaction to the death of Babban Jan, his mistress (who is not young). As he walks toward her house, unaware that she has already died, he hears a song about the wind blowing out a lamp on someone's grave. It makes him think of her possible death and what a loss it would be. For in her house, 'he had built a quiet corner for himself, where he could always retire and forget his sorrows in secluded peace.' When he arrives and finds her dead, he pulls back the sheet and holds a lantern to her face. 'Even in death, she was beautiful. Peace and serenity on her lips and in her eyes.' He tries to comfort the grieving mother and gives her money for the funeral. Then he walks away, dragging his heavy legs, weighed down by memories, feeling that he himself had died. That author suggests that his sadness is, in part, at least, caused by the realisation that there is now no one to take care of his own needs. Still, despite that selfishness, the scene shows us a man who is overcome with emotion.

Fearful One component of Mir's complex personality is fear. Not fear of physical harm or criminal attack or financial loss. But fear of outside forces. We might call this 'xenophobia,' as long as we can extend that word to encompass anxiety about non-human invaders, such as cats and snakes. We know that Mir feels hatred toward the British whom he always calls the *farangis* (a Persian word for 'foreigners'). But he is also worried about cats and snakes that threaten his beloved pigeons. This fear is described in a scene, very early in the book. Mir has already lost several pigeons to cats, who steal into the cage when he inexcusably forgot to lock it. Now, at night, he is on his roof again after hearing fluttering and squawking from his birds. Holding a lantern high he sees something that looks like a black rope near the cage. He thinks it is a snake, and orders his servant to bring a stick. He strikes at the snake, but misses, and the serpent slithers away and into a gutter hole. Mir grabs it and manages to pull it out and kill it with several savage blows. It should be a scene of triumph for Mir—he has protected his pigeons from the intruder—but instead it conveys his irrational fear that his world is always under threat.

Passive If this novel is a requiem for a lost culture, as most critics agree that it is, it also suggests that the blame for the demise lies with the culture itself. Since Mir is the embodiment of that culture, then we understand that it is his passivity that is to blame. Mir rails again and again against the foreigners, attacking their rude manners and their crude language, even their shoes. But his days are spent looking after his pigeons, resisting change in his own family and lounging with his mistress. Although the novel is filled with his fulminating against the 'foreigners', there is one particular moment when we see both his anger and his futility. It is the day of the coronation of King George V in Delhi. Mir has taken his grandson to see the magnificent procession of princes on horseback. When the little boy begins to cry, out of boredom, Mir points out the British soldiers mounted on horses. 'There,' Mir says, 'there are the people who have been our undoing, and will be yours, too.' The boy looks at his grandfather with incomprehension, and Mir continues, 'But you will be brave, my boy, won't you? You'll be brave and, one day, drive them out of our country.' Mir has transferred the task of political action from himself to a young boy, who has no idea what he is talking about. The bravery that Mir hopes for in his grandson is exactly what he has lacked.

Asghar (Shallow)

Character Asghar is the twenty-two-year-old son of Mir Nihal. He is portrayed as a weak-willed, superficial and shallow character, preoccupied with his physical and emotional wants. He takes no notice of what his father calls the 'slavish acceptance' of foreign rule. Instead, he is concerned to wear the brightest colours and latest fashions. He does not appear to have any occupation until his wife suggests that his might lift his moody spells by 'doing some kind of work.' His life, from the very beginning, is dominated by his need for sensual gratification. His attraction to the young girl who later becomes his wife (Bilqeece) has nothing to do with her character and everything to do with her appearance. Despite this weakness, he does show some maturity when his wife dies and he is forced to look after their daughter. Throughout the novel, Asghar is consumed with emotions, disappointments, desires, fears and confusions about his relations with people. There is a subtle hint

of a homoerotic attraction to one man, but Asghar buries it. Like his father, Asghar is sensitive, like him he wallows in his sensitivity. But unlike his father, he cannot articulate his feelings.

Activities Until he meets Bilqeece, Asghar spends most of the day moping around, lying in bed and daydreaming. He visits friends where he typically talks about his 'sadness' or his 'hopes.' He also enjoys listening to *qawwali* singing (ecstatic religious songs) and drinking sherbet on hot days. In the late afternoon, he usually goes to his mistress, who satisfies his needs. Later, after his marriage, his life continues in much the same way, except that his wife persuades him to take a nondescript office job. He does nothing in the way of domestic work, until his wife dies and he takes over the parenting of his daughter.

Illustrative moments

Modern If Mir is the embodiment of the faded glory of Mughal culture, then Asghar, his son, represents the modernity that is replacing it. This aspect of his character is illustrated in the very first scene in which he plays a part. When Asghar comes into a room, where Mir is resting, his appearance is described in terms that present a sharp contrast with that of his father (who resembles a portrait of a nineteenth-century Muslim noble). Asghar is handsome, 'his hair is well-oiled, and the upper buttons of his *sherwani* [traditional coat] are open to show the collar of the English shirt he wears underneath. He looks an aesthete, and has a somewhat effeminate grace about him. And around his wrist is wrapped a jasmine garland. As he approaches, his pumps creak.' Mir then orders his son to 'throw away those dirty English boots.' It is a skilfully narrated scene. Asghar is not a self-conscious Anglophile—he is not sophisticated enough for that. But what is worse, in Mir's mind (and possibly that of the author), he represents a miscegenation of Muslim and foreign cultures. This bastardised modernity is revealed in the carefully worded description of him. His traditional Muslim coat covers but does not fully hide his English shirt. He wears a garland, a Muslim custom, but also pumps. This is a hodge-podge, an incoherent mixture of two cultures that stands for the modernity of Delhi in 1911.

Sensual The above description of Asghar's appearance also includes the word 'aesthete.' Again, this might be redolent of the lost Muslim culture, which prided itself on aesthetic discrimination, but in the decayed atmosphere of the novel, and in Asghar's character, it has been degraded to mere sensuality. Asghar indulges himself throughout the novel in sexual pleasure, especially with his mistress, and he leaves his marriage because his wife is not sufficiently sensual. This component of his character is highlighted in a scene that opens an early chapter. Asghar is lying in bed and, like most people, he daydreams and imagines himself flying in the sky. Only for Asghar, even the stars are a source of sensual delight. 'At last,' the author writes, 'he is up there, and one by one the stars seem to move and begin to dance...out of every star, a beautiful maiden is born...their glowing bodies are shapely and naked. Their breasts heave with a gentle motion as they dance around him...they tempt him...but he turns away, and is interested in his own body, in love with his own flesh...'

Self-pitying Asghar's intense interest in himself turns to self-pity when things do not go his way. He gets moody when his father opposes his choice of a bride, and he is upset when his mistress is not as free with him as he would like. But a better illustration of this aspect of his characters comes much later in the novel. Asghar's wife, Bilqeece, has died, and he is overcome with the demands of office work and of bringing up his young daughter. Relief comes in the shape of Zohra, Bilqeece's younger sister. When she visits Asghar and sees how overwhelmed he is, she offers to help with the daughter. Asghar, although secretly harbouring a sexual desire for her, moans to her, 'Who will look after me? Who cares for me? I am alone in this world.' This self-pitying behaviour is the hidden weakness in the patriarchal society that the author describes in the novel. Men like Asghar have all the power, they make the decisions and have their needs taken care. But if a care-taker (such as a wife) disappears, they are destitute, unable to manage their lives.

Bilqeece

(Innocent)

Character Although Bilqeece is not a fully developed character, she has an important role in the story. Like Asghar, she represents a kind of Muslim modernity in early twentieth-century Delhi. Her character is revealed by her clothes, especially (again like Asghar), by her western shoes. One female character comments that she 'looks as good as a dead *farangi* ('foreigner'). She is certainly beautiful, described by the author as 'graceful as a cypress. Her hair is blacker than the night of separation, and her face is brighter than the hours of love. Her eyes are like narcissi, big and beautiful. There is nectar in their whites and poison in their blacks. Her eyebrows are like two arched bows ready to wound the hearts of men with the arrows of their lashes. Her lips are redder than the blood of lovers.' No wonder Asghar is smitten as soon as he sees her. In sharp contrast with Asghar, her future husband, however, Bilqeece is extremely innocent and shy. It is not that she lacks feelings, indeed she is completely devoted to her husband, but she lacks his sensual character and does not know how to respond to his love-making. This causes a rift between them, and things get even worse when she gives birth to a girl instead of the boy whom Asghar has hoped for. As Asghar draws further and further away from her emotionally, she suffers silently, 'like a child who had been disciplined.' She does not understand the cause of his alienation, and she is afraid to bring up the subject. She is caught between the desire to talk with him and the fear that it would displease him. Despite the fact that Bilqeece represents a stereotype of an innocent Indian bride, the author has given her a complex inner life.

Activities Bilqeece enters the story at about age sixteen or seventeen, so we don't see anything of her childhood. Instead, she is described, when living in her parents' home, as secluded in purdah, confined to the kitchen and her bedroom and other rooms that make up the women's quarter in the house. She is an accomplished seamstress and spends time making various clothes, especially embroidered headcloths for women. After entering the house of her in-laws, she spends time cooking, sewing and cleaning. She also sometimes goes to visit her parents, but not often.

Illustrative moments

Innocent Bilqeece is young woman when she is introduced into the novel. Like most females in families of any status in Delhi at that time, she observed purdah in the company of men when inside the house and always outside the house. Her innocence is revealed in a scene in the beginning of the book, when she first sees Asghar, whom she will later marry. She comes into the open courtyard in the centre of the compound of her house, unaware that Asghar is already there talking with her brother. She is uncovered, and their eyes meet for a second. Immediately, she turns her head away and hurries into another room, where she sits down. But she cannot control the beating of her heart. She is unable to forget the earnestness in Asghar's eyes, the way they searched hers and found a companion. The author describes how the young woman is simply overcome by her first visual encounter with a young man outside her family. Indeed, that was to be her only sighting of Asghar until the day of their wedding, when he gently lifted her veil and placed a spot of sandalwood on her forehead.

Shy Even after Bilqeece is married, she remains a shy and reserved person. She does not feel at home in the house of her husband's family, although they give her a warm and sincere welcome. She tries to hide herself away and never asks for anything, not even a glass of water. Her shyness is illustrated in a scene between the newly-weds. They are in their own apartment, the only place where Bilqeece takes off her headcloth and shows her face to anyone. When Asghar puts his arm around her waist, but she pulls away from him. 'Don't you love me?' he asks, petulantly. 'There was so much love in your eyes, when you saw me first.' And Bilqeece replies, 'I was confused, bewildered. I felt ashamed and did not know where to hide.' It is perhaps a little difficult for today's readers to fully appreciate the depth of her shyness, even after months of living with her husband. But as we read about Bilqeece's childhood, the constant purdah and lack of interaction with men, we do gain some insight into her reserved nature.

Loving Despite her extreme shyness, Bilqeece is a loving wife, who struggles to understand her husband. Her devotion is illustrated in a scene that occurs not long after the one described above. A change has taken place in her simply because her father-in-law, the moody and irritable Mir, has found a reason to praise his daughter-in-law. Her cooking is 'not bad,' he says and adds that she is 'not a bad girl.' This injection of self-confidence in turn emboldens her to speak more openly than

before with her husband. They are in their separate apartment, and he is sulking and incommunicative. She takes the bold step, for her, to approach him and put her hand on his arm. He looks up at her, surprised, and she says, 'What is the matter, darling?' He barely knows what to say, and she goes on to suggest (accurately) that the problem is his lack of employment. He equivocates, but she persists and says that she only wants him to be happy. It is a moving scene, for both of them and for the reader. The slightest show of affection from her in-laws is enough to bring out the love that she has had for Asghar all along but has been unable to display.