



RESEARCH PAPER

Liminal Characters in Ali's Fiction: A Postcolonial Critique

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ABSTRACT

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All the countries those who have experienced the colonial occupation had to undergo a change in their culture and civilization. Similarly, the people of the colonized states dwelt in a situation in which they would become liminal characters. The present study explores the liminal characters in *Twilight in Delhi* by Ahmed Ali. Liminality is one of the issues of postcolonial studies which has been propounded by HomiBhabha, and the researcher has taken postcolonialism as a general framework of the study. The critical study of the novel shows that the major character, as well as minor characters of the novel, are liminal ones. The study is significant for the readers, students and researchers who are interested in Pakistani Literature in English.

Introduction

Twilight in Delhi is the story of British invaders who came to Sub-continent under the name of 'East India company' but turned into Draculas and exploited humanity and committed atrocities on the people which are still evergreen in the novel mentioned above by Ahmed Ali. Moreover, he also presents the chaotic situation in Delhi as a result of colonial domination and how the colonialism leaves a devastating and everlasting impact on the culture of the subcontinent. The title of the novel in itself covers the tragic legacy of colonialism in a way that after the end of colonialism, youth in sub-continent turn into a confused generation who indulge themselves into racial and cultural complexities just because they started considering themselves inferior to the white people who were ruling them. Therefore, they gradually started adopting the lifestyle of the British. 'Twilight' metaphorically represents the decline of Indian culture in sub-continent after British invasion henceforth the novel addresses the decay of Muslim civilization in sub-continent.

Ahmed Ali portrays a transformation of culture in sub-continent through the character of Asghar who takes inspiration from the British culture and changes his lifestyle to overcome his complexities which develop due to consistent propaganda by the British to declare themselves as a superior race. Therefore, a boy who used to wear *ShalwarKameez* gradually starts wearing western dresses in order to overcome his racial and cultural complexities. Mir Nihal often criticizes his new lifestyle, but it doesnot bring any difference in his transformed personality; likewise, he gets married to a girl Bilqeece. However, he doesnot get sexual satisfaction from her just because she is the follower of eastern traditions where women are not supposed to play an active role in sexual intercourse that is why he starts getting sexual gratification from the prostitutes. In this way, he metaphorically represents the cultural shift in sub-continent after colonialism.

Mir Nihal is portrayed in the novel as a representative of the Muslim culture in sub-continent who has been very strong at the beginning of colonialism, but with time it gradually starts weakening. At the end of the novel, the paralysis of Mir Nehal metaphorically indicates the paralysis or decay of Muslim civilization in India which completely shatters till the end of the colonial era.

Ali has portrayed the characters from the local Indians in such a way that one can identify their inclination to British lifestyle and culture. Additionally, it is observed that some characters such as Asghar are on the line or space in between; they are neither pure Indian nor British. The present study strives at exploring such characters as liminal ones. HomiBhabha has introduced the notion of liminality, and this is considered one of the postcolonial issues. The study is a qualitative one, and the selected text has been analyzed using Postcolonialism as a general framework.

Literature Review

Liminality may be considered one of the postcolonial trends, albeit, initially it was not a postcolonial trend. Instead, it used to be a problem in regional cultural studies but, due to the influences of multiculturalism and globalization, it became an integral part of a set of intellectual theories called postcolonialism.

Originally the concept of liminality is deeply rooted in the cultural and ritual preoccupations. It has been the subject of much discussion and research by folklorists, ethnologists and anthropologists. Examples of liminality can be seen in ethnographical studies of rites of passages. The same term (liminality) was popularized by a German ethnographer Arnold Van Gennep. It is important to note that different societies have different rites of passage based on a wide variety of ethnic groups, but they serve the same purpose: separate an individual from a group, prepare for the next one, and then enable to re-enter into society. It was noted that the liminal state, when the individual is neither in the previous group nor yet re-entered into society, is critical. During this period, the individuals try to get ready for coming up social and domestic responsibilities. Victor Turner and Mary Douglas, also, developed their theories on rites of passages in the 1960s.

Liminality has a temporal dimension along with the spatial one and, therefore, it can be applied to a wide range of subjects: individuals, groups, a whole society and possibly even whole civilization. Different boundaries and limits may guide the researchers to find the places inbetween. 'Noon', for example, may be taken as a liminal time and twilight, too.

Globalization has played its role to break the homogeneity of a society and, now, because of the cultural effects of globalization, heterogeneous societies can be seen around the globe. In a heterogeneous society, miscegenation can be examined that results in the emergence of hybridity. The liminal behaviour of individuals or groups in a society or a culture can be studied. Shariff², a South Asian woman, explained the cultural liminality by giving herself out as an example of a liminal being fighting for her identity in Canada.

Trushaw (1995) is of the view that ethnologists do find liminal spaces and liminal characters in literature, for example, fools, shamans and some other characters are averred as liminal beings. According to Ashcroft 'limit' is a suitable word as the sense of liminality may be clearly defined keeping the things into limits. The liminal characters, therefore, are the ones who dwell in an inbetween space or a threshold area.

Bhabha (2006), too, considers liminality very important in postcolonial theory. According to him, to be a liminal one prevents identities from polarizing between different arbitraries such as lower and upper, black and white. As the confusion of cultural identity and hybridity seems to be the inevitable and inescapable consequence of immigration, assimilation and multi-ethnicity, these notions are essential for immigrant writers in expressing their thoughts and stances about the immigrant experience and being "other". Bhabha considers liminality very important as it is a crucial term of postcolonial theory and postcolonial studies to describe the inbetween space of cultural ambiguity where diasporic and the migrant identities are shaped.

After the establishment of Pakistan, its literature began to receive international recognition, especially among the literature written in English, in the latter part of the 20th century. Earlier, Pakistani literature, written in Urdu and English, refers to the events and the incidents full of pain and troubles. It is observed that not only cruel subjugation of British is explained in those pieces of literature but also those were full of pathos and tragic events of disowning of wealth and self-respect.

The prominent work in the nineteen fifties was the publication of Pakistan PEN Miscellany (1950) edited by Ahmed Ali in which Manto's famous short story *The New Constitution-1935* was published. Elsa Kazmi published her novel *Old English Golden Symphony* in 1952. Mumtaz Shahnawaz is another creative writer who was a political activist as well. He wrote a novel *The Heart Divided* in which he elucidated almost all events that took place from 1943 to 1948 from both the Hindu

and Muslim point of view. He himself favoured Muslim point; a demand for a separate homeland.

Ahmed Ali is the most prominent writer among the writers of this decade. He is the first Muslim writer from sub-continent who described the malice of the Gora Raj in his works. His works, especially the novel *Twilight in Delhi* describe the downfall of Mughal Empire and the climax of British Raj. Elsa Kazi published her novel *Old English Garden Symphony* in 1952. This novel depicts the middle-class virtue for the protagonist is the incarnation of middle-class virtue. Zaib-un-NisaHamidullah published a collection of short stories *The Young Wife and Other Stories* in 1958. In her stories, as Tariq Rehman (1991) says, a streak of sentimentality can be observed. Zahir H. Farooqi wrote his novel *Love in Ruins* in the fifties. ZulfiqarGhose is the most prominent writer. He is a prolific writer. Farooqi, a typical Pakistani writer, depicted Pakistani society through his novels, *Snakes and Ladders, Faces of Love and Death*. His novels represent 'a myth of high-class society relatively high-class society itself'.

During the fifties and sixties Islam, socialism and democracy have been discussed at different levels in Pakistani society, but most of the discussions were ill-informed, pretentious and vague. Burki, as Rehman (1991) says, is the writer of the same decade who wrote short stories like *Saqipur Sacred* and *Some Men and Brothers*. His themes were about the struggle against social or moral forces under dangerous circumstances and condemnation of utilitarian values. Abdul Qayyum Khan Arif published his novel in 1969 entitled *Bewilderment to Sublimity* which is the story of a stereotype energetic young man.

In the nineteen seventies the only prominent figure was BapsiSidhwa who published her first novel in 1978 entitled as *The Crow Eaters*. This novel is based on realism, and there the life of Parsi community has been wonderfully described. Her second novel *The Bride*, was published in 1983, which explores the theme of conflict between male-dominant values of agrarian and urban society. In the nineteen-eighties, some new names were introduced on the literary horizon of Pakistan like Abdul Rashid Tabassum, a short story writer, some novelists like Tariq Mehmood. MehmudSipra, Adam Zameendad and MehrNigarMansoor.

A Window to the East was published by Tabassum in 1981. His works indicate that he belongs to 'liberal intellectual tradition in English writing in Pakistan begun by Ahmed Ali. MehmudSipra published a novel *Pawn to King Tree* in 1985. It was not less than a thriller. Another literary figure is Tariq Mehmood, who wrote *Hand on the Sun* in 1983, which was the composition of autobiographical elements. According to Rehman (1991), this novel which is 'admixture of autobiography is no guarantee of the literary merit of the work of art'.

Tariq Ali appeared as a British-Pak historian, novelist, filmmaker, political campaigner and commentator. His work includes a series of historical novels about Islam: *Shadows of the Pomegranate Tree* (1992), *The Book of Saladin* (1998), *The Stone Women* (2005). On the other hand, his number one-fictional work includes

Conversation with Edward Said (2005), *Rough Music: Bombs, Baghdad, London, Terror (2005)*; and *speaking of Empire and Resistance (2005)*, which takes the form of a series of conversation with the author. His latest book is *The Idea of Communism (2009)*. KamilaShamsie, wrote her first novel, *In the City by the Sea* in 1998 which was shortlisted for the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize in the UK.

In his magnum opus *Twilight in Delhi*, Ahmed Ali, one of the leading figures in the Progressive Writers Movement, seems to be reconstructing Indian Muslim culture as a commodity to be consumed by the west. Ali takes his readers into a journey of the Orient with its decadent society, its kite and pigeon flying sessions, its zenanas and lovelorn males and females. The Orient which has been created by Ali is not a land of magnificence and charm but is a land of lost glory and fading lustre. The novel begins with darkness and ends with the same erasing and obliterating all the possibilities of hope for the future. *Twilight* showcases Delhi for the western eye -- a land of heat and dust, a land if not of snakes and snake charmers but pigeons and kites, of beautiful females, of men keeping mistresses and considering it to be a part of the culture. Delhi has been chosen as the representative city of India as it has always been a city of great importance in Indian history. Ahmed Ali portrays Delhi in a state of ruin which was once a symbol of strength and splendour, and it also portrays his preoccupation with Indian heat and stink --- there are elaborate descriptions of stinking gutters, sweating labourers and unhygienic surroundings with dogs and cats consuming the leftover of man. The novel opens with a description of Delhi engulfed in darkness.

Ali Husain Mir and Raza Mir have discussed at length some suggestions of Ali SardarJafri which he has written in his essays; *Taraqqi Pasand Shairike Baaz Masaail'*. Here it has been made clear that progressive literature has no place for the portrayal of —Gham-e zaat (the sorrows of the heart or the self) and further it has been emphasized that —Poets should write verses of optimism (Rajaiyat) and eschew sorrow and lament (Gham, Udaasi, Afsurdagi). (Mir and Mir 2006:32)

“*Twilight in Delhi*” depicts the colonizers’ cultural and traditional dominance over the colonized (Indian Muslims). It is important to mention that Ali has personally been through that painful agony of the mentioned colonial age. So as the writers are mirrors of their social era, Ali also has drawn a clear sketch of British rule in India, especially from Muslim perspective. He appears to have a clear goal to bring to limelight Muslim lingual, cultural and social deprivation caused by the British assault earlier and rule later on. Ali’s novel *Twilight in Delhi* is the exact representation of the decline of Muslim culture in India, which is like twilight near to be diminished. He highlights the decline of Muslim cultural values and their traditional sunset also.

Ahmed states that after the British rule, the Muslims of India lost their homeland, theirMughal Empire, their language, culture and their city Delhi

which was the capital. "Twilight in Delhi" discusses many postcolonial terms like hybridism in language and culture, the concept of 'Other'. Ali has examined the great Muslims centre in Delhi, India. It shows that the light in Delhi was getting fade due to the new light, which was brighter. That light affected the culture, religion and the whole life of the Muslims of India. As Ali says that, "My purpose in writing this novel was to depict a phase of our national life and the decay of a whole culture, a particular mode of thinking and living, values now dead and gone before our eyes" (Ali, 2007).

The research focuses on the representation of Delhi's culture versus English culture, family constructor versus destructor, idealist versus realist, romantic versus unromantic and bold versus shy. Binary opposition is the basic concept of structuralism, a theory of sociology, anthropology and linguistics. Binary opposition states that all elements of human culture can only be understood in relation to one another and how they function within a larger system or the overall environment. It explores the relationships between different groups of people, for instance: upper-class and lower-class or disabled and non-disabled. In the same fashion, the present study has analyzed the characters of the novel to present their actual status in the light of binary opposition. On the surface, these seem like mere identifying labels, but what makes them binary opposites is the notion that they cannot coexist. Binary opposition in the characters highlights the ways of living, behaviour, choice, like and dislike. The study also gives postcolonial touch because the theme of the novel is set in the colonial period. English ruled over India and deliberately imposed their culture. The downfall of Delhi's culture and adoption of English one is also the part of this research.

Analysis and Discussion

Liminality is one of the most striking issues of postcolonial critical studies. Postcolonial features, mainly, are being explored by the critics and researchers in Pakistani literature in English. The present study deals with the liminality in characters and their states of dwelling as described by the writer.

Asghar is not only one of the main characters in the novel but also an example of pluralism. From the beginning of the novel Asghar finds himself in the middle space. Asghar's physical appearance, described by the author, shows that he is a complete representative, not of Indian or English culture. For example, his first interaction with readers is as:

He is a tall and handsome young man with his hair well oiled and his red Turkish cap cocked at a smart angle on his head. The upper buttons of his sherwani are open and show the collar of the English shirt that he is wearing under it. He looks an aesthete, and has a somewhat effeminate grace about him. And round his wrist is wrapped a jasmine garland. (2007:13)

The appearance of Asghar, vividly, shows that he is wearing sherwani; an Indian cultural representation but, at the same time, he is wearing an English shirt under it. The use of English shirt shows that he, himself, is very much interested in wearing the English shirts which has nothing to do with the culture of his forefathers. Besides, he wrapped his wrist with the garland, which is the part of the western culture. Therefore, Asghar's first appearance described in the novel make the readers think that he is living on the threshold of culture; he is neither the part of Indian culture, completely could adapt the English culture.

At another place in the novel, Asghar, influenced by the western trends and customs, wants to tell his choice about the life partner but he holds himself in check. Here, he has to follow the eastern trend according to which off-springs cannot speak about the choice of marriage for this is the parents' jobs. This situation is explained as follows:

Asghar was between the devil and the deep sea. On one side of him stood the wall of the family, on the other his deep and incurable passion. (2007:34)

Here, Asghar is on the threshold of Indian values and that of the English. Asghar is more inclined toward the English culture than that of the Indian.

His father Mir Nihal, on the other hand, is the pure postcolonial character because, being a typical Eastern father, he, off and on, thunders at his son Asghar to see him wearing English dress and shaping himself in the English fashion. For example, Mir Nihal speaks to his son:

You know Asghar said in a voice full of bitterness and self-pity, that father has never been sympathetic towards me. He is always shouting at me and getting angry. I must not wear pumps or English shirts; I must not grow my hair in the English fashion. If I had stayed in Delhi, he wouldn't have allowed me to learn English. (2007:48-49)

Here, again, Asghar finds himself, in an inbetween space because he wants to follow the English fashions but his father is not letting him adopt that fashion. Asghar opens his heart, in these lines, with his elder sister to adopt the English life style.

On another occasion, Asghar shows his inclination towards the English culture. He presents shoes to his wife; as in the text:

He often brought presents for her and gave her a pair of English shoes which, he said; she should wear at Mehro's wedding. (2007:186)

Here, Asghar wants his wife to use the shoes of his choice: the English show, but local people, especially women, laughed when his wife puts on those shoes. Ultimately, Asghar seems to dwell on the threshold of both cultures. His wife, herself, dislikes the English after listening to comments of the local women.

Talking about Asghar's place in the society he is living in, it is important to note that the local people make him think about his existence in an inbetween space. For instance, the text of the novel, describes as:

As he walked lost in thoughts, wearing old dreams into new garbs, a few urchins passed by him. He was wearing English clothes and they began to mock at him and shouted in his face: 'Bolgai My Lord Kukroo-koo' (My lord has been frightened like a defeated cock). 'Bolgai,,,My Lord Kukroo-Koon.' (2007:249)

In these lines, Asghar seems a misfit, even, the society he lives. Urchins act as a factor to drive him to the liminal space because he is neither considered the part of his own society nor the English. For the local people, he is a misfit because he is not less than a laughing stock and they laugh at him as he tries to adopt the English lifestyle which they dislike. The dislikeness of the local people is expressed through the ways they taunt Asghar.

It can be said that Asghar may be considered a liminal or threshold character. The English and their culture greatly influence him. He wants to follow the English fashions but, being the part of a native family, he has to face resentment in using the English clothes, shoes and adopting English lifestyle. The local people, especially Mir Nihal; Asghar's father, do not let him adopt the English fashion whereas he is very fond of the English styles. Therefore, he is considered neither the part of local culture nor the part of the English culture. This is how it can be said that Asghar is a liminal character in the novel.

Some minor characters can be tackled as liminal ones. Some people of Delhi feel themselves on the threshold because they are gnashing their teeth against the English whereas some of them are fond of watching the procession of coronation. This situation is explained in the novel as:

The Delhi people were agog and stared in wonder at this bustle, many happy in the hope of gain, others raging within their hearts at the thought of subjection to a foreign race (2007:133)

In these lines, it is clear that local people are dwelling in the space in between because they are neither can resist, openly, the dominance and control of an alien race over them nor celebrate the coronation of the English king in the Indian subcontinent; the place that has been under the control of their forefathers, for many decades.

Mirza, one of the minor characters, lives on the threshold as he exists in space in between: For example, Mirza, to one of his fellows:

I am not abusing God's graciousness who is always good. But I do believe that the rule of the frangis can never be good for us. See how they imprisoned Bahadur Shah, banished him, killed his sons and looted Delhi. All this does not be taken any good... (2007:136).

These lines guide the readers to get to the in between space in which there is a region of continual change: the process of movement and interchange between states. Therefore, Mirza, along with other people, is a threshold character. He, inwardly, believes that a ruler should be considered the shadow of God, but he is unable to consider the English his rulers.

Some other characters like Begum Nihal, Habibudin and Kabiruddin are to be called liminal characters because they do exist in trans-cultural space: a space in which personal or communal self-hood may be elaborated. Ali describes:

Other fires had broken out, and the petrol depot had caught fire. Mir Nihal and Habibuddin left secretly happy; but Kabiruddin kept quiet out of loyalty to those from whom he got his salt. Begum Nihal, however, cursed the English feeling happy at the news. (2007:137)

The communal self-hood, represented by the characters like Begum Nihal, Habibuddin and Kabiruddin, is elaborated these lines. Indian communal self-hood is being targeted by the foreign race and the above lines express liminal space because these show the communal self-hood of the local people.

Moreover, another type of liminal space is found here in these lines. Since the liminal space may be considered a pathway between upper and lower areas, it presents identities from polarizing between such arbitrary designations as 'upper' and 'lower', or 'white' and 'black'.

To summarize, it can be said that the characters; major as well as minor ones have been existing in an in between space where cultural change occurs. Therefore, living in an in between space, they are considered the threshold characters or the liminal characters. Besides, some characters, especially the minor ones, are polarizing between arbitrary designations. That is why they are existing in the pathway between the poles, and can be considered the liminal characters.

The title of the novel *Twilight in Delhi*, states that Delhi was on the verge of change. Twilight is, in fact, a time which is neither night nor day. It is a time in between the day and night. Therefore, the title itself refers to a liminal space. The title has a symbolic significance, and after reading the novel a reader comes to know that it is, not only twilight (in a temporal sense) but also twilight of the Indian civilization, and this thing can be explored in the novel.

From end to end of the Chandnichowk, divided down the middle by a row of noble and expensive peepal trees, the central causeway was turned into a long line of wooden stands. In front of the Town Hall and around the statue of the English Queen, one enormous stand was erected; and the ugliness of the Cock Tower had been concealed. The stands continued through the Fatehpuri Bazar with its majestic mosque and grateful shadows, and continued to the Mori Gate and beyond. All this made Delhi look more like an exhibition ground than the city which was once the greatest in Hindustan. (2007: 134-135)

Delhi has been considered a centre of the Indian civilization. It is shown here facing changes, and this is what makes the readers think that the colonizers tried their best to change the whole civilization.

Moreover, Ali, a prolific writer, shows his propensity to bilingualism. He is good in English, but even then, sometimes, it seems that he takes refuge in the Urdu language, for some of the expressions and idioms are directly translated from Urdu. Being a bilingual writer, he made fair use of code-mixing and code-switching. Sometimes, his code-mixing and code-switching lead him to the acme of work. The use of the terms and vocabulary of any other language than the one in which he is writing can be termed as language appropriation. Many of the postcolonial writers have been going for language appropriation in their works, for it helps them expressing the events and expressions of the novel more appropriately.

At many places in the novel Ali uses terms from Urdu as it is, for example, 'Azaan', 'muazzan', 'kotha', 'zanana', 'mardana', 'sherbet', 'paich', 'melaad', 'domnis', 'vida', 'Amma', 'pulao', 'majzoob', 'mussalman', 'qawwals', 'doli', 'Amma', 'kababi', 'Amen', 'buqas', 'loo', 'sabeel', 'HarayBharay', 'tahmat', 'Dulhan', 'mureed', 'kazzak', 'panjiri', 'ghassals', 'majzoob', etc. These are the examples of code-mixing because Ali, very aptly, mixes these terms in the text in English.

There are some places where Ali translated Urdu idioms and tried to make them the part of the English language, for example:

She could shout, and if anyone interfered, then the tears began to flow, breasts were beaten, and heaven and earth made one.
(2007: 40)

There are three translated idioms used in these lines. All three are from the Urdu Language, and in Urdu, these are: 'ansubehna', 'chhatiaanpeetna', 'zameen-o-aasmaanekkrna'.

Ali made a good use of language appropriation; he himself can be termed as a liminal figure because he adopted English as a medium, especially in case of *Twilight in Delhi*, but did not ignore the usage of Urdu idioms, terms and expressions in his work.

Making a long story short, Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* has liminal space and liminal characters, and these characters and the language of the novel are analyzed and investigated. The whole Indian civilization looks liminal and some minor as well as major characters, like Asghar, are liminal ones.

Conclusion

Liminality can be explored in different characters of the novel primarily in the character of Asghar who is Eastern by his race and colour but Western mind and appearance. Asghar is least interested in his ancestral culture. Therefore, he tries to transform himself by putting his native culture aside and adopts the western culture, but he remains unsuccessful in this attempt because he is unable to imitate western lifestyle comprehensively. As a result, he becomes laughing stock for the people. The utmost desire of Asghar to get rid of his native culture and adopts western culture leads him towards a situation where he becomes misfit in both of these cultures. In this way he can be considered as a liminal character furthermore the people of sub-continent can also be categorized as liminal because they are neither in a position to resist against colonial domination nor to accept the colonial rule moreover Mirza a minor character in the novel is also liminal because in spite of having a belief that rulers are the shadow of God he forbids to accept the British as is rulers. Ahmed Ali himself is considered liminal because of writing *Twilight in Delhi* in English but adding local idiomatic expressions in his work to make it liminal. In this way, colonial invasion leads the people of sub-continent towards everlasting liminality.

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