

# Woman as Colonized Subject: Ahmed Ali Versus Shahnawaz

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## Abstract

*This paper explores the difference of representation of women by Ali and Shahnawaz and attempts to find if there was a deliberate exclusion of women in the fiction of Ali in comparison to that of Shahnawaz. Shahnawaz' portrayal of women in her novel The Heart Divided reflects women's active participation in the socio-political process under the British rule in India while at the same time Ali's portrayal of women in his novel Twilight in Delhi reflects an exclusion of women, especially from the political process. This evident difference problematizes the issue of representation of women by the fiction writers and initiates the debate whether it was a deliberate exclusion of women in one case and the willful inclusion of women in another. Portrayal of Mehruin Ali's Novel Twilight in Delhi and that of Zohra in Shahnawaz's novel The Heart Divided has been analyzed to find the most probable answer to this question with reference to the socio-political situation in India as a British colony.*

**Key Words:** Woman, Representation, Portrayals of Women, Mahru, Zohra, Colonized Subject

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## Introduction

The story of Pakistani fiction was triggered with the writings of Mumtaz Shahnawaz and Pro. Mohammad Ali. As such, Mumtaz Shahnawaz is the first Pakistani woman writer and Mohammad Ali Leads men writers of Pakistani Anglophone writings. These beginnings encouraged many afterwards and so now Pakistani Anglophone writings have significant volume because of the contributions of ZulifkarGhose, BapsiSindhwa, Kamila Shamsie, NadeemAslam, MohsinHmaid and others. These writings attempt to determine Pakistani identity in context with the theme of injustice, Feminism, oppression and Corruption. But the portrayal of women as an oppressed figure has been a dominant aspect of these writings (Ahmed, 2009). "This was the time when the consolidation of British power in India sparked off intense debates over the question of the condition and rights women" (Ali, 2000).

While discussing about the role of heteroglossia in language of the formerly colonized areas, Bakhtin has suggested that there is constant interplay of the colonized and colonizer and the colonial postcolonial resulting in further stratification of the societies. Bakhtin equates this phenomenon of language with the occurrence of hybridity because of the process of encroachment in different cultures and hence causing deconstruction of the same (Riaz, 2014, p. 96). On the other hand, Said relates the fragmentations of the societies with history where the dominating has always tried to take the weak nations. Riaz (2014) propounds that Colonization was one such process as well. He says that "the process of colonialism defined and constructed the realities and relationships between the colonizer and the colonized" (Riaz, 2014, p. 97). Loomba is also of the view that the process of colonization has resulted in the new kind of relationship between the communities. She says that "the process of forming a community in the new land necessarily meant unforming or forming the communities that existed there already" (Loomba, 1998, p. 176). Alam (2015) while discussing the process of colonization understands that this process is the constant struggle in subverting

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and redefining the existing structures of the colonized societies. He says that “the new cultural episteme that emerges under the dictates of colonization not only subverts the existing power structures but also redefines the practice of everyday life” (Alam, 2015, P. 347)

Although *Twilight in Delhi* by Ahmed was published in 1940, the time setting of the novel is 1910 and space setting is the suburbs of Delhi and it highlights a lot about the sufferings and post colonization life of the Muslims of Delhi, especially with reference to the downfall of the Muslim Mughal rule in India (Shamsie, 2007). This had prompted an urge among the Muslims of India to preserve their culture and social values while it was extremely complicated in case the Muslims decide to cooperate with the occupying British forces and, as a result, these were the women who were supposed to be at home and preserve the Muslim culture. This enhanced the social role of Muslim women in the British occupied India and so their condition was a type of measure with which the life of the Indian Muslim could be judged (Ali, 2000). So, this was the scenario with which Ali (1940) was working when he gave a conservative portrayal of the Muslim Indian women in his novel *Twilight in Delhi*. Although Ali (1940) was a part of the progressive writers’ movement in India, the Portrayal of Muslim women is pretty conservative, which can be explained only with reference to the efforts of the Muslims that they made to preserve their cultural values at the home front.

### Literature Review

In the novels like, *Twilight in Delhi* by Ahmed Ali and *The Heart Divided* by Shahnawaz the history of one woman becomes the history of the nation. This new unfolding of history on the Indian Muslim Women was particular because they found out new construction of their identities and experienced the impact of British colonialism and its aftermaths in the shape of post colonialism (Chakravarty, 2013). The novel *The Heart divided* is a bit more significant because in this the character of Sughra, the protagonist, along with her associates, is made to look at the Indian history with the angle of a woman through the 1940s. Shahnawaz represents the world through the eye of a woman to show how she would absorb the change that was coming so abruptly in the household of that time, especially in the sense that these women were very deeply associated with their pasts and the same past was intervening in to their present as well. There were the socio-political challenges as well which were bringing women face to face with the new realities of life. For example, on the one hand she was living through changing times but also had to face the challenge of professional possibilities and education for her. It was not without consequences because the women had to carry the burden of their past as well as seek for them a new role in the society of that time. Chakravarty says,

Simultaneously, history also presses upon the narratives in other ways: as change sweeping households, new professional possibilities, through women’s struggles for education, through challenging social customs that continue to be enforced upon the younger generation desperately seeking change. Freedom from foreign rule seamlessly melds into freedom and liberation from the prison-house of custom especially for the young. (Chakravarty, 2013, p. 94)

The new vision of women demanded that the Muslim household would transform itself to accommodate the new woman of the postcolonial era. But it was too complicated to be taken so naively because of the conflicting and struggling elements in the society. This was the time when women had become the part of Indian political discourse otherwise just a few years ago, the Muslim writers had a reformist attitude in making women fitter with the traditional setup of the household and the society. The life of a new woman like Zohra in Shahnawaz’s novel was not less than a hard struggle waged to discover her new-found identity and to seek approval of her men in order to exert this identity of women who had her will and wanted to express it as well (Chakravarty, 2013, p. 95). This discourse found its way in the magazines like *Tehzeeb-e-Niswan* and *Purdah to Parliament* by Ikramullah where the transformation was discussed openly to make women fitter for their role in the political struggle against the British. This brought many changes in the lives of women at that time. “Significantly, the starting point for the possibility of the emergence of women’s political agency was that women needed to decisively move out from the zenana” (Chakravarty, 2013, p. 95)

Jajja (2012) believes that the writers like Mumtaz Shahnawaz have responded to their colonial experiences as they had around them. The text *The Heart divided* is an expression of the women experiences of colonialism (Jajja, 2012, p. 297). Chandio& Malik (2015) highlighted the way of representation and claimed that Anglo-Indian writer enforced the hidden agenda of declaring and hence disappointing the colonized subject by labelling him as “uncivilized, uncultured, incapable, sycophants and superstitious” and on the other hand, we see the rebuttal of the same in the text produced by the postcolonial writers (p. 35). Chandio& Malik (2015) further claim and suggest that the literature of postcolonial age has transformed and generated itself into a literature that reflects the tension and the strain between the colonizer and the colonized which has helped the writers to develop a counter discourse of resistance against the power. Bhabha further maintains, “The term postcolonial is used to describe that form of social

criticism that bears witness to those unequal and uneven processes of representation by which the historical experience of the once colonized Third World comes (Bhabha quoted in Chandio & Malik, 2015, p.36).

Riaz & Khan (2015) Have discussed the changed socio-political environment with reference to the condition of women in the Delhi under the British Rule. They believe that decline is shared by both. According to Riaz & Khan (2015) beauty and charm of the city of Delhi has declined in the same way as the beauty and charm of Babban Jan is dead in the novel (p. 150). They have found a parallel between the declining conditions of Delhi and the women with the postcolonial condition claiming that the “postcolonial discourse studies the dynamics of identity, politics, race, power, subordination and dominance, landlessness, displacement or dislocation of culture, and hybridization” (Riaz & Khan, 2015, p. 151) These dynamics are revealed through the portrayals of empowered Mughal Muslim women, silently suffering women and the oppressed women.

Another sort of postcolonial feminism is the depiction of women as oppressed in social, religious, and cultural contexts. Begum Nihal, Mehro, Begum Waheed, and Bilquees are silent sufferers of thumbscrews of prevalent patriarchal system. They are the women who are doubly displaced from the centre as a woman and as the colonised. In one way, Ali lays blame on the colonisation for women disempowerment as if the western culture of wielding power strongly altered the local practice of giving significant status to women. (Riaz & Khan, 2015, p. 154)

### Research Method

This paper employs qualitative method to find out the comparative approach of Ali and Shahnawaz towards the portrayal of women in their respective novels. This is basically a library study and follows the contrapuntal reading model of Edward Said. Therefore, selected passages of the text relevant to the women’s portrayal in the colonized set up of India and its long and short term implicature on the lives of Muslim women in India, have been critically read in order to seek the answer to the question if the portrayal of women by the two writers reflects the kind of difference they try to manage between the western educated Muslim women and the traditionally educated Muslim women in India. Therefore, the paper questions and debates the socio-political condition of the Muslim women in India.

### Discussion and Analysis

The portrayal of women given by Ali in his novel *Twilight in Delhi* (1940) is that of well to do women. But these Muslim women were mostly restricted to their domesticity and were unwilling to take part in the mainstream of life and hence ignored the socio-political situation of that time. For example, Mrs. Mir Nihal in the novel is a wife of a wealthy Muslim of Delhi but has no desire to violate the strict control of her husband even if she sometimes wishes to do so. She would love to manipulate the situation in her favour by her dexterity and power of manipulation, especially when there is the matter of marriages of her sons or daughters or the matter of some social gathering.

So, Ali, being a man writer has attempted to show his women characters as dependent on their men and restricted their lives to their home. Their homes, though whole arena of their life, did not give them much authority and they had to exercise their allocated authority under the strict supervision of their husbands or other male members of the household. Women, however, were source of love and care for their family which is a traditional trait of the Mughal Muslim Women of India as they inherited combined culture of foreign Muslim States. The domestic goodness of Mrs. Mir Nihal made her compromise her rights on her husband even when she could see that her husband was more involved with his pigeons and with Babban Jan than with her.

Another woman character in the novel is Begum Waheed, who married at an early age and became widow after a few years of her marriage. She kept on living with her son and the family of in laws. She never opted for a re-marriage out of the fear of the family and the established social norms and kept on depriving herself of the pleasures of life and happiness of marriage in such a youthful age. According to Ali, “For though Islam permitted her to marry again, the social code, derived mostly from prevailing Hindu practice, did not favor a second marriage (Ali, 1940, p. 36). This tendency among the Muslim women of India was followed by the young women as well. For example, Mehru was a young unmarried daughter of Mir Nihal and is declared to be shy and reserved girl who never objected to the decisions made by her elders regarding her marriage proposals, although she had her own dreams and expectations about her bridegroom and marriage. She has been disclosing her dreams while talking to the stars at night, but she could never dare express them to her elders, not even to the elder women of the house. She does not leave her reticence and unquestioning attitude even when she finds that she is going to marry a very ugly man. Such was the hold of traditions and customs on the Mughal Muslim women of India.

The silence of Mehru speaks about the absence of the effect of modernism brought by the English colonialism of India, as it was witnessed at the upper strata of Muslim women in India. Instead of getting any rights of liberty, Muslim women were expected by their males to preserve their Mughal Muslim Culture home. These young

women were unaware of the socio-political changes taking place around them, nor did they know about their rights. Modern education had also not knocked at the doors of every Muslim family. The education imparted to them was simply religious and that of household with an addition of silence and obedience to the family culture and norms. This training at home counts, perhaps for a silent acceptance of an unacceptable husband by Mehru.

The novel *Twilight in Delhi* by Ali shows that women in the declining period of Mughals were unaware of emancipation of women as propagated by the then British colonialism. In case of empowerment of women, they were to say YES to the decisions made by their men. Marriage, the most important event of the life of Muslim women in India, was not decided by women. They only worked to make the match, but the final decision was taken by the men of the family. But the change was inevitable because of the British colonialism as the sources of income and power of the Muslims were depleting very fast and the women, though still prosperous, were feeling the impact and the British induced reforms were penetrating into the so far confined households.

The period of 1940s also witnessed a change in the portrayal of the women characters. The Pre-Pakistan period ranging from 1940 to 1947 is significant in many respects. It was a period of rising political consciousness with a sense of achieving independence from the British. Pakistan movement had become equally powerful after the passage of the 'Pakistan Resolution' in 1940. The political developments had affected and changed the lives of Muslim men and women. They were sad and upset because of the loss of noble and old heritage carved out through the labour of so many Muslim kings and Princess. They deplored their loss of culture and Muslim rule in India. But on the other hand, they were happy as well because they were hoping to carve out a new niche for the Muslims of India called Pakistan. Both these trends were visible in the writings of the would-be Pakistani writers during this period. The British arrival and capture of India had affected the lives of both men and women and, similarly, the Pakistan movement had put its influence in even broader terms. It had specially influenced the Muslim women who were about to replace their identity from Indian Muslim women to the Pakistani women. "Muslim women were increasingly able to participate in the public sphere, created in large part by changes, emanating from the impact of the colonial state" (Ali, 2000). We can find that portrayal of women in the two novels, of this era, is interesting and covers all the dimensions of women's life in the pre-partition India. *The Heart Divided* (1957) by Shahnawaz was the most representative of the new political and social realities of the life of women in the Indo-Pak subcontinent.

Shahnawaz, being a woman from the elite family was a role model for the Indian women because she was the one who adopted the changing roles of Muslim women in India. As she was in her life, she followed the same patterns in her novel and gave her characters the outlook which matched more with the modern Muslim woman in India than with the common Muslim women. Her protagonist in the novel is a modern, educated and progressive woman who would prefer to walk side by side man than just following him. Though these were the nascent steps of Muslim women in India to lead them to their emancipation and empowerment yet could be the initial steps towards these goals. This was, however, the matter possible at the upper strata of Indian society at that time and the common women of India were still living under the patriarchal social setup. But, nonetheless, this was a major proof of Muslim women's participation in the political process of India, as has been pointed out by Shamsie (2005) that the novel *The Heart Divided* is mainly the description of the struggle of the Muslim women in India waged for the sake of freedom and independence and for the better rights for them.

Mumtaz Shahnawaz engages the reader with the sociopolitical stories of multiple women in her narrative but out of these two are more significant and eventful stories. Both of these young women make a difference and become the role models for the Muslim women in future. However, Shahnawaz portrays two young women in different light but with the same purpose. For example, Zohra is portrayed as a progressive woman for whom her education, teaching career, and her practical political stance is more important as compared to the domestic life as a wife. Zohra has never been a good observer of the tradition of Purdah since her school and college days. She would rather go in markets and social and political gatherings without Purdah and for this purpose she had enlisted the support of her brother also. Mumtaz Shahnawaz was trying to portray the change that was to penetrate in the Muslim society and make the Muslim women modern and progressive. This portrayal of Zohra by Shahnawaz is the reverberation of the thinking of a renowned novelist of the Indo-Pak subcontinent, Deputy Nazir Ahmed that "moral structure of the Muslim society was based on *Purdah* of women but this did not mean that Muslim women were to be confined to their homes or deprived of life's happiness" (Ali 2000). Shahnawaz confirms this vision about the Muslim women in her narrative,

That Surrya who goes about like a FaranganMemand some Hindu girls. Well, it seems upon being told it would take 20 minutes to get the car going, all three of them jumped out of the car, called a Tonga and drove away in it, God knows where they went. And mind you, Zohra Bibi was without her *Burqa*. (Shahnawaz, 1957, p.15)

This narrative of Shahnawaz echoed the rapidly changing Muslim society, at least at the upper classes of women who were taking active part in the political struggle, education and development of their society. Ali (200) points out that Muslim women were claiming their part and position already because of their active role in the political struggle in India. At the official level the passage of India act 1935 also accorded the communalization of Indian female identity. The narrative of Shahnawaz also points out to the conflict and struggle that the women of India had to go through because of their new and progressive stance with that of the traditional set up of the Muslim Society. This struggle is well portrayed through the portrayal of Sughra, the sister of the protagonist. Sughra, instead of being an educated young woman, does not resist when she is offered the role of a domestic wife under strict conditions of *Purdah* and observance of traditions. But the spark of progressive attitude did not let her feel satisfied with her role and she too wanted a bigger sociopolitical role for herself and so very soon she too rebelled against the restrictions imposed on her by her in-laws. Thus change was exactly in accordance with the sociopolitical change that was introduced and was working in the political horizons of India that Muslim women were taking an active part, side by side their men, in the political struggle for freedom from the British colonization. Ali (200), maintains that participation of Muslim women in the political process and the introduction of role models like Miss Fatima Jinnah in this process indicated on the one hand that Muslim women were becoming aware of their rights and status and on the other hand Muslim men also had begun to realize that their struggle might not succeed without their women. Shahnawaz confirms this in her narrative when she says,

‘Times are changing’, said Habib for the second time that day. ‘Some Muslim ladies in other parts of India actually took part in the civil Disobedience Movement last year, and even from our own province, a Muslim lady had gone to the round-table conference. I remember all the English papers praising her speeches last year. Our women must come out of *Purdah* now for we shall never make progress until they do.’ (Shahnawaz, 1957, p. 69)

### Conclusion

The above discussion raises the point that both the writers, Ahmed Ali and Mumtaz Shahnawaz have portrayed the sociopolitical status of Muslim women in their society. Written almost at the same time, both the texts reveal the history of Muslim Indian and the role and status of women in India. Ali (1940) has reflected on the traditional set up under which Muslim women lived and mostly compromised their freedom to the power of the traditional social set up. The portrayal of Mehru, Begum Mir Nihal, Begum Asghar and Babban Jan in Ali’s *Twilight in Delhi* is the glaring example of the compromising Muslim women. On the other hand, Shahnawaz (1957) and her novel becomes the embodiment of change that was spreading rapidly in the Muslim society of that time reflected through the portrayal of Zohra, Sughra and Mohni. This political change, however, had had a significant impact on the women of the elite Muslim families who were involved in the political struggle for Pakistan movement in the 1940’s. As such, the women portrayal of Shahnawaz highlights this impact. Zohra and her sister become a model of for the next coming generations of Muslim women in India to prove their social worth at the social and political level. But the same benefit was not visible in the other circles of Muslim women who were mostly the victims of the traditional set up of local culture. The similar approach dominated the socio-political set up of Muslim women after the birth of Pakistan. The colonization did impact the life of Muslim women at certain level but it could not change the lot of the ordinary women. This transformation in the sociopolitical status of Muslim women was mainly introduced because of the British colonization of India and political struggle waged by the Indian men and women for their independence. The struggle of Muslim women along with their men was not only helpful in giving awareness to the Muslim women but also changed them as postcolonial subjects.

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