

**RECONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES: EXPLORING ISSUES OF
NATIONALISM AND RELIGION THROUGH A COMPARATIVE STUDY
OF SELECT NOVELS OF SUNIL GANGOPADHYAY
AND AHMED ALI**

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with social and cultural changes that took place in India from 1840 to 1911 in the novels of Sunil Gangopadhyay and Ahmed Ali. The novels under consideration are Those Days, First Light and Twilight in Delhi. The paper looks at different social groups but mostly focuses on the middle class that was involved in the changes taking place during this tumultuous period in Indian history. Through a comparative study of Ali's Twilight in Delhi and Gangopadhyay's Those Days and First Light, the paper looks at the rise of Hindu power and the decline of Muslim influence both in the political as well as socio cultural field. It also traces the crystallization of identity, Hindu and Muslim, the merging of nationalism and Hinduism and the moving away of Muslims from the idea of the Indian nation. The two different worlds inhabited by the two major communities vying for a place in the colonial sun is depicted in the novels and through comparison and contrast the different world views, the angst and vision of the future are highlighted. The novels document the changes and impact of westernization on Indian society and how the revolutionizing of lives and values under western rule led to a resentment of foreign rule. Voices, known, and unknown, emerged from the colonial space. Some of them belong to the makers and shapers of Indian history and the paper analyses their role and impact on India's cultural and religious life.

Key words: Identity, Nationalism, Nation, Westernization, Colonial space

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Sunil Gangopadhyay (1934 – 2012), poet, novelist, travel writer, dramatist, journalist, script writer was born in erstwhile East Pakistan. He too was a victim of partition and migrated to Calcutta where he had to earn a livelihood from his teen years to keep body and soul together. He completed an M.A in Bengali literature from Calcutta University and went on to spearhead a new literary movement in Bengali literature along with fellow poets Shakti Chattopadhyay and Narendranath Chakravorty. He is first and foremost a poet but his novels have won him much acclaim. His novels *Pratidwandi* and *Aranyer Din Ratri* have been filmed by Satyajit Ray, *Sei Samay* won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1983.

Ahmed Ali (1910-1984) was born in Delhi and passed away in Karachi. After a brilliant academic career he joined the Bengal Senior Educational Service as Professor and Head of the English Department, Presidency College, Calcutta. He went as Visiting Professor to China and was stranded there in 1947. Unable to return to India he moved to Pakistan where he joined the Pakistan Foreign Service. In British India Ali was co-founder of the All India Progressive Writers' Association. His collection of short stories, *Aangarey*, was banned by the British in 1933. *Twilight in Delhi*, his first novel, was published in 1940 by the Hogarth Press, England.

Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Sei Samay* (Those days) and *Pratham Alo* (First Light) and Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* traces the rise of the Hindu elite and fall of the Muslim one under colonial rule. The two different worlds inhabited by India's largest religious communities is depicted along with their angst and vision of the future. With both communities vying for a place in the colonial sun the formation of an identity, religious, social and cultural, that precedes a political one, is crucial for survival in a colonized space.

Gangopadhyay and Ali are concerned with the social and cultural changes that accompany the political impact of colonialism. While they focus on these changes, they delineate the arena, the issues and the methods of these changes and look at the contestation for power among colonial subjects.

This contestation is important to understand the rise of Hindu power and the decline of Muslim influence in the political, social and cultural sphere, especially after 1857. The events of *Those Days* and *First Light* stretched from 1840 to 1906, an epic era in the history of Bengal and India. Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* is located in Delhi between 1910 to 1919, a period of painful transition from old to new. Both writers take us into post imperialist and pre-independence Hindu and Muslim households. While Sunil Gangopadhyay's novels are steeped in a cultural awakening and growing national consciousness, Ali's novel offers a different view of the colonial encounter. "Through the eyes of the aristocratic Mir Nihal it elaborates a specifically Muslim perception of colonial rule as the loss of Mughal hegemony over India. No longer masters and rulers of Delhi, Nihal and his peers lament their estrangement from the city of their birth and progressively lose their bearings in the new geography of their imperial capital" (Mehrotra 210). They struggle to cope with their loss and move inwards, losing touch with the world around them. The national movement bypasses them and they can only identify with the first war of independence in 1857, a war that was the swansong of Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal ruler of India. The defeat in 1857 and subsequent exile of Bahadur Shah Zafar sounded the death knell for Muslim society and its aspirations.

In contrast to the dying and claustrophobic world of Indian Muslims, Gangopadhyay portrays a vibrant era that takes up the gauntlet thrown by colonialism. Time, not any individual, is the hero of *Those Days* and Sunil Gangopadhyay has tried to hold on to that time, which was at the cusp of tradition and modernity. In *Sei Samay (Those Days)* published in 1982 and *Pratham Alo (First Light)* published in 1996, Gangopadhyay focused on the entire social milieu of Calcutta and Bengal from Mid-nineteenth century to the first decade of the twentieth, a period of cultural awakening, resurgence of nationalism, growing influence of science and encroachment of modernity on traditional ways of thinking and being.

Those Days begins with the birth of Nabin Kumar, son of Babu Ramkamal Singha and Bimbabati. Nabin, the chief protagonist of the novel symbolizes the advent of a new age.

Nabin Kumar lives between 1840 and 1870. This period ushered in a new era in the history of Bengal. "There was an awakening in the realms of politics, religion and education such as had never been witnessed before" (Chakravarti, 1997, VIII).

Those Days is the story of the rise and the fall of an established, rich land owning middle class Bengali Bhadrakalok family. Through a focus on education and culture this story is intertwined with important events in the history of a new Bengal. Many illustrious and famous personalities enter and exit through the pages of the novel making it a rich and colorful canvas. It is noteworthy that almost all the historical personalities brought to life in the novel, including the fictional Nabin Kumar, are men of letters. If Nabin Kumar symbolized the birth of a new era then it was to be powered by education and literature. From the Derozians, the Tagores, Kesab Sen, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, David Hare, John Bethune, Harish Mukherjee, Ramtanu Lahiri, Pyarichand Mitra, Dinabandhu Mitra to several others, all become part of both the colonial and the anti-colonial project.

Though separated by fourteen years, *First Light* carries forward the story of the Bengal Renaissance to culminate in the resurgence of nationalism. In fact the idea of a 'nation' that emerged in Bankimchandra's works is carried forward further through the plot and the historical figures who dot the novel. *First Light* documents the impact of western science and rationalism on Indian society and at the same time the contribution of Dr. Mahendralal Sarkar and Jagadish Chandra Bose and the impact of revivalists like Shri Ramkrishna Paramhansa and Swami Vivekananda.

In *Those Days* and *First Light* we see the middle and upper class Bengali and Hindu society leading the march of history although it is the orphaned and dispossessed who become the inheritors of the future. The novels span a period from 1840 to 1910. In contrast Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* spans a period of just ten years from 1910 to 1919 and captures the claustrophobic and self destructive inwardness of a particular class within the Indian Muslim community.

By stoking cultural memory while harking back to 1857 Ali portrays the persecution of Muslims by the British colonial power for their role in the mutiny to overthrow the British Raj. From 1857 onwards Muslims were victimized, tortured and killed.

The triumphant British held an orgy of blood and terror, all mention of which has been dropped by their historians. (TID X1)

Ali draws parallels with the colonization of the Americas and like all colonization by the white race it is accompanied by brutal violence and a desire to dominate populations and local culture. Ali believes that "The damage done by colonial powers to the heritage of conquered peoples are irreversible, yet racial memory is a collective store house that time and history cannot eradicate." (TID XI) In the novel he attacks the civilizing mission of colonialism and through it responds to the deliberate and false propaganda against Indians, especially Muslims, that they were backward, uncivilized and inferior. The novel is an attempt to retrieve the past that colonial history has tried to erase and try to restore to India and Indian Muslims a sense of identity lost in the turbulence of colonialism.

The novel spans the period from 1910 to 1919, and covers significant moments in Indian history, especially the national movement. It is divided into four parts roughly coinciding with three major historical events, The mutiny of 1857, the Delhi Durbar of 1911 and the passing of the Rowlatt Act in 1919.

In the novel *Mir Nihal*, the patriarch of an old Delhi family becomes the symbol of tradition and his young son Asghar the emblem of modernity. That Ali's sympathies lie entirely with *Mir Nihal* is evident in the way he strengthens his character and depicts Asghar's modernity effete.

Foreign rule impacts *Mir Nihal's* life, although indirectly, through his sons. The city of Delhi undergoes a transformation in readiness for the coronation.

Colonialism and imperialism are closely linked to commerce and capital and both the ruler and ruled are inextricably linked in this collaborative project.

But suppose if the king had not held his Darbar here, what would you have done?' said Siddiq loudly.' You couldn't have forced him to come here, could you? He is a very gracious emperor to think of his subjects and of our Dilli which will now become the capital of India. Soon we shall all be rich and roll in wealth all our lives. (TID 160)

Mir Nihal chooses to walk away from the coronation and his state of mind echoes that of Mirza Nazirul Mulk, the youngest son of Bahadur Shah, now a beggar, "No, brother these things are not for us now." (TID 177) Mir Nihal retreats into his world of the past.

In Mir Nihal's wish to remain insulated, isolated and away from the mainstream Ali seems to be focusing on issues that concerned the Muslim community before independence and precipitated the partition of India. Writing in the late 1930s, the language issue, the separate electorates, the Muslim league and the demand for Pakistan would have surely exercised Ali.

In 1935 Jinnah returned from England and began the transformation of Muslim politics from the provincial to the national level. At the time patriotic Muslims found themselves in a dilemma about their role in nation building. Not wanting to be seen as communal nor sharing Gandhi's vision of Ram Rajya many Muslim intellectuals became socialists or even communists like Ahmed Ali. But we see even Ali breaking away from the all India Progressive Writers Association by the time he wrote *Twilight in Delhi*. His Marxist concerns are subsumed by the existential angst of the Indian Muslims as symbolized by Mir Nihal. By 1937-1938 the Muslim league had become a force to reckon with. The Congress and the League were the two major parties that would negotiate the future of India with the British. On 23rd march 1940, the All- India Muslim League passed the resolution for 'Pakistan' with Jinnah declaring that the Muslims were a nation.

It is against this background that Ahmed wrote and published *Twilight In Delhi*. Did he, like many of the intelligentsia feel that the Muslims had no future in India? That it was their twilight years and that the only way to preserve their culture was to wall themselves in or build walls not bridges between communities.

It becomes clear that the insularity of Mir Nihal is the fear of loss of identity through its submergence by another. The orphaned children of Bahadur Shah symbolize the isolation and vulnerability of the Indian Muslims. The building of a bigger, newer city by destroying an older thriving one is an attempt at erasing an identity built and cultivated over centuries.

If 'Time' is the hero in Gangopadhyay's novels, then it rings the death knell in Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*. Time wreaks havoc on the way of life of Mir Nihal and his family. For Ali the conflict between old and new results in the marginalization of the old order symbolized by Mir Nihal. New strategies have to be devised to cope with change. Engagement with history, not retreating from it will ensure survival and eventual success. Gangopadhyay's protagonists take up the challenges posed by westernization. They struggle to define themselves vis-a-vis colonialism and construct a

new identity for themselves in the process. In *Twilight in Delhi* we see the feudal elite trying to cling on to a dying world. It is both unable to and unwilling to accept the present. Living in the past it fails to define a future for itself. That future, in the twentieth century, would be a new era, one that would decisively push out the old and ring in the new.

It is interesting to study how both Sunil Gangopadhyay and Ahmed Ali depict Indian society at critical junctures in its history. All the incidents in the narrative are carefully located in time and they show tremendous skill and knowledge of human psychology in the delineation of their protagonists. They are aware of the social and cultural movements of the time in which they locate their stories and history and memory come together very effectively in their novels. While Ahmed Ali represents the British empire and the Raj as a corrosive power, Sunil Gangopadhyay's novels seem to emphasize its productive cultural influence. If *Twilight in Delhi* is a turning inwards, retreating from the west in order to preserve identity then in *Those Days* and *First Light* we see collaboration with the west and the formation of a new identity. If in *Twilight in Delhi* we see an eschewing of non-oriental cultural influences then in Gangopadhyay's novels there is a coming together of the orient with the empire. All three novels are involved in a complex transaction of both anglicist and oriental priorities.

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