

Twilight in Delhi

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October 13-19, 2008

Does a poet write a novel differently? There are many examples, such as Pasternak and Rilke. Is the novel of a poet more contemplative, more attuned to modes, better written on the level of style: maybe poor on plot and suspense, less enenergetic and engaging, more directed to the discerning reader, who is not interrsted in action but in evocation.

Ali was an udru poet who chose to write his first novel in English. Why? Did he have a specific message in mind, an overarching desire to reach out beyond the narrow confines of his own culture and language to reach a more global world responsible for much of its woes? Ali was born in the early 20th century and the novel is taking place as well in the years leading up to the First World War, thus, one suspects a recreation of the life and times of childhood. It was however written at a fairly early age of the author, and thus his evocation of childhood cannot have so much been one of nostalgia as one of convenience. It tells the story of one Muslim family, the father a successful businessman and landlord, actually do not need to engage in trade, the fixed income accrued through his holdings are enough to keep his family afloat; but he does his trade on the side to generate an income he can spend discretionarily, be it in the innocent habit of flying his pigeons, a favourite pasttime of his, or his keeping a young woman in a house, finding in her company a welcome relief from the boredom of family life, both through the liveliness of her conversation as in the pleasures of her young body.

But the main protagonist of the story is not really the father, at least not exclusively so. There is also the young sun - Ashgar, in his early twenties ready to get married. Muslim or Hindu, it certainly does not matter very much, the social structures of life are strikingly similar, reflecting an old tradition and economic standing more than religious strictures. You do not marry recklessly or frivolously, the sweetness of passion is but temporary, but marriage is for life. In the long run sexual attraction counts for less than social compatibility and good common sense. A woman who is a good cook will serve a man far more reliably in the long run, than one whose allures may be irresistable. Thus a woman of good family and standing should be found for the boy, her looks and attractiveness being secondary. But Ashgar, a spoiled and dreaming young lad, has discovered the sweetness of romantic dalliance, through a professional artisan, and has now fastened his desire on a young, beautiful sister of a companion of his. The father strongly disapproves of his relations with that companion, also the family is not pure, their roots are dubious, and certainly they should not be mixed with. But young Ashgar, with nothing to concentrate his mind on than idle phantasies is set in his mind, and as a truculent child he enlists the sympathies of a sister, threatening suicide would his wishes not be granted. A campaign is set in motion, his mother is finally turned around, and then eventually also his father, in spite of the threats the latter has expressed of disinheritance. Maybe the father softens, because he suffers a deep setback. His young and beautiful mistress is taken ill by typhoid and within a few days succumbs and dies. This cuts at the very core of his life, and he

decides to give up his business, because after all what is there to money when there is no meaningful outlet for it? He also gives up his beloved pigeon flying, of which he was so apt, and in this state of renunciation and resignation, coming around is no longer such a deal.

Maybe Ali has some didactic ambitions, certainly the lengthy description of the wedding seems almost designed to give to the outside reader a lesson in the procedures of a proper Indian wedding. But it works, the reader is fascinated, and is almost made into an active participant himself, being almost put in the shoes of the happy bridegroom himself. Yes, the bride is young and very beautiful, and his parents cannot help feeling pride in their recent acquisition. In India, the girl is uprooted at a very early age, to be moved from a loving family into one of strangers. The departure must be a traumatic one, and the rupture excruciating, especially if there will be discords.

Asghar is in bliss, but he is up for an unpleasant surprise. The young woman knows nothing of passion, she has been raised playing with dolls. He is fervent, but she is but an object of his imagination, in fact a creation of the same, a creation that could in principal be attached to any beautiful woman. The love of the flesh, as Plato reminds us, is one for which the object is eminently interchangeable. Pretty soon he starts to find his young bride a bit insipid, she does not reciprocate in kind, yet cast into the situation, she becomes increasingly dependant upon him. Now early fresh love is rewarded by the advent of a pregnancy and a child, partly reviving flagging emotions. Yet, the disappointment is too deep, and he ends up neglecting his young wife, who now after a year of marriage merely bores her. She is devastated, but what can be done? The kind of love he had bestowed on her, cannot be willed, it is but a fancy that may seize hold of you as a demon, but which cannot be, unlike the magi in the lamp, be summoned to duty. By this time Ashgar has moved into his own quarters, and his mother-in-law and young sister-in-law become a fixture of his household. What has she done? The young woman complains, to have raised the ire of her husband. But then she gets sick, and as she gets sick, he is filled with pity, an Ersatz emotion that, at least for some time, can do the duty of love and devotion. Predictably she succumbs, and overcome with self-pity he mourns her deeply as only the egoist can mourn. Meanwhile his father falls into serious decline, he suffers a stroke, not a debilitating one, but one serious enough to curtail his physical prowess and strength, to make him dependant upon others, especially the quick rawness of his young manservant. This is humiliating, but devastating as such brutal termination of youth is, you are willing to accept anything in life, as long as it promises to prolong the same. With the humiliation comes a humbleness and a quiet pride as a grandparent.

1911 is a key year, it was the year in which the gate of India was erected in New Delhi, the year when the British thought that their mastery over the land would be more or less permanent, and thus a time in which the defeat was rubbed in. What defeat? By choosing the time as the turn of the last century the author ensures that the older protagonists would have personal memories of the horror and humiliation of the brutal crushing of the so called Sepoy mutiny some fifty years earlier. This is a crucial element in the novel and in the motivation for both its writing and choice of a foreign language in its composition. This also made the publication of the book at the time controversial, and the author stubbornly resisted pleas to excise those parts from the book in order to

ensure publication in England¹. One may argue in retrospect as how integral this aspect really is of the novel in purely aesthetic and compositional terms, yet in the politics of the writing, it certainly was inseparable. The main effect on the novel is to further underscore its general mood of depression and bitterness. Of an old culture hoplessly being the victim of modernity and external progress.

Disasters strike the family. The eldest son catches a disease and soon dies. A son loved by all and hence the natural leader of its future. In the meantime the young man Asghar has attached his roaming desire onto the younger sister, an act of impiety bound to shock her relatives. Ashgar is still the unreformed spoiled young man, although he by now must be approaching thirty. He pleads for yet another marriage, but now his former in-laws put their foot down. They certainly will not give two of the daughters to him. In the first case they had done so willingly and proudly, but now he is of course not worthy of it. Instead she is betrothed otherwise, and at the funeral of his older brother he learns of her fate. And with that the book ends.

The underlying story is simple and possible to evoke rather effortlessly, the worth of the book clearly lies in its depiction of a way of life as well as a position in time and space. Does it succeed? It is, as noted initially the work of a poet, and hence expected to be conveyed through an economy of expression. Indeed the chapters are short, the font is large, and as a reader one flows along. Much emphasis is given on the depiction of the outside appearances of the characters, as well as the nature of the changes of weather and season. The starry sky plays an important aesthetic role, and the author is indeed able to evoke it with unusual vividness. But the sky in Delhi is not always clear and transparent, on the contrary it is a sky of threat and darkness, sometimes black, sometimes bronzed, seldom blue and inviting. The city is ransacked by sandstorms and winds, scorched by the relentless summer heat, and for a brief period in winter, chilling to the bone. The family consists not only of members of blood, but also of a whole hierarchy of servants, without which life would be impossible. The life of the bazaar seeps in a little, as well as those of winddriven characters, fakirs, holy fools, insane beggars, who intermittently are fed and taken care of. A contemporary visitor to India, struck by the seediness, the misery and the confusion of everyday life, naturally wonders whether the same was also true back a hundred years ago. To this the novel does not give many clues, a reader with no personal experience and physical confrontation of India would not be instructed. What does come through is not the mundane aspects of Indian existence, as much as its magic ones, so fitting in a work of poetry. Certainly the outside reader is exposed to an oriental tale reminiscent of what he might find in *Thousand and One Night*, or countless other fables and fairy-tales inspired by an Indian past.

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¹ The Hogarth Press run by Leonard and Virginia Woolf.