Hetroglossia, Language and Identity in Twilight in Delhi

Khurshid Alam
University of the Punjab, Lahore.

Abstract

For colonized subjects, the arrival of the colonizer is fraught with socio cultural anxieties. Under the yoke a new regime, the indigenous cultural values and norms are redefined. 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. In historical terms, it could be seen as dialectical struggle between the colonizer and the colonized. Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian Formalist critic defines it as a dialogue between the two cultural discourses. In this paper, I have borrowed the theoretical framework from Bakhtin to investigate how Mir Nihal, the protagonist in Twilight in Delhi deals with the introduction of colonial episteme in the public and private spaces of his life in particular and of Indian Muslims in general. It also traces the cultural marginalization at the hands of the colonizer. I call it cultural hetroglossia to pin down the changes that are taking place in the Indian civilizational landscape because of the introduction of English language and manners. Urdu, the cherished language of the Muslim civilization in India is under threat. Mir Nihal tries to protect it at least in the private sphere of life. Dejected in the public sphere, he withdraws to the private. But the cultural onslaught is all encompassing, leaving Mir Niahl marginalized and frustrated.

Key Words: Hetroglossia, Dialectics, Civilizational landscape, Cultural Episteme, Public and Private Space.

Main Body

Bakhtin uses the term hetroglossia to indicate the presence of multiple voices within a discourse. Social hetroglossia means the introduction of new cultural values into an existing cultural paradigm. The introduction of hetroglossia in the text is important as it allows, not only developing an understanding of multiplicity of perspectives expressed through different characters, but also authorial intention. In *The Dialogic Imagination* Bakhtin observes:

> Hetroglossia, once incorporated into the novel
> (whatever the forms of its incorporation) is
> another's speech in another's language,
> serving to express authorial intentions but in a

> refracted way…. the refracting discourse of a
> narrator, refracting discourse in the language
> of a character and finally the discourse of a
> whole incorporated genre—all these
> discourses are double voiced and internally
> dialogized. A potential dialogue is embedded
> in them, one as yet unfolded, a concentrated
> dialogue of two voices, two world views, two
> languages. (1981: 325)

Mir Nihal, the protagonist is scared of social, cultural and linguistic hetroglossia. He does not like the presence of the outsiders in the cultural landscape of the city. Through his aversion for the outsiders, we can deduce that Ahmed Ali has given vent to his anti-imperialist feelings. Ali's cherished culture, preserved through its architecture and poetry, is in danger of contamination. Since the novel is an attempt by the author to discover his identity, hence the textual strategy he adopts to build the mosaic of texts in the novel becomes strategically important to understand the politics of resistance and identity. Thus, by introducing the translated version of Urdu poems as an integral part of the text, Ahmed Ali has initiated a cultural dialogue between the colonizer and the colonized. In doing so, Ahmed Ali has strategically excluded the Hindu voice because he considers that in the cauldron of Urdu language, all other religious, racial and ethnic identities are subsumed under a single category of Indian identity. Tariq Rehman in *From Hindi to Urdu: A Social and Political History* argues that in India the question of identity politics is even more vexing for Muslims than it is in Pakistan. The major narrative of Indian Muslims is that Urdu is a symbol of composite culture of the Hindus and Muslims of North India. (2011: 96)

It is precisely this composite culture that Ahmed Ali, by introducing poems from Urdu and Persian tradition in the text, posits against the colonizer to establish his identity. Since he is writing in the language of colonizer, it becomes all the more important for him to appropriate it for the projection of main thematic concern of the novel. Tariq Rehman in *A History of Pakistani Literature in English* remarks:

> The function of poetry was mostly rhetorical
> in Urdu speaking culture and that is how it has
> been used by the characters. The couplets are,
> therefore, clichés which substitute a
> hackneyed formula for an intellectual response
> to a given experience. But, of course, the
> couplets prefacing chapters are intellectually
> relevant and emotionally evocative. (1991: 42)

Rehman clearly distinguishes between role of couplets recited by the characters in the practice of everyday life and those prefacing the chapters. Whenever the characters find themselves in a critical situation of their lives, they give vent to their feeling by reciting poems from the past masters of Urdu and Persian poetry. The couplets prefacing the chapters serve as a textual strategy to

create a dialogic possibility between two cultures and civilizations, represented by two different languages.

It is pertinent to discuss the historiography of Urdu as the language which during its evolution in the subcontinent came to be recognized as a marker of Muslim identity. Historiography is related to ideology-- especially those aspects of it which contribute to the politics of identity among the speakers of Urdu and Hindi in South Asia (Rehman, 2011: 79). Sohail Hashmi in *Celebrating Delhi* observes:

> The term Urdu has its origin in the Turkish word Ordu- army camp. The market where the soldier went to buy his daily needs came to be called "Urdu Bazaar." The open ground where the soldiers camped next to Jama Masjid was known as "Urdu maidan", and the Red Fort, the camp of the Supreme Commander, was the "Urdu-e- Mualla." (2010: 137)

It would be interesting to recall the scene of carnage that took place before the Jama Masjid at the behest of Thomas Metcalf. Thousands of Muslims were killed in front of Jama Masjid while defending the mosque. Since all of them were Muslims, hence Urdu speakers died in Urdu maidan (courtyard). It was the symbolic death of Urdu-e-Mulla. Mir Nihal imagines that the arrival of the new residents in newly constructed Delhi would tarnish the beauty of an imaginatively perceived pure language. Another question that arises here is that of creating an indissoluble link between Muslim identity and Urdu language. Sohail Hashmi (2010) argues that it was a colonial project of associating Urdu, written in the Persio-- Arabic script, with Muslims and Hindi, in Devnagri script, with Hindus. John Borthwick Gilchrist (1759-1841), the first President of Fort Williams College in Calcutta, designed language courses for the officers of the East India Company and set up the first translation bureau at the college. Hashmi further observes:

> The translation bureau did remarkable work in providing texts on diverse subjects to the people. The college initiated the policy of making two sets of translations, on in Urdu in the Persian script for 'Mohammedans' and the other in Hindi in Devnagri script for 'Hindoos'. This act of Gilchrist eventually created the idea of two separate cultures, for language and culture are joined by umbilical cord. (2010: 139)

The idea of Muslim identity, being joined by umbilical cord with Urdu, is analogous to Indian Muslim imagination. In Anita Desai's *In Custody,* the Head of Ram Lal Colege Mirpore's Urdu Department, Abid Siddiqiu wants to get rid of his property at Mirpore to enjoy a "chaste language", spoken in the walled city of Delhi. Desai captures his feelings:

> I have often wished someone would do me the favour of seizing and destroying my property

> here so I would be free to make the return
> journey to Delhi where at least within the
> walled city the Urdu spoken is chaste. (1999:
> 148)

On the contrary, Trivedi, the Head of Hindi Department, becomes skeptical of Devan's intentions because Devan is working for the cause of Urdu language. Trivedi considers Urdu and Muslim identity almost as synonymous with each other. When Devan requests for leave for one more week to conclude interview with Nur Shahjahanabadi, the famous Urdu poet, Trivedi bursts out:

> I'll get you transferred to your beloved Urdu
> Department. I won't have Muslim toadies in
> my department; you will ruin my boys with
> your Muslim ideas, your Urdu language.
> (Desai, 1999: 158)

Poetics and politics of language are being questioned here. For Trivedi, interviewing Nur, the poet is not a poetic affair but overtly political to the extent that Devan, the protagonist, is labeled as a traitor. Thus, *In Custody*, Urdu, as an Indian language, predominantly signifies Muslim identity in the subcontinent. Urdu is posited as, what Bakhtin calls, a unitary language meant to create a maximum of mutual understanding in all spheres of ideological life. He observes:

> We are taking language not as a system of
> abstract grammatical categories, but rather
> language conceived as ideologically saturated,
> language as a world view even as a concrete
> opinion, insuring a maximum of mutual
> understanding in all spheres of ideological life.
> Thus a unitary language gives expression to
> forces working towards concrete verbal and
> ideological unification and centralization,
> which develop in vital connection with the
> process of sociopolitical and cultural
> centralization. (1981: 271)

Rehman labels this process of sociopolitical and cultural centralization as "The Islamization of Urdu," He observes:

> The Islamization of Urdu is my term for the
> use of excessive Persian and Arabic words as
> well as the overall references to Indian and
> Islamic culture in the ancestor of modern Urdu
> and Hindi between the eighteenth and the
> nineteenth centuries. (2011: 98)

Thus, Urdu as a unitary language, spoken by large number of Muslim speakers, creates a sense of nationhood as well as a temporal religious identity site on which Persian, Arabic and indigenous cultural signifiers are subsumed under a monolithic Muslim identity. Ahmed Ali begins Part I of *Twilight in Delhi* by quoting extract from Hafiz, making the Persian tradition of poetry as part of dialogic dialectics in the text. Ahmed Ali quotes:

> The night is dark, the waves rise mountains high

> And such a storm is raging!
> What do the pedestrians know my plight moving
> Upon the shore that's safe and dry? (2011)

For Ahmed Ali, *Twilight in Delhi* is a means to discover and resurrect his cherished cultural past which has been lost in colonial times (Ali xxi). The discovery of this past would have a healing effect on the writer and also help us to understand the nature of our cultural interaction with other communities. For one interested in cultural and political psychology, the past is not only the objective history of a person or group but a record of marks left in the form of memories, experiences, scars and adaptive resources in personalities (Nandy, 2002: 1). So the journey begins with the Persian poet singing a ghazal, serving as a backdrop, a context against which the tragic downfall of Muslims in colonial India is to be analyzed in historical, literary and cultural terms. The images of dark night and a raging storm resonate throughout the text. In fact, the storm builds the centre of metaphorical tropes that are brought into the text to reflect on colonial subjectivities and the prevailing political conditions. Another reason for bringing in Hafiz as a preamble to the story is that as a renowned Persian poet, Hafiz stands out as a high priest of mysticism. The discourse of mysticism is an essential part of Muslim identity in the subcontinent. Thus, in tracing the genealogy of Muslim identity, Ahmed Ali takes Hafiz, the Persian poet, as the first milestone. The metaphor of night in Hafiz sets the tone of the novel as Ali mentions night in the opening line of the novel which covers the city like a blanket (Ali, 2011: 4). The night mentioned in the Persian text corresponds to the night of colonialism which covers the city, Delhi, like a blanket. By forging a link between these two similes, Ahmed Ali has found the mosaic pattern which forms the cultural and literary text of Muslim identity. After giving a detailed description of the streets and by- lanes of Delhi, Ali, in a flashback remembers almost nostalgically the past glory of the city and its present destruction at the hands of the colonizer. This prosaic description is interrupted by the introduction of the plight of Mir Taqi Mir, the famous Urdu Poet, who while travelling to Lucknow in a bullock-cart expressed his grief for Delhi:

> Why do you ask my native place
> O dwellers of the East
> Making mock of me for the poor plight I am in?
> Delhi, which was once the jewel of the world,
> Where dwelt only loved ones of fate,
> Which has now been ruined by the hand of Time,
> I am a resident of the storm tossed place (2011: 5)

It is interesting to note that the metaphor of storm which is mentioned in Hafiz is brought back to literary imagination through Mir. The storm symbolizes haze, confusion and destruction. And these three images are continuously embedded in the text. Though, primarily a poet of love, Mir had a deep emotional attachment with Delhi. In *The Golden Tradition: An Anthology of Urdu Poetry,* Ahmed Ali observes that at the age of sixty six Mir eventually left Delhi, which he loved

dearly. He went to Lucknow where Asaf-ud-daula, the nawab of Oudh, gave him a pension, and there it was that he died in 1808, still pining for Delhi (2011: 135).

Along with Mir, the other famous poets that make up what I have called the cultural text of Muslim identity include Asadullah Ghalib, Ibrahim Zouq and the deposed king Bhadar Shah Zafar. The Part II of the novel begins with an extract from Ghalib:

> My despair does not know
> The turnings of the Wheel of Time
> The day turned disastrous
> Knows neither dusk nor dawn (2011: 87)

The part II is set in the backdrop of terrible summer of 1911 when the bitter memories of the Mutiny of 1857, revisit Mir Nihal's imagination. It becomes extremely painful because the British are celebrating the coronation of the English King. Mir Nihal juxtaposition of this event with the past glory of Muslim kings create a dialogic space between two historical narratives. The present is reviewed in the light of the past through its myths and legends. Nandy calls this interpretation of past as life-defining (2002: 2). And much of this life defining depends upon Urdu poetry in the text. As the preparations for Asghar's marriage gear up, Mir Nihal's sense of loss is heightened. And his heart felt feelings over the theme of Indian slavery are reverberated through a beggar singing Bhadur Shah Zafar's Poem:

> I am the light of no one's eye
> The rest of no one's heart
> That which can be of use to none
> Just a handful of dust am I (2011: 133)

The last part begins with an extract from Zebun Nisa, the daughter of the last Mughal King. The poet ponders over her sense of loss and futility of human existence. In my view, the introduction of extracts from Persian and Urdu poetry has three main functions to perform in the text. Firstly, these extracts give us a poetic introduction to the tragedy of Indian people to be unfolded on the theatre of history. In this sense, these poets become choral figures as in Greek tragedy to inform the audience of the nature of conflict between human beings and higher powers or gods, and also to establish an organic link between the audience and the characters on the stage. The extracts that Ahmed Ali has selected as choral songs provide a poetic summary of the political tragedy written in the language of the colonizer. Secondly, these extracts also comment upon the personal lives of the characters and the predicament that these ordinary human beings find themselves in. For instance, Asghar recites love poems time and again to confront the feelings of helplessness when he is denied the opportunity to marry the girl he loves. These verses have a cathartic effect on Asghar and he finds a temporary relief for his love stricken heart. Thirdly, the poetic text serves as a cultural text of the colonized people and this text tries to create a dialogic space with the colonial text represented through English language. In other words, Persian and Urdu poetry

become the marker of Muslim identity and the English language that of the colonizer. Another common thematic concern of these poetic extract is that on the one hand they celebrate the past glory of Delhi, the metaphoric centripetal force of Muslim culture and identity, and on the other hand, they mourn over its destruction at the hands of the colonizer. It can also be interpreted as creating alternative narratives of history and culture or to produce knowledge about the past in way that can help in creating counter narratives to confront feelings of civilizational inferiority propagated by the colonizer, a way of looking at the future through the past. In *Time Wraps*, Ashis Nandy argues that many people or communities, even modern in their outlook on life, refuse to see their past as dead. Rather, they consider it a source of alternative knowledge romanticizing its outmoded system of healing and non formal modes of education (2002: 2). He further observes:

> Many who live with these alternatives are in constant dialogue with their pasts, not defensively, but as a way of accessing their own tacit knowledge. They believe that pathway to the future may be through aspects of our past that survive as our under-socialized or less-colonized selves. The best studies of the future are also often studies of our past. (2002: 2)

The Urdu language and Delhi in unison represent the past which has the power to negotiate with the present and build a vision for future. For Mir Nihal, it serves both the purposes, a private space of recluse and also a hope for political resurrection. In theoretical terms, the architectural metaphor of Delhi structures the subtext of the novel that deals with the theme of Muslim identity. And with the dismantling of Old Delhi, Mir Nihal feels that the last abode of glory, the private space is crumbling down. And Mir Nihal does not have the necessary political power to resist the process of historical change. He creates another private space to divert his attention from the architectural and cultural changes taking place. This time, he turns to mysticism and alchemy. He began to live more and more at home, in his own world, and in the atmosphere of alchemy and medicine, a world which was still his own where no one could disturb him or order him about (Ali, 2011: 197).

The escape is illusory. While saying prayers, he has a paralytic attack and falls unconscious. The novel ends with the figure of a physically paralyzed Mir Nihal helplessly staring at things taking place around him. I argue that physical disempowerment symbolizes political disempowerment and the Muslim subject has been turned to a silent spectator of socio political changes taking place around him.

The private space of family, language, culture and the city is the only site where Mir Nihal could posit resistance against the imperial oppression. The colonizer must be kept out of this sacred space. And the text chronicles Mir Nihal's struggle to preserve the imagined purity of this private domain.

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Biographical Note

Khurshid Alam is an Assistant Professor at English Department, University of the Punjab, Lahore.

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