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‘Respectability can be preserved like pickle in gold and silver’: Delineating the Pasmanda in Ahmed Ali’s *Twilight in Delhi*

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Abstract:

Given the professed egalitarian philosophy of their religion, Muslims are generally seen as a homogenous community, bereft of any divisions. However, recent scholarship, particularly sociological research suggests a pluralism among Muslims which is as rampant as in any other society. Furthermore, this stratification finds a comprehensible expression in literature. The main focus of this study is how such demarcations hold sway over a multifarious community like India’s Muslims, influencing their interactions, perceptions, ideology and identity. The present paper seeks to study the problem of social stratification among the Muslims of India through its fictional representations. The text taken under consideration is Ahmed Ali’s celebrated novel, *Twilight in Delhi* (1940). Since Muslims form an intrinsic part of Indian polity and have an equal share in the history and identity-formation of the subcontinent, a study of the intrinsic hierarchy in an otherwise apparent homogenous community is valuable.

Keywords:

Social Stratification, Muslims, Marriage, *Pasmanda*, *Arzal*, Marxism, *Twilight in Delhi*

Heterogeneity has always been the norm of human society, especially a culturally multifarious society like India. Apart from their natural distinctions, people are also differentiated in terms of various societal demarcations, one of which is social stratification in terms of lineage. Contrary to popular belief, this stratification proliferates not only among Hindus but also, to a substantial degree, among Indian Muslims. The formation of the Muslim identity has been a continuous process in India as a result of certain socio-political events in the country. This paper attempts to study the issue of social stratification among India’s Muslims. It further dwells on the literary representation of this stratification through Ahmad Ali’s novel, *Twilight in Delhi* (1940).

Social Stratification among Indian Muslims:

It is believed that the non-hierarchical, singular and unifying ideology of Islam got challenged when it spread over the world and reached a particularly plural and elaborately stratified culture like India. Although, initially the Arabs were divided into different tribes or ‘*Qabile*’ as they are known in Arabic, like *Quraysh*, *Banu Asad* or *Ajman*, there was no gradation or segmentation among them. However, people began stratifying the community on the basis of, initially, their lineal or social connections to the Prophet, caliphs and other prominent Muslim personalities. Later when Islam spread to distant lands, intricate group identities began to surface. In the past few years, the issue of social stratification among Muslims has also attracted considerable scholarship and debate in the academia, resulting in somewhat differing views by scholars and theorists, who, however, have a common consensus: the Muslim

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community is elaborately stratified. Status differentiation implicit among Muslims finds expression mainly in restrictions on marriage and to some extent, inter-dining.

On the basis of decadal censuses of India, Muslims can be divided into four groups. Group I consists of Ashrafs, who trace their lineage to foreign shores such as Arabia, Persia or Afghanistan. Saiyyids are considered most significant and highest among Ashrafs, followed by Sheikh, Mughal and Pathan. Group II comprises indigenous Hindu converts to Islam. This included people across Hindu castes, except untouchables and are known as Ajlaf. Group III was characterised on the basis of profession, for instance, Julaha (weaver), Darzi (tailor), Qassab (butcher), Nai (barber), Kabariya (garbage collector) and Dhobi (washerman), Mirasi (musician) and Tawaif (prostitute). Group IV consists of foreign settlers in India who were known by the regions they came from, for instance Biloch (born in Bilochistan) or Habshi (born in Africa).

This stratification, however, excludes another class of people, the Hindu Dalits or Untouchables, who converted to Islam in order to emancipate themselves from oppression due to caste practices in their former religion. They are known as 'Pasmanda' Muslims, a term which became popular after the formation of the Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz, an Indian Muslim organization dedicated to the emancipation of the Arzal community. It was founded by Ali Anwar in Patna, Bihar, Anwar himself being an OBC Muslim. It is a general belief that untouchability does not exist among Muslims, but the existence of such organisations as the Pasmanda Muslim Mahaz and other facts reveal something else. For instance, an episode on Untouchability of the popular television talk show on social issues, *Satyamev Jayate*, featured clips of a documentary. It depicts a poor Muslim family, one of whose members told that the Sheikhs and Syeds are from a higher status and thus do not even let them sit at their homes for they consider these people filthy and therefore untouchable. He also tells that the Mosque is the only place where there is no bias but no sooner they climb down the stairs of the Mosque, than Islam is kept aside and discrimination thrives and apart from offering Namaz, they cannot do anything else together (Khan 2012).

It is notable that although they converted being perhaps lured by the Islamic promise of equality and brotherhood, the Hindu Dalits could never really escape the heavy baggage of their humble birth and faced an equal, if not more, discrimination in their new-found community. The scholar, Ghaus Ansari terms this group as 'Arzal' which consists of 'unclean' groups such as Bhangi (manual scavengers) and Chamar (tanners) and are at the lowest rung of the social ladder.

It can be said that the flexibility attributed to Islam is confined only to the mosque and religious pilgrimages where all pray as equals. Firdous Azmat Siddiqui, in her book, *A Struggle for Identity: Muslim Women in the United Provinces*, notes how no Mehtar Muslim could ever think of sitting with a Saiyyid and also how there was a separate passage for a Mehtarani to enter a house in order to clean the washrooms. She was debarred from touching the taps or drinking water and would be poured water only from a distance. They used to outstretch the loose end of their saris in order to receive wages from the mistresses of the house, thus avoiding contact with their superiors. This gesture carries within itself undertones of inferiority, voluntary submissiveness and internalization of their consciousness of being at the lowest of the stratification hierarchy among the Arzals or the downtrodden (Siddiqui 7). Owing to urbanization

and developments in every field, this practice may have receded a bit but there is a long way to go and in villages, the conditions of the Arzals still remain the same.

Extensive sociological research in this area has not really been done, an observation also endorsed by the sociologist Imtiaz Ahmad who has been a prominent researcher in this field. Ahmad observes that Muslim groups, who are commonly designated by terms such as *biradari* or *zat*, are corporate and local entities. Even biradaris like Saiyyid, Sheikh and Ansaris, who reside in different parts of the country, restrict marrying within their particular territories and often, their names are affixed with their respective territories. This is how one hears of Sayyids of Satrikh, Sheikhs of Allahabad or Pathans of Malihabad.

It is also generally believed that hierarchies like *zat* or *biradari* are based not just on birth but on other factors such as occupation or economic standing, but it can be argued that these demarcations are based on birth alone. There is really no recourse through which, say, a Julaha (weaver) can be a Saiyyid except that of birth. Consequently, if someone from a lower status group becomes economically prosperous or marries into a higher or another *zat*, his *zat* does not change. It becomes another *biradari* or *zat* and is addressed by a different name, to which membership continues to depend on birth. Therefore, the belief that the *biradari* system among Muslims is less rigid, because Islam permits marriage between distinct classes of believers is just a common assumption and is not substantiated by solid empirical evidence.

Approaching Social Stratification through Marxism:

The social stratification among Muslims is a manifestation of dominant ideologies. Religion is an 'identity-marker', as is class. A common use of the term ideology equates it with any belief characteristic of a particular group or class. Ideology is something ruling classes "do to" subordinate groups, what Nicholas Abercrombie refers to as the "dominant ideology thesis". Dominant groups such as Ashraf exercise control over the Ajlafs and Arzals by means of superior birth more than economic power. The German philosopher and political theorist, Karl Marx opined that "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" (Marx "The Future Results"). The Italian Marxist philosopher, Antonio Gramsci held the belief that political control requires both coercion and consent. While the state is the principal agent of coercion, it is not primarily responsible for the creation of consent. The institutions of civil society, such as religion or the educational system, create the cultural forces that legitimise the status quo. Gramsci's analysis can be extended to the notion of social stratification where the social position of individuals gets internalised by them. The Mehtarani who used to outstretch the loose end of her sari to take wages from their employers as noted by Firdous Azmat Siddiqui is a classic manifestation of the internalization of their inferior status by the lower classes and the 'naturalization' of the status quo.

The ideology of the dominant group in a system of stratification can be further discerned against the discourse on Marxism. The significance of a theory cannot be grasped independently of the historical and social practice within which it is understood, hence, class struggle in Marxism is considered radically distinct from social stratification in India by most scholars. However, if one analyses the underlying reasons for both, one may be able to come to some reconciliation. Karl Marx was one of the first thinkers to draw sharp attention to the highly deleterious impact of social

stratification on Indian society and its causal link with the relations of production. In his famous essay, "The Future Results of British Rule in India", he characterized the Indian stratification system, which includes stratification among Muslims as "the most decisive impediment to India's progress and power" (Marx 2010). Marx clearly and causally connected the archaic social formation of stratification within India with the relations of production and devised that this was based on the hereditary division of labour, which was inseparably linked with the unchanging technological base and subsistence economy of the Indian village community. The struggle between the higher and lower strata of Muslims in India, that of between feudalism and peasantry as well as the Ashraf-Ajlaf divide can be envisaged as the divide between the bourgeois and the proletariat.

A religion becomes an ideology when a particular dominant group within that religion such as the Ashraf comprehend religious doctrines to suit their own agendas and refuse to accept any way of understanding the religion other than their own. It also becomes an ideology when man-made dogma is treated as infallible truth. A literary manifestation of this is the text, *Fatwa-i-Jahandari*, written by the fourteenth century Turkish scholar, Ziauddin Barani, who was a prominent courtier of Muhammad bin Tughlaq, Sultan of Delhi from 1325 to 1351. Through the *Fatwa-i-Jahandari*, Barani comes across as a vehement advocate of Ashraf supremacy who is ruthlessly against Ajlaf. Barani's translator, Mohammad Habib, writes, "Barani's God, as is quite clear from his work, has two aspects—first, he is the tribal deity of the Musalmans; secondly, as between the Musalmans themselves, He is the tribal deity of well-born Muslims" (Habib 134). Barani's contempt for the Ajlaf is apparent in his advice to the Sultan against their education, although the Qur'an stresses on the acquiring of knowledge by everyone alike. Thus, he advises the Sultan:

They (Ajlaf) are not to be taught reading and writing, for plenty of disorders arise owing to the skill of the low born in knowledge. The disorder into which all affairs of the religion and the state are thrown is due to the acts and words of the low born, who have become skilled. For, on account of their skill, they become governors (*wali*), revenue-collectors (*amils*), auditors (*mutassarif*), officers (*farman deh*) and rulers (*farman rawa*) (Habib 49).

Barani promotes such ideas in order to keep the Ajlaf under control so that they do not challenge Ashraf hegemony and for this, he frequently looks for religious endorsement: "to promote base, mean, low-born and worthless men to be the helpers and supporters of the government has not been permitted by any religion, creed, publicly accepted tradition or state-law" (Habib 95).

The Pasmanda in Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*:

The conflict between the Ashrafs and Ajlaf is not simply one between a dominating upper-class and a downtrodden lower one, but a constant dialectic of hegemony and resistance. This division can easily be discerned through Ahmed Ali's novel, *Twilight in Delhi*. Published in 1940 and set in Delhi, the narrative of *Twilight in Delhi* spans over the years 1911 to 1919. The Indian independence struggle under colonial rule forms the backdrop of this book and it chronicles the rapidly transforming socio-political milieu through the perspective of Mir Nihal, his family, and the citizens of old Delhi. Reiterating the title, the novel is about the twilight or regression of Muslim

culture and Mughal rule. *Twilight in Delhi* is perhaps one of those rare novels in terms of being “an irreplaceable record of the vanished life and culture of pre-war Delhi” (Dalrymple 52) as William Dalrymple notes in his travelogue, *City of Djinn*s (1993).

Ever since its publication, *Twilight in Delhi* has been read, analysed and discussed primarily or, if one can say, only in terms of a long-lost and much loved legacy and culture. However, there are other equally important aspects which the novel sheds light into but which have not been much explored. One of these is the representation of marginalized and long-oppressed classes- the Ajlafs and Arzals. Through the narrative, Ahmed Ali describes in detail the glory and grandeur of Delhi during the bygone days and its contemporary condition. He wishes to show the world how Delhi has always been a place of constant attraction, admiration and how its pre-dominating Muslim culture has always been its strength but now, after the annexation of the country by the British, Delhi has lost its charm. This lament, however, is for the much-privileged elite of the city—“Where are the Khiljis and the Saiyyeds?” (Ali 4), asks Ali in the beginning itself. He renders this loss through the poetry of Bahadur Shah Zafar, “the last of that noble line” (4).

Ali then introduces the central character of the novel, Mir Nihal, who is the epitome of the old order of life which is not ready to give way to the changing conditions of time. Ali plays with metaphors throughout the novel, incorporating them to express the human condition. Mir Nihal’s pride regarding his own feudal culture and traditions as well as the legacy of the Mughal rulers he reveres, can be seen through the “old date palm tree (which) raises its head up towards the sky.” (6) There are a lot of references to his ‘noble’ lineage, one of which is through his appearance:

He is tall and well-built, and is wearing a white muslin coat reaching down to the knees, and an embroidered round cap is put at a rakish angle on his bobbed head. His white and well-combed beard is parted in the middle, and gives his noble face a majestic look (7).

Another instance of his ‘royal’ indulgences is his love for poetry and pigeon-flying. He maintains two pigeon houses for breeding and flying pigeons of rare breeds and takes immense pride and pleasure in it. “He was an aristocrat in his habits”, writes Ali, “a typical feudal gentleman, as his hobbies testified. Besides pigeon-flying he was fond of collecting old china and he had devoted some time to alchemy and medicine” (28). Mir Nihal is the epitome of the Ashraf class, one who takes pride over his superior lineage while denigrating those inferior to him in birth.

At the very beginning of the novel, it is established that Mir Nihal despises the fact that his son, Asghar, keeps a company which he would never even consider acknowledging. He does not approve of Asghar going to Mir Shahbaz Beg’s home or his friendship with Bundoo for they are nowhere near his status and, more importantly, his birth. Owing to Mir Nihal’s obsession with lineage, Asghar knows for sure that his love for Bilqees, Mirza Shahbaz Beg’s daughter, will never be accepted by his family and this becomes extremely agonizing for Asghar. As a member of the feudal class Mir Nihal takes pride in his class position and refuses Asghar’s alliance with Mirza Shahbaz Beg’s family for two reasons. One, he and his wife are against the idea of matrimony borne out of love and second that of miscegenation. Mir Nihal will never approve of their union because someone in Bilqees’ line had married a prostitute or a maid-servant. Asghar thinks to himself,

The different race and caste (his people came of Arab stock and prided themselves on being Saiyyeds, direct descendants of the Prophet Mohammad) and this low blood in her veins were bound to stand in this way of his father giving his consent to the marriage (26).

Mil Nihal and his family are Ashrafs, or Muslims who trace their lineage to the Prophet and originated from Arabia while Bilqees' family is lower in the hierarchical order. Marriage is the key to any understanding of caste. Unlike Hindus, Muslims may not be so rigid at times when it comes to inter-dining, but marriage is something which always takes into serious consideration issues such as lineage and caste. One of its finest instances is the matrimonial advertisements which include, in their description, tags such as 'Syed', 'Sheikh', 'Ansari', 'Siddiqui' and so on. These tags are often mentioned way before educational qualification and professional standing which itself is an indication that social category matters much more than any other thing even among Muslims.

What is noteworthy is that while Mir Nihal would not allow his son to marry in a family where someone had married a prostitute, he finds absolutely nothing wrong with keeping mistresses. Babban Jan, a dancing girl, is his mistress who entertains him with songs, conversations, "her lithe figure and young body" (28) and every night, he comes home late. In fact, not only keeping a mistress, Asghar and his sister, Begum Waheed reveal, through their conversation, that Mir Nihal had an illegitimate son whose mother is Dilchain, the family servant. This can be an instance of the commodification of women, especially those belonging to the working class.

Oppression of women domestic slaves does not originate with individual people—it stems from institutional inequality that is organized from above, in the traditional family structure, the legal system and the capitalist system. Capitalism creates classes of the haves and have-nots, and the survival of the haves depends on the exploitation of the have-nots. The sexual abuse of lower class women by higher class men, mostly their employers, extending from sexual exploitation to liaisons remains an ever-growing phenomenon. It is not as if the lower class women, often the domestic help, lose their 'purity' and 'honour' by giving in to the sexual advances of their masters, willingly or unwillingly- in the eyes of the upper classes, they have no honour or purity to begin with. Declared to be 'sexually promiscuous' by upper classes, the onus is firmly on these women for inciting upper caste men (Chowdhry). Dilchain's condition is one of exploitation of labour, based on a fundamental asymmetry in a power relationship between workers and their employers.

Although no reference has been made to Dilchain's experience, owing, perhaps to Ali's biased point of view, she must have been through equal torture and pain of satisfying the whims of her feudal employer, facing hatred from those who knew and most of all, losing a child. Ali doesn't give words to her side of the story. Attia Hosain, however, expresses the plight of women such as Dilchain through Nandi, a maid-servant in *Sunlight on Broken Column*, who is the washer man's daughter:

We poor people get a bad name because we cannot stay locked up. But what of all those uncles and cousins who wander in and out of the zenanas? They're men, aren't they? ... Respectability can be preserved like pickle in gold and silver (Hosain 97).

Mir Nihal quietly gives consent to his son's marriage but it is only after he doesn't possess the energy to oppose it on account of Babban Jan's demise which renders him powerless, defeated and broken. It seems as if he has given up on life and it hardly matters what follows:

It mattered little whether Asghar married a low-born or a girl with blue blood in her veins...He had lived his life, good or bad, done all he could for the children and purity of his stock. Now it was their outlook whether they flourished or decayed...Besides, if Asghar got married without his consent it would be worse. Why heap disgraces unnecessarily on his old and hoary head? Why not die with grace? (86-87).

Izzat or 'Honour', as it is called, operates in two ways. One is family honour, on account of which Mir Nihal and his family look down upon the prospect of Bilqees being a part of their family and the other is individual honour which comes to the fore when Mir Nihal realises that his son would go ahead even without his approval. Only then he thinks that it is better to concede than to go through the sneers and derision of his community members. Here one can also understand how caste practices among differ slightly from the Hindus. Although inter-caste marriages are discouraged, they tend to be tolerated, particularly if they occur within the same broad class or economic status grouping: Bilqees belongs to an economically secure family.

Pasmanda Muslims pervade all through *Twilight in Delhi*. "Whores" are mentioned as well as *Bhishtis* or water-carriers who come to people such as Mir Nihal's home carrying the burden of water on their heads, their "hands looking frost-bitten." (31) Asghar, while listening to a qawwali, is suddenly reminded of Budho, Durgi Chamari's daughter who belongs to the lowest rung of society. Asghar considers her pretty and thinks that as she sits in her tiny room where light hardly found its way, "she did not look like a low-caste woman but a fairy" (123).

Another aspect which comes forth in Asghar's marriage to Bilqees is that of hypergamy, wherein a man belonging to a higher caste or status can marry a woman from lower strata but not otherwise. Zarina Bhatti, in her extensive research on caste practices among Muslims in the district of Kasauli in Uttar Pradesh validates this fact by noting,

Marriage alliances between Ashrafs and non-Ashrafs are still inconceivable and not a single instance of this is known to have occurred in living memory in Kasauli. In another predominantly Muslim village in the same district, a marriage did occur once between a non-Ashraf man and an Ashraf girl. But social disapproval was so persistent and intense that the couple was forced finally to migrate to Pakistan (Bhatti 301).

It is interesting to note that although *Twilight in Delhi* abounds with references to poetry, it is quoted, discussed and reminded of, only through prominent, upper class characters, particularly Mir Nihal, his friends and Asghar. People such as Mirza, the milk-seller, the Kababi, the barber, Kallan, the carpenter, Siddiq, the bania or Dilchain, all of whom belong to the working classes, the *Pasmanda*, never quote or even talk about poetry. It is only people like Mir Nihal who have, what Pierre Bourdieu terms, 'Cultural Capital'. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital refers to the collection of

symbolic elements such as skills, tastes, clothing, mannerisms and material belongings that one acquires through belonging to a particular social class. Bourdieu also points out that cultural capital is a major source of social inequality. Certain forms of cultural capital are valued over others, and can help or hinder one's social mobility just as much as income or wealth. Upper-class individuals, for example, have a taste for fine art because they have been exposed to and trained to appreciate it since a very early age, while working-class individuals have generally not had access to 'high art'. Art and poetry have always been the domain of the privileged and the educated; people like Mir Nihal.

Also, nomenclature varies according to social status. The working class and peasants do not generally have names resembling those of Ashrafs. For instance, there is a common practice of naming a person *Jumman* if he was born on a Friday. There is a washerman named Jumman in Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* as there is *Kallan* the carpenter in *Twilight in Delhi*. *Dilchain*, the name of Mir Nihal's maid, is also one by which an honourable, Ashraf woman would probably not be addressed.

What is more problematic for the Pasmanda Muslims is that they have not been recognized as 'scheduled category' by the Indian Constitution, unlike their Hindu counterparts. In eastern UP and Bihar, for instance, Muslim Halalkhors or manual scavengers work alongside Helas, Doms and Valmikis in sanitation crews and brass bands, and are subjected to the same forms of everyday contempt on account of their lowly birth, yet the latter three are identified by the state as Scheduled Castes while Halalkhors, because they profess Islam, are excluded from this category and its concomitant safeguards and benefits.

Although different from the Hindu untouchables, the Muslim Pasmanda are subjected to the same kind of exploitation and segregation. In *Muslim Caste in Uttar Pradesh: A Study of Culture Contact* (1960), for example, Ghaus Ansari observes that A Bhangi, either Muslim or non-Muslim, is not permitted to enter a mosque no matter how clean he may be at the time and that in almost all the households of Ashraf, Muslim Rajputs, and the clean occupational castes, Bhangis, either Muslim or non-Muslim, are generally served food in their own containers and are given water to drink in such a way that the jar does not touch even their hands (Ansari 60).

Discrimination on the basis of caste is not just confined to endogamy. It manifests itself in other ways as well. An Al-Jazeera documentary entitled *Dalit Muslims of India* (2015) shows, among other things, the lives of the Hila community in Tara village of Madhya Pradesh. They are manual scavengers. They faced discrimination on the hands of upper caste Hindus so they converted to Islam but without any respite. The Hilas have a burial ground quite separate from the other ethnic and religious groups and also different mosques. This reality debunks the belief that religious places such as mosques do not discriminate people on the basis of the category to which they belong in the strict social hierarchy.

Syed Ali, in his research on caste among Muslims of Hyderabad, also notes that on the one hand there are Qureshis who want to preserve their blood purity through strict endogamy, there are others in Hyderabad for whom the importance of lineage-based status identities such as caste have greatly declined. This has been possible with the expansion of economic opportunities, education and a modern outlook with time. However, social stratification is still a grim reality in small towns and villages if not so

much in cities. As far as education and employment are concerned, half of government jobs and education opportunities are reserved for certain castes and social groups among Hindus. This entails that Muslims from the backward classes don't have the slightest chance of finding a basic job. The Muslim community may shy away from accepting the existence of stratification but they cannot steer clear of its ramifications.

Thus, the *Pasmanda* Muslims have such a peripheral existence that their presence and identity has almost been concealed. The purpose of this paper was to bring forth their existence in society as well as literature. The social stratification can also be read along the lines of the Marxist polemics of the bourgeois and the proletariat wherein, the dominating Ashraf classes exercise hegemony and control over the lower, Ajlaf and Arzal classes, not only on the basis of economic superiority, but also on the basis of an advanced, modern culture, lifestyle and pride over lineage. Furthermore, there remains scope for a substantial amount of sociological research which can open new avenues into the socio-political and cultural lives of Indian Muslims.

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