

Kanwal Zahra \* Aisha Jadoon †

## A Reconsideration of Feminine Sensuality in *Twilight in Delhi*: Indian Women in Fiction

### Abstract

Modernist discourses centralize feminine sensuality as an indicator of a female's autonomy; generally, they denounce religious or traditional constraints related to its expression. In particular, liberal feminism rejects normative constraints on female sensuousness, which are argued to enforce gendered restrictions. Amid these popular considerations, there has been a remarkable increase in interest in postcolonial women's approach to sensuality. Being perceived as sensually submissive by their faith, the question which continually surfaces is: is the sensual ethics of postcolonial women shaped by their religion? Or are they shaped by the societal considerations and values of the society they are born into? This paper addresses this question by considering the varied choices of sensual behaviour adopted by female characters in the postcolonial text, *Twilight in Delhi*, written by Ahmad Ali. By approaching the decadent culture of Delhi in this novel from a feminist perspective, this paper analyses the feminine sensuality of the Indian women and considers their assumptions about what counts as an appropriate choice for them within the cultural context of Indian society. This paper concludes that the sensual inhibition of these women is conditioned by the cultural bias towards the female gender that connects shame and guilt with their sensual desires in a traditional Indian society.

**Key Words:** Feminism, Post-colonialism, Psychoanalysis, Marginalization, Discursive Representation

### Introduction

In western academia, native women have been discussed variously. These debates have focused on the marginalization of 'other' women as imprisoned and victimized. On the contrary, Indian women in indigenous discourses are presented as fully satisfied and who are not in need of Western emancipation. However, a monolithic view of the native woman as a homogeneous entity is merely a myth. As Zayzafoon (2005) has pointed out, the discursive representation of a native woman needs a contextualized analysis. The term itself has metaphoric significance and needs careful contextualization. This research paper explores the discursive representation of native women in the South Asian context. The novel *Twilight in Delhi* is written by progressive novelist Ahmad Ali. He has focused on representing the postcolonial society of Delhi as an insider. The female sensuality is depicted by the novelist with vivid details. In the following sections, this discursive representation of Indian woman's sensuality is explored from a postcolonial and feminist perspective.

The purpose of this study is to highlight the psychological and social inhibitions of Indian women in the south Asian context. The native woman of today's Indian and Pakistani society continues to face a similar situation in relation to sexual behavior and social training. This study would help the readers to understand the psychological and social predicaments of an Indian woman in the contemporary world. This paper explores the sensual desires of these women as depicted in *Twilight in Delhi*. The special reference is to the sexual behavior of the three young women in the novel; Mehro, Bilques and Zohra.

### Feminist Theorization of Gender

In *feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, bell hooks (2000) states the idea of feminism in very simple words; "Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (p. viii).

\* Assistant Professor, Centre for Languages and Translation Studies, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Punjab, Pakistan.

† Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities, COMSATS University, Islamabad, Pakistan.

Email: [aisha.jadoon@comsats.edu.pk](mailto:aisha.jadoon@comsats.edu.pk)

However, feminism is not that simple. It has grown a fairly complex set of ideas that have taken insights from various interdisciplinary perspectives such as postcolonialism and postmodernism. The complexity of feminist theory also owes to developments in literary and cultural theory. Ropers-Huilman (2002) foregrounds the three very basic assumptions upon which the theory of feminism is founded. First, women are a significant part of the human world as they significantly and valuably contribute to almost every aspect of life. Secondly, women are oppressed, and they have not been allowed by patriarchal structures to fully realize their latent potentials, receive their deserving rewards or fully participate in society. Thirdly, the research in the field of feminism should not be limited to generating critiques. It should focus on social change to minimize oppression and marginalization.

Feminist theories start with differentiating between sex and gender. Biological differences between male and female anatomy and physiology which determine the maleness and/or femaleness of an individual with which he or she is born, are called sex. Gender is the socially constructed identity that refers to an individual's psychological sense of his being male, female or transgender. The idea of gender is accompanied by two allied concepts; gender roles and gender expressions. Society and culture usually expect a particular set of behaviors from a woman and call it femininity, and a particular set of behaviors is expected from men and is referred to as masculinity. Such sets of expected behaviors are usually based on the idea of heteronormativity. The gender roles are socially or culturally determined; however, gender expressions are the ways one adopts to express one's own gender. It includes dress codes, physical appearance and other behaviors which refer to gender identity (Adams, M., Bell, L. A., & Griffin, P., 1997; Hackman, 2010).

### Levels of Oppression from Feminist Perspective

A feminist perspective focuses on three levels of oppression; individual, institutional, and societal/cultural. Individual oppression refers to the prejudiced attitudes and actions against women as a social group by individuals. Institutional oppression is an organized activity. Social institutions and organizations frame policies, constitute laws, set rules, adopt customs and develop norms that privilege one social group over the other. The feminist theory challenges all such norms, customs, rules, laws and policies which undermine women and suppress and marginalize them. Societal/cultural oppression is rooted in socio-cultural institutions such as language, art forms, music, rituals and norms that reinforce the suppression and marginalization. (Hardiman, Jackson & Griffin, 2010) In response to oppression and marginalization, feminist theory has passed through various stages, which are sometimes referred to as waves. Usually, three major waves are identified. The first wave appeared between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It focused on the sufferings of women and strived for equal rights. This wave usually focused on the plight of the western woman. The Second Wave (during the 1960s and 1990's), however, "drew in women of color and developing nations, seeking sisterhood and solidarity and claiming 'women's struggle as class struggle.'" (Rampton, 2008, p 8) This wave grew from the perspective of civil rights and the antiwar movements, and it focused on the solidarity of various marginalized groups.

The second wave radical feminists think that liberal feminists do not offer a perspective that is drastic enough to redress the ages-old oppression at the individual, institutional, and systemic level. There are two major branches of radical feminism: Libertarian radical feminism and Cultural radical feminism. The first type focuses on freedom of expression at a personal level as well as androgyny. The cultural perspective of radical feminism holds that the real problem is not femininity itself. The problem lies with a patriarchal attitude that assigns low values to feminine qualities. To remove and mitigate the oppression, society needs to unlearn the under privileging attitude towards femininity. Liberal feminism identifies three sites of oppression: State, Family and Patriarchy (Mandell & Johnson, 2017).

The third wave of feminism appeared in the 1990s and continues to exert its influence even today. This wave is strongly influenced by postcolonial and postmodern thinking. Against the backdrop of the three waves of feminism, the theory took various different shapes on the basis of the primary assumptions that informed a particular stage. The earliest feminist critique of the first waves cherished the values of liberal humanism, and therefore, it was named liberal feminism. This perspective argued that "society has a false belief that women are by nature less intellectually and physically capable than

men" (Tong, 2009, p. 2). Therefore this point of view argued for equal opportunities and sought to level the playing field. Liberal feminists criticize the patriarchal structure of society that does not differentiate between gender and sex and specify certain jobs for women while under privileging them in other jobs. So equality in jobs and pay is the main motto of first wave liberal feminism.

Parallel to radical feminism are Marxist and socialist approaches to feminism. These approaches equate oppression with economic inequality and social injustice in the capitalistic social structures. The liberation of women is not possible according to this approach without destroying capitalist society (Mandell & Johnson, 2017). The postmodernist and postcolonial perspective on feminism which is related to third-wave feminism, focuses on deconstructing the metanarratives of feminism. The politics of sexuality is an important aspect of postmodern debates. The postcolonial marginalization of the colonized as 'other' is incorporated in this debate. The postmodern, postcolonial concept of female sexuality as a marginalized other opens the vistas of contemporary research (Mandell & Johnson, 2017). The question of female sexuality has been viewed from varied angles ranging from the liberal humanist question of equality to the queer theory (Freedman & Throne, 1984). The debates on feminist sexuality focus on the one hand on the question of intimacy, desire, pleasure and, on the other hand, on the question of normalcy and abnormality from hetero-normative to the queer concepts of gay and lesbian relation. (Stansell & Thompson 1984; Jónasdóttir, Bryson & Jones 2011; Mandell & Johnson, 2017). In this paper, female sensuality is analyzed in terms of desire, intimacy, societal conditioning of sexual desire.

### Postcolonial Feminist Consideration of Feminine Desires

Comparable to Western societies, alike in Postcolonial society of feminine desires related to sensuality is a highly politicized issue that is majorly under men's control. In a postcolonial context, feminine sensuality is a frequently studied phenomenon. It has been seen from many contexts, which include transnational context, queer theory, race, class and gender. The queer theory and marginalization theories study the sensuality of women of color apart from the Eurocentric viewpoint. In the postcolonial context, the feminine sensuality is a field interest for many feminist and postcolonial theorists. (Jackson 2010) From the perspective of postcolonial theory, a native woman is an invention of orientalist writings. In western discourses, a particular image is constructed, which needs a revision from the insider perspective of postcolonial counter-narratives.

Zahra (2013) has studied Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* and Hyder's *River of Fire* as a counter-narrative of the western discourses. She has focused on the representation of Muslim women in the backdrop of writing back to the empire. Western psychoanalytical feminism also depicts Muslim women as monolithic figures (Zayzafoon 2005). The feminist themes in *Twilight in Delhi* are examined from both perspectives in this study. The psychological issues, as well as the postcolonial dimensions, are both taken into account.

### Being a Female: Portrayal of Feminine Desires in *Twilight in Delhi*

*Twilight in Delhi* presents the feminine desires of a colonized woman against the backdrop of colonial and social marginalization. Mehro, Bilqueese, and Zohra are the three main characters in this analysis whose intimate desires are seen from a postcolonial and postmodern perspective. Of the three women characters, Mehro is the sister of Asghar and the daughter of the protagonist Mir Nihal. Mir Nihal is the traditional patriarchal elite of Delhi. His household represents a typical family of the subcontinent. Mehro is engaged to a distant relative, Meraj. Mehro's attitude toward sex is exemplified by her disagreements with Masroor. Masroor teases her "by mentioning her fiancée's name" (*Twilight*: 40). Mehro is irritated by the mere mention of Meraj's name, which causes "her to lose her cool" (*Ibid*). She is only pertinaciously angry, according to the story. Mehro "liked it in her heart of hearts" (*Ibid*). Meraj's name has sexual connotations for Mehro because he is a proposed husband, and sex is a taboo subject for Indian women, so when Masroor mentions Meraj's name, it brings: "...her hidden wish came to the surface with a root sadness that not only disturbed her emotional balance but also exposed her inhibitions that grow like cobwebs and mushrooms in the repressed lives of Indian women." (*Ibid*) The taboo nature of sexual life is established by expressions such as 'root sadness', 'emotional balance', 'inhibitions', 'repressed lives', 'cobwebs', and 'mushrooms'. A young

unmarried female is not allowed to think sensually, and any hint of sexual desire is enough to make her feel uncomfortable. As a result, a native woman is psychologically bound "to conceal her sex consciousness" (Ibid). When Meraj's name is mentioned, Mehro becomes enraged. It lands "with a splash on her ears like a stone in the middle of a stagnant water or pond," and it "disturbs the placidity of ponds static life..." (Twilight: 41). This description of Mehro's response demonstrates that a colonized woman's sexual life is stifled, and she is not expected to accept even the presence of desire within her mind.

Similar to Mahroo, Bilqueecee married life also reflects the sexual inhibition of colonized women. Bilqueecee's sexual behavior is depicted as being extremely cold. She is "extremely shy" (Twilight: 186). When "Asghar would put his hand around her waist, "she is embarrassed and annoyed" (Ibid). Asghar is disturbed by her cold behavior because he expected a warm love response from her, but Bilqueecee is shy because "she was a simple Indian girl" (Ibid). Asghar loses interest in her as a result of her cold response, and he recalls Mushtari Bai and other courtesans he has met. "He remembered how warm their passions were and how loving they were. Bilqueecee, on the other hand, appeared dull and insipid" (Twilight: 187). Bilqueecee's shyness isn't a characteristic that distinguishes her. "She attributed her coldness to shyness and the atmosphere of restraint that prevails in Indian homes," Asghar said (Ibid). Bilqueecee's shyness is due to the fact that she was "brought up by an aunt...an old and religious person" (Twilight: 188). But her behavior is not in stark contrast to that other of Indian women:

In the world of an Indian home, where the woman is relegated to a subordinate place, love enters very rarely. An unmarried girl is not allowed to chew paan or wear flowers in her earrings or her hair...to wear fine and expensive clothes or to use attar...By education and hearsay, she is made to believe that passion is the worst kind of sin. (*Twilight*: 188)

The association of sin with passion causes Indian women's sexual behavior to be frigid and cold, even in conjugal relationships. The love affair between Zohra and Asghar in part IV's chapter V heightens the sense of sin and shyness associated with sexual desire in an Indian young girl. In her sexual behavior, Zohra, Bilqueecee's younger sister, is portrayed very differently from Mehro and Bilqueecee, with the association of sin and guilt resulting in shame being a big part of her personality. The association of sin with passion causes a lack of ferocity and coldness in sexual behavior. Asghar lives in the same neighborhood as his mother-in-law, and after Bilqueecee's death, he looks after his daughter, Jehan Ara. Zohra frequently visits and offers assistance. She is a "beautiful sixteen-year-old girl... aware of her sexuality..." (Twilight, no. 254). She expresses her feelings of kindness for Asghar one evening while in a state of pity and sorrow. She is moved by passion and puts "her soft fingers in his hair... playing with it..." when Asghar expresses his grief "in a voice full of self-pity" (Twilight: 255). Asghar notices "a look of inebriety and tenderness in her eyes as comes with great longing" when he looks at Zohra (Ibid). Unlike Mehro and Bilqueecee, Zohra cannot hide her feelings and desires, as evidenced by her choice of vocabulary. She can't help but hide her emotions because she's young and has had contact with the opposite sex. "A wave of love seems to be rushing through her veins" (Ibid). Suspense elicits strong emotions in Asghar. "A thrill ran through his body as he put his arm around her and touched her ..." (Ibid). This embrace arouses feelings of love in Zohra as well, but her reaction is typical of an Indian girl: "Zohra's heart also leapt, but she was smitten with shame and guilt." She snatched herself from his embrace and bolted, clutching her secret to her "..., terrified that it had been revealed" (Ibid). The expressions of shame, guilt, and fear, as well as the hugging of her secret to her heart, show the typical response of an Indian girl.

Following this incident, Zohra ceases to visit Asghar, despite her desire to see him, "but an overwhelming shyness kept her away" (Twilight: 256). She's perplexed and finds it difficult to "face him" (Ibid). After a few days of Jehan Ara protesting her aunt's absence by crying bitterly, Zohra arrives. "Asghar stood near her, filled with a great desire to hold her in his arms," says the situation in their second meeting, when their love for each other is revealed. Zohra, on the other hand, was shy" (Twilight: 257). She is now acutely aware of her appearance. "It was an unguarded moment that she had betrayed her sub-conscious love for Asghar..." in a previous meeting. (Ibid), but in this meeting, "she felt guilty as if she had committed some great sin" because of the awareness of relation (Ibid). In Indian culture, guilt and sin are always associated with such a relationship, and it has become ingrained in the female psyche. Sexual inhibition is portrayed in Zohra's mind as a struggle against the

power of desire. Her feelings of guilt and sin are powerless to stop her from enjoying herself. "Yet she was happy and full of an unknown joy that filled her mind, body, and soul, a joy so great that she was jealous of it and wanted to keep it hidden in her bosom lest it is taken from her" (Ibid). This feeling is unique to Zohra, and no other woman in the novel has been confronted with it, but there is still a desire to hide the feelings. When Asghar asks her about the previous episode, she gives a typical Indian girl's response. "'Please let me go,' she said shyly" (Ibid). When Asghar openly declares his love for her, Zohra responds, "'I didn't mean anything,' Zohra said, looking at her feet" (Ibid). When Asghar embraces Zohra again, her attempt to elude him fails. "She fought for a while before relaxing in his embrace..." (Twilight, no. 258) The feelings of shyness and guilt are eventually overcome by feelings of love and strong desire: "since that day, love has claimed their hearts and swayed them with its enchanting melodies" (Ibid). It's worth noting that Ali's description of this love affair takes a symbolic tone, and there's a hint of deception in the symbolic indirectness of expression. By comparing the three female characters, a composite image of colonized women's sexual behavior emerges. If there is a strong sense of taboo, love will not be properly consummated, and a sense of guilt and sin will always accompany the satisfaction of desire. If the taboo is not very strong, the sense of guilt that is always present gradually fades, and shyness remains a part of Indian women's sexual behavior, but the pleasure associated with sexual desire is realized, and sexual desire is consummated.

From the reading of the text, it is obvious that Ahmad Ali consciously problematizes the issue of female bodily desires. The three women behave differently in their response to male intimacy. Mehro's response is that of shyness. Though she does not directly confront the sexual desire, however, her emotional frame shows that she is fully conscious of the taboo nature of sexual reference. Merely the mention of the name of the proposed husband disturbs her. This disturbance of a young woman shows the social constraints that brought up has inculcated in her. Its psychological repercussions are very predictable in advance. Bilquees's attitude towards her husband Asghar is also very marked. It shows that her religious brought up has inhibited her towards the proper consummation of sexual desire in her married life. Her shyness is coupled with a sense of guilt and shame. It shows that the training in early life is so structured that the sexual desire is almost rendered cold. It is typical behavior of Indian women in the subcontinent. They lack intimacy in their sexual behavior. It results in many social and psychological problems in both sexes. Asghar's recalling of the behavior of courtesans and his disappointment with married life shows how societal behaviours towards female choices negatively influence the conjugal life.

Female sensuality and the emotional complexes it involves are fully revealed in Asghar and Zohra love affair. This love affair develops in domestic settings. Zohra is a teenager who is fully aware of her beauty. In a moment of contact with the opposite sex, she cannot conceal her desire. This moment of 'weakness,' as she herself deems it, accompanies shame and guilt. However, gradually the sense of guilt and shame is overcome by the strong desire. The feeling of love overpowers her. Though at an early stage, she is not ready to admit this love, ultimately, she acknowledges it. Zohra's attitude shows that the expression of female sensuality for a woman in the South Asian context is a complex phenomenon, and it needs psychological training to remove the sense of shame, sin and guilt from the unconscious of Indian women.

The postmodern feminist theories recognize family, patriarchy and state as sites of oppression. In the given case of *Twilight in Delhi*, the role of family and patriarchy is obvious. However, the imperial marginalization of native Indian women also contributes to marginalization. The Indian family structure itself seems to contribute to the oppression and marginalization of female desire. As Ali clearly points out, the abnormal behavior of Bilquees is because of her early life training by a distant relative whose religiosity negatively affected her. The Asghar- Zohra love affair remains unconsummated because the patriarchic structures of society discourage their love affair.

## Conclusion

The truths and identities of native women related to their feminine desires lead us to conclude that the psychological constraints on their behavior necessitate consideration of socio-cultural effects on their behavioral choices. Western feminist discourses present the women in colonized context as marginalized and suppressed. However, such discourses fail to acknowledge the complexity of their

reality. It is not mere oppression and suppression that create problematic sexual behaviour. The patriarchic structures of the society have created psychological barriers in the mind of the Indian female, and she cannot consummate her desire even in a conjugal setting. Thereby, the insider view of Ali in *Twilight in Delhi* calls for a revision of the female choices in the social and psychological setting as a corrective to the odd behaviors and responses associated with postcolonial women. The solution to the problem lies in a psychological and social reform that may remove the mental barriers and liberate female desires from taboo consciousness.

## References

- Abu-Lughod, L. (2002). Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others. *American anthropologist*, 104(3), 783-790.
- Ahmed, S. (2014). *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 2004. Edinburgh University Press.
- Alcoff, L. (1988). Cultural feminism versus post-structuralism: The identity crisis in feminist theory. *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society*, 13(3), 405-436.
- Ali, A. (1994). *Twilight in Delhi: a novel* (782). New Directions Publishing.
- Asad, T. (2003). *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford University Press.
- Butler, J. (1997). *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Friedan, B. (1963). *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton.
- Friedman, M. (2003). *Autonomy, gender, politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Gilligan, C. (1993). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Harvard University Press.
- Hemmings, C. (2005) 'Telling feminist's stories' *Feminist Theory*, 6(2), 115–139.
- Hyam, R. (1990). *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Jackson, E. (2010). *Feminism and Contemporary Indian Women's Writing*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kruk, H. (1996). *The grounding of modern feminism*. Yale University Press.
- Levine, P. (2006). "Sexuality and Empire". In *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, edited by Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, 122-142. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mandell, N., & Johnson, J. L. (2017). *Feminist issues: race, class, and sexuality*. Ontario: Pearson Canada.
- Marzi, E. (2013). Ali Zahra, Féminismes islamiques. Paris, La fabrique, 2012. *Genre, sexualité & société*.
- Miller, B. (1998). Seneca Falls First Woman's Rights Convention of 1848: The Sacred Rites of the Nation. *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, 8(3), 39-52.
- Mohanty, C. T. (1984). Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Boundary 2*, 333-358.
- Mohanty, C. T., & Bidy, M. (2003). "What's Home Got to Do with It." In *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. 85–105. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- O'Brien, M. (2019). *Reproducing the world: Essays in feminist theory*. Routledge.
- Riley, D. (1988). 'Am I that name?' *Feminism and the category of 'women' in history*. Springer.
- Sassoubre, C. B. (2008). Mahmood Saba, Politics of Piety. The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject, Princeton University Press, 2005, 233 p. *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, (124), 316-319.
- Spelman, E. V. (1988). *Inessential woman: Problems of exclusion in feminist thought*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Spivak, G. C. (1988). Can the Subaltern Speak? in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. C. Nelson & L. Grossberg. *Urbana: University of Illinois Press*, 271-313.
- Thompson, S., Stansell, C., & Snitow, A. B. (Eds.). (1983). *Powers of desire: The politics of sexuality*. Monthly Review Press.
- Walby, S. (2011). *The future of feminism*. Cambridge. Polity.
- Zahra, K. (2013). *Image of Colonized Muslim in Postcolonial Novel: A Comparative Analysis of E. M. Forster's A Passage to India, Ahmad Ali's Twilight in Delhi, and Quratulain Hyder's River of Fire*. Doctoral Thesis NUML
- Zerilli, L. M. (2020). *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*. University of Chicago Press.