

# Interventions



**CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION**  
*Combined Volumes (3: 2 & 4:1)*  
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## ***Cultural Violence and Translation of City Space: The Case of Delhi***

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### **Abstract**

They say it is the fate of this city to get destroyed. Yet, history has been its witness; every time Delhi has fallen it has risen from its ashes like a phoenix. In the process, something of the past remains and newer meanings get deployed. Lutyens' Delhi was everything that Muslim Shahjahanabad was not; post-partition Delhi was negation of the city's Islamic past. If translation can be understood as a cultural transaction between people then Delhi can surely stand as a specimen to the violence that underlies the whole procedure. This paper attempts to look at the various selves of Delhi in order to see how translation is an act of cultural violence, with a special focus on the transition of Shahjahanabad to New Delhi and New Delhi's experience of partition times. For this purpose, Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* will be studied in translation spaces.

***Keywords: translation, violence, past***

I structure my argument in this paper, suggesting that Delhi is an example of translated space, in three different parts- first through a discussion of the city's architecture and landscape, then illustrating the case of its residents as translated subjects, and finally locating it in a specific context- focusing on the transition from Shahjahanabad to New Delhi and New Delhi's experience of partition times. Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* is taken up for detailed study to illustrate my hypothesis.

**1**

One can say that there are nine or even twenty-one cities of Delhi, depending upon how you look at it, but as per the official records there exist only seven distinct cities that can claim a share in its historical past. These are: Lal Kot of Raja Anangpal/ Qila Rai Pithora of Prithviraj

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Chauhan; Mehrauli, which was the seat of Qutubuddin Aibak; the first entirely new capital, Siri, built by Alauddin Khilji; Tughlakabad of Ghiasuddin Tughlak; Firozabad by Firoze Shah Tughlak; on the ruins of Humayun's Din Panah Sher Shah Suri built Shergarh; and Shahjahan's Shahjahanabad. The city has a history of 1500 years and several dynasties ruled it over the course of time: the Hindu Tomara and Chauhan, the Delhi Sultanate (Mamluk, Khilji, Tughlaq, Saiyyad and Lodhi), the Mughals (from Humayun to Bahadur Shah Zafar), and for a while Suri and Marathas too. However, as Rana Dasgupta puts it, there is little or no connection between the various cities of Delhi as successive rulers chose to build their own cities, demolishing, crushing or neglecting the ones that existed before (150). In fact, it has been destroyed as many times as it has been built and it is therefore important to differentiate its builders from the destroyers. Muhammad Ghori remains the earliest of the invaders, followed by Taimur-i-lang, Nadir Shah and of course the British who demolished it in 1857 (who were also the last of the builders). It is not surprising then, as Dasgupta says, that much of the creative energy of this city was spent on bemoaning the lost past, the "sweet pain of passing", which has been written both in Urdu and Persian (153). The contemporary Delhi, thus, is a fascinating collection of the various selves of its several pasts. It is "the city of ruins" (Dasgupta,154) or "graveyard of dynasties" (William Dalrymple, 8). To walk through each of these cities then, is to make a journey to different stages of its history.

However, I would like to suggest that despite the difference, in spite of the attempts to build a new city or rebuild an existing one, one can say that these are different parts of the same self or various interpretations of the same text. To validate my point, I take recourse to Delhi's architecture. Qutubuddin destroyed sixty-seven Hindu and Jain temples to build India's first mosque, Qu'watt-ul-Islam (Dalrymple, 321). But the past continued to exist in the present as columns and stones from the temple premises built the walls of this mosque, which marks entry of Islam in the Indian subcontinent. This trend of using the remains of the past city to build a new one continued even at later stages of history. In the preface to her book *The Forgotten Cities of Delhi* Rana Safvi writes that it is difficult to identify the tombs of Lodhi

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period, not only because the tombs were unnamed but also because locals stole stones and remains from old structures for reuse. She adds, that the “chaukhat (door frames) were favourite for such pilferage because (they were) built using strong stones and beautifully built”. The historian gives one more interesting example to elucidate the construction process in the city: “when Sher Shah was building his city Shergarh much of the material for building was taken from Siri. Recycling was always in fashion!” (Preface). Safdarjung’s tomb follows the same trend when its builders compensated for the lack of marble by a supply of pink sandstones from other tombs (Dalrymple, 158).

Let’s move to another stage of the city’s history and see how the palaces and monuments, which have withstood the ravages of time, house within them multiple histories as they were repurposed and repopulated with newer regimes. In his *City of Djinnns* Dalrymple refers to the ruins of Dara Shikoh’s library which became the Residency of Ochterlony, who added a “classical façade to the Mughal substructure” without doing away with the original (111). William Fraser’s fort became Hindu Rao’s house after his death and headquarters of British during the revolt of 1857, before finally its central portion became Hindu Rao Hospital for contemporary Delhi (ibid.,144). The Red Fort, which was once the palace of the king, became the barracks of the British while Chandni Chowk, built by Jahanara Begum, is now simply a storehouse for shops, and the havelis of Shahjahanabad got divided to become the houses of Hindu-Sikh partition refugees.

It seems, as if every successive regime has been trying to inscribe their own meaning on the landscape, whether they have moved away or stayed back in the city of a bygone era. The Delhi Mutiny Memorial after independence has been renamed as Ajitghar, with a plaque next to it that mentions that the “enemy” were actually the martyrs of Indian soil (ibid., 149). The statue of George V at the Coronation park stands “forgotten and unloved” (ibid., 72) while the streets of New Delhi have been renamed- Kingsway is now Rajpath and Queensway is called Janpath. The city itself, whether you call it Delhi or Dilli, is caught up in its own language games. Sadia Dehlvi laments “how do you expect Delhi to care about its own

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history when no one can read the languages it is written in? Its entire history is written in Urdu and Persian. The government deliberately killed Urdu after 1947 because they treated it as a Muslim language. But Urdu has nothing to do with religion.” (*Capital*, 160).

To conclude this section, I would like to quote Dalrymple: no matter how hard the urban planners try to create “new colonies of gleaming concrete, crumbling tomb towers, old mosques or ancient Islamic college-*medresses*-would intrude” (8). The past will forever make its presence felt. The city, thus, has almost a gothic feel to it as the past cities remain a spectral presence in its contemporary times. The narrator of *Delhi: A Novel* sighs “Delhi has more ghosts than any other city in the world” (164). These are, what I would call, the translations of the original which remain present yet absent in a new context.

## 2

One of the first lessons that a translator learns is that translation is a process where, inevitably, something is lost, newer meanings are created, and the original gets transformed to an extent that the translation can stand separate and claim a life of its own. The act of finding equivalences, thus, often includes coercion, manipulation, substitutions, additions and deletions. And because translation is not simply an interaction between languages but between cultures too, one can see that the entire exercise involves a degree of violence to the source language’s culture. If one applies this concept of interaction between cultures directly to the people involved in the process of negotiation, in areas of cultural confrontation, then one can see how they come out as translated subjects, who belong to neither of the ‘original’ cultures but to a new mix or ‘hybrid’ space (a term that Bhabha uses too, in the context of migrants) that has its own unique characteristics. This may involve varying degree of resistance or acceptance on part of the subjects, but nevertheless they do get transformed in the process. Delhi which has, perhaps, one of the most violent and gloomiest of histories in the world, serves an example.

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For the purpose of this study however, I'll limit myself to two specific junctures in the history of this city, which also mark the obvious transitions in its cultures: first, the coming of Islam and secondly, the early phase of British residency (as I deal with the later phase in the last section of the paper). It would be manipulation of history or a particular interpretation of the text (hence a particular translation) if one says that Hinduism and Islam had non-violent, non-coercive existence in the subcontinent. In fact, one needs to accept that the entry of Islamic culture was particularly a violent one; Qu'watt-ul-Islam mosque being emblematic of that. The early Muslim rulers were Ilbari Turks who were wary of and sceptical about recruiting even Afghani Muslims and Indian born Muslims in their army (Mehru Jaffer, prologue). However, this was to change with time as hiring ethnically 'pure' Ilbari Turks became difficult because of Mongolian attacks, and the Khiljis came to power, marking the entry of 'desi' Turks in the governance (ibid). As the process of integration started and the two cultures merged into each other a distinct, Indo-Islamic, culture came into existence, a sample of which can again be sighted in its buildings and monuments. Rana Safvi writes that the Islamic geometrical patterns were woven into local traditions of lotus bud motif and the kalasa, a perfect example of which is Alai Darwaza. In the field of literature, Nizamuddin Auliya's disciple, Amir Khusrow developed a new art form- qawwali, which was the fusion of Indian, Arabic and Persian styles of music. Under the guidance of the Sufi *Dervish* himself developed a new syncretic culture which spoke of universal love and brotherhood. Not only did Nizamuddin Auliya, make no distinction between Hindus and Muslims but also developed a new understanding of God - God as is manifest in His creatures, as is expressed in music. Thus, "as orthodox Islam spread, through Persia, into the Himalayas and out through the Hindu Kush to Sind and India, Sufism spread alongside it, reacting with local mystical beliefs so as to take in elements of Hinduism, Tantrism and the wild shaman-cults of the eastern Himalayas." (Dalrymple, 282).

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I would now, draw your attention to a character from Khushwant Singh's *Delhi: A Novel* to illustrate what it meant to be a disciple of the Sufi saint, in times of violent cultural confrontation. Musaddi Lal's ancestors learned Turki, Arabic and Persian as Qutubuddin Aibak came to power while he himself converted to Islam for better prospects: "I could even aspire to become *Kotwal* of Mehrauli" (51). As Abdul/Abdullah, Musaddi Lal is a translated subject who still bears resemblance to his original self – he is a trained scribe who has also been taught Sanskrit and Hindi by a *pandit*. (51) and has no hesitation in calling Ishwar who is also Allah, Ram who is also Rahim. As someone who belongs to an in-between space he says "I realized I neither belonged to the Hindus nor to the Mussalmans." (55). He continued to visit, along with his Hindu wife, Hindu temples and Sufi hospices, and chose to dress up like a Turk with skull cap and turban, sporting a trimmed moustache. He did not get his son circumcised and asked a Brahmin to recite mantras when his head was shaved. In fact, he named him Kamal, which could be either a Hindu or Muslim name (62), while he himself, as Musaddi Lal Kayastha or as Shaikh Abdullah, was a translated man.

Let us now move on to the next major cultural shift that came with the coming of the British. According to Dalrymple "the early (British) residents were a series of sympathetic and slightly eccentric Scotsmen, whose love and respect for India was reflected by their adoption of Indian modes of dress and Indian ways of living" (98). In *City of Djinn*s the author gives two examples from history to validate his point. The first one is Sir David Ochterlony, who was also known as '*Loony Akhtar*' among the masses, and liked to be addressed by his Mughal title Nasir-ud-Daula. Dalrymple describes the man's love for hookah, nautch girls, his thirteen Indian wives and his life as a Mughal gentleman (98). The next example is that of the "white Mughal" William Fraser. A young Persian scholar of Scottish origins, he was the first European to take interest in the ruins of Delhi and befriended Ghalib, an Urdu poet (Dalrymple, 99). In the thirty years of his career that Fraser spent in Delhi, he not only refused to move outside the city but build a home for himself and started living in the style of an Indian Nawab with pruned moustaches in Rajput style, with his harem of Indian wives,

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employing sepoy from his local community. His house was full of “tygre-skins, caps of tyger heads, saddle clothes of ditto, quantities of saddlery, matchlocks, bows and arrows.....Persian books and Indian curiosities of all sorts” (ibid, 121). Just like Dalrymple, who calls him a Kurtzian figure, there were others who were unsettled by his Indianized behaviour. Lady Nugent thought of him “as much Hindoo as Christian” and reminded him of “the religion [he] was brought up to” (ibid, 107). Unlike his brother Aleck who complained about “a dozen people and half a dozen languages resounding in my ear all the time” (ibid, 121) Fraser mixed with the locals freely and it was, rather, the company of superfluous English which made him restless. When Fraser died, Ghalib wrote that he felt the death of Fraser ‘like a father’ (ibid.,148). With their Mughal names, Indian manners and changed lifestyles these men stand as the translated subjects of the empire, where the translation has happened in a direction reverse of what was desired. The days of the “Brahminized Englishmen” (ibid, 107), however, came to a slow end as one moved from the 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century, which I will discuss in the next section of the paper.

A more curious case, perhaps, is the identity of the ‘half-castes’ or the Eurasians, whose presence unsettled both sides of the empire. A case to mention is that of Colonel James Skinner, son of a British man and a Rajput mother, who just like Ochterlony, had three names to his credit- James Skinner/ Sikander Sahib/ Nasir-ud-Dowlah (ibid, 126). This racial inheritance, however, worked like a “double edged blade in his words, as he was debarred from company army and like other Anglo-Indians was discontinued from the service of Marathas” (ibid, 129). His “very dark complexion” and “accent” became his distinguishing qualities that separated him from the rest (ibid, 130). The man was known to have commissioned building of churches, temples and mosques. Emily Eden in her letters talks about Skinner who has built as “a very curious building, and very magnificent- in some respects; and within sight of it there is a mosque which he has also built, because he said one way or the other he should be sure to go to heaven.....His Protestant church has a dome in

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the mosque fashion, and I was quite afraid that with the best dispositions to attend to Mr Y, little visions of Mahomet would be creeping in.” (*City Improbable*, 50).

If Skinner falls on the ‘native’ side of this cultural translation, then Alice Aldwell *alias* Ayesha Bano Begum (a character in Khushwant Singh’s *Delhi: A Novel*) represents the more ‘disturbing’ aspect of this cultural interaction. Daughter of a Kashmiri Muslim, Ayesha got married to an Englishman and wished to identify with the British. She, thus, is critical of her mother who has lived in India so long that she has forgotten where she has come from. Like many others, she would like to emphasize that “there is nothing Indian about yours sincerely. I am as pucca as you: one hundred percent British and proud of it.” (239). As someone who knows both Hindustani and Persian, she is a British ally in the Mughal camp, nevertheless, she is quick to claim her Muslim half during the revolt of 1857, and got converted to Islam for her own safety and that of her children. Santoshi Mizutani in her essay on “Hybridity and History” illustrates the historical implications of Eurasian presence for the construction of colonial racial boundaries (29). Mizutani describes how it’s not the difference of the Eurasians as such but their ‘disturbing’ resemblance to the colonial race which posed special problem for the empire. She writes that not only were the Eurasian subjects mocked as somebody who was “white, but not quite”, accused of being “falsely white”, “desirous of passing themselves off for what they were not” (quoted from *Imperial and Asiatic Quarterly Review*, 35), but their resemblance with the “superior” colonial necessitated that their lives be controlled and directed in such a manner that they do not undermine the colonial race. Thus, when the “hybrids” were looked down upon for being “profitless”, “unmanageable”, and ultimately “dangerous” (she quotes from *Review of Education in Indian 1886*, 38), the Eurasian children were separated from their biological families (particularly the infamous “native mother”) (quotes Christopher Hawes, 40). Special institutions, like Andrew’s Colonial Homes at Kalimpong, took care of such children. Mizutani concludes that as the “never changing agent of the imperial civilizing mission, the white subject would always be

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‘original’” while the hybrid Eurasian subject remain a mere mimic man, “reproducing inauthentic versions of it”, a “pirated” copy of the original. (36).

In all these cases, whether the transformation of these subjects was self-imposed or they showed resistance to cultural change, one thing is clear, that they are translated versions of their original self, adapting, accepting, accommodating or resisting changes in the process of cultural interactions. They lie in areas that Mary Louise Pratt calls “contact zone”- “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination-like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today”(Michael Cronin and Sherry Simon,121). They are responsible for creating “translation zones” (Emily Apter, *ibid*, 121) or areas of intense language traffic.

### 3

In “The Translation Life of Cities” Sherry Simon puts forward the concept of a “translational city”- “a space of heightened language awareness, of forced substitutions or accelerated exchanges” (405). In her essay she explains how a translational city comes into existence as a result of violent takeover by a new regime, or massive population exchange, or a decisive historic event (for example World War), or competing claims of different linguistic groups on the cityscape. What it leads to, inevitably, is a redefinition of a city’s identity. Unlike a multilingual city, which cherishes its diversity, in a translational city, she writes, “languages connect as they move across space, are dominant in certain zones, less so in others. Border zones are scenes of specially intense interaction” (407). The city, in such a situation, remains a contested space between those who have historic claims on the city and those trying to establish their identity (407). Thus, she says, “citizens living side by side may be experiencing separate, even contradictory, versions of the urban imaginary” (407). To add to

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that, she writes that the experience of reading about a city in one language is definitely different from reading about it in another language.

Delhi, I would like to suggest, is one such translational city, with various historical narratives and individual memories trying to claim its terrain. As Dalrymple states, the hopes of a happy fusion of British and Indian culture were put to an end with the massacres of 1857, when the city was plundered, its citizens murdered, and its rulers were dethroned by the conquering white race (147). When three thousand Delhiwallas were tried and executed, the composition of the city changed dramatically as the Muslim residents of the city were driven out of the walls of the city and their mosques were sold to Hindu bankers (Dalrymple, 145). Quoting Edward Said, Ahmed Ali in his introduction to *Twilight in Delhi* writes that for Europe “Islam was a lasting trauma” (ix). It is not surprising, when they decided to build a new city, they wanted to leave the Muslim traces of the city’s past behind. Dasgupta points out to the contrast that can be noticed in the way Shahjahanabad was visualized and the way New Delhi was planned. “The imperialists would design a city so geometrically European, that it would defeat, with its very layout, the benighted orientalism of all its past and set the stage for a new, enlightened future.” (Dasgupta, 167). Dasgupta notes that when the narrow streets of Shahjahanabad were designed to prevent direct sunrays from reaching the pedestrians, the bureaucratic enclave of New Delhi was conceived to attract light and air to disperse the ‘miasma’ that scared the British. “All in all, a reversal: where Shahjahanabad’s streets were narrow and labyrinthine, New Delhi would have vast, geometrical avenues; where commerce in the old city took place in a profusion of packed bazaars, it would be confined in the new to a pillared circle, eventually named as Connaught Circus. Whereas Shahjahanabad was a city, it could be said, New Delhi was a bureaucratic village.... pastoral layout, whose open spaces was emptily monumental and left few places for any kind of urban bustle. There was almost no provision in the plan for venues of pleasure and congregation, nor for merchants and their trades, nor for housing for the poor- all of which had been conspicuous features of the old city.” (ibid, 167-168).

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In order to make their new but empty city alive the British looked towards the Punjabis who were not only instrumental in building the city but who had turned to English way of life to further their fortunes. Dasgupta reports: A shift in the design of houses of locals also came along in the same period. The Sikh contractors of Delhi needed to invite their British clients in their houses and so they gave up the courtyard style of housing, that had come to north India via central Asia. They decided to build lawn-skirted mansions with large drawing rooms, something that suited the taste of their English guests (ibid, 172). This meant that the city changed not only in the way it looked but also in the way it was heard.

This change was accentuated by the time we reach the stage of partition. Sadia Dehlvi bemoans that the city which once used to be all about exquisite language, beauty, gentle and refined behaviour died, first with the coming of the British and then with the event of partition (*Capital*, 157-161). The Punjabis, according to her, brought with them loudness, aggression and entrepreneurship. What the city lost in exchange was a love for language and culture (ibid, 157-161). In the post-colonial narrative, a Muslim past had little relevance and the dream of the Mughals turned into a decrepit Old Delhi, which was best avoided. It was the Imperial city of British which became the seat of post-colonial governance and it is this city that caught their imagination too. The Post-colonial nation frantically tried to rename, redefine and restructure the city while simultaneously choosing to forget the Muslim past.

In the light of this discussion above, I will now attempt to discuss this translational city through a reading of Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*. This will help us in understanding how Delhi was reinterpreted, visually and orally, as the British overtook the city from its Muslim inheritors.

## ***Twilight in Delhi***

The Delhi that Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* evokes is unique, both visually and in terms of its sounds. Mir Nihal belongs to the narrow lanes and alleys of (Old) Delhi. His house has a

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courtyard with date palm and henna trees, a low kotha and two rooms under it, and an arched veranda opening on to a raised platform. The two parts of the house- zenana and mardana- have their own modes of functioning, aware of each other's existence and yet operating as individual units. He is an old aristocrat who does not need to earn, and lives by the money he derives from rent. His days are spent taking care of his pigeons, which he adores just like or perhaps more than his kids, and visiting his mistress Babban Jaan, with whom he seems to share a bond that he does not with his wife. This Delhi wakes up to the azaan in the voice of Nisar Ahmad, whose soulful voice resonates in the hearts of its listeners. The discussions that you hear in its streets revolve around the language and diction of Mir and Daagh, with people voicing their opinion on who is a better poet and why. In the bazaars one can notice men debating over the relative merits of Kabuli pigeons over Golay pigeons, narrating epic tales about expert pigeon fliers. The rooftops of this Delhi reverberate with the shouts of crows and kite fliers. It is the smell of ghee, kebab, pualao, vegetable cutlet that fill one's senses outside Jama Masjid and many could be seen drinking soothing cold sherbets out of coloured and painted china cups. Various fakirs roam around the streets of Mir Nihal's Delhi. But they are not to be mistaken for random beggars for each one of them is special and unique: there is the mad fakir, Mast Qlandar, who roams around naked, a favourite with the gamblers (95); then there is a beggar who only sings Bahadur Shah Zafar's songs (133); Kambal Shah, the Afghani fakir (123); Iron Shah, who wore heavy iron chains round his neck and on his arms, fetters on his feet, and carried a heavy iron rod in his hand (127); and Blind Hafizi, who has reached a mystical stage in his divine passion (259). Their melodious voices and prophecies are part of the Delhi that the novel tries to capture. To add to that are the songs of *saavan* sung by women.

All of these gradually come to a close as Mir Nihal's son Asghar adopts more and more the English ways, and his city prepares for the coronation of a "foreign" King. When Asghar decides to move out of the family house, with his wife, and live on his own, one can see how strange things start entering their household- a soap, a gaudy dressing gown and English

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furniture. The meaning of fashion also changes in the city where men used to wear Kurtas that were so typical of Delhiwallahs. At a time when the descendants of Bahadur Shah Zafar walked around the city begging, Mir Nihal's elder sons were busy making preparations for the coronation of George V (128). As the procession walks past Jama Masjid, Mir Nihal could not stop reminiscing about the times when the British wanted to demolish the mosque and construct a church in its place (145). Along with the disfiguring of Chandni Chowk one could see how the language of the city had become "adulterated and impure" as "strange people" had started coming into the city, "people from other provinces of India and especially from Punjab" (197). There looms a fear that the city would be "inhabited by people who would have no love for her, nor any associations with her history and ancient splendour." (197). As Mir Nihal and his son Habibuddin lie on their beds, one knows that Dr. Mitra has silently entered into their lives, and the old world of alchemy and Unani medicine is passing by. Nihal has heard "men sing in vulgar tunes, new verses cheaper than any that had ever been written before" (240). The protagonist, thus, laments at the "poverty of thought" and the "vulgar sentimentality" gradually replaced by "emotion and sentiments" (241).

But much worse fate awaited the writer of this novel, who was not allowed to return to his beloved city as the country decided to tear itself into two parts. In such a scenario, his novel did not fit well into the narrative of a Hindu nation, which praised the virtues of countryside, while Pakistan refused to telecast a serial version of it for it was about the "forbidden city", even if that is a Muslim past (Ali, introduction, xx). As Shanulhaq Haqqee (now Pakistani, once a Delhiwallah,) declares that the present city was just a "carcass without a soul", Ahmed Ali adds that he himself had turned into a "a fossil" (Dalrymple, 64).

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