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Gender and Domestic Space in Ahmed Ali's and Krishna Sobti's Novels on Old Delhi

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Abstract: Female perspective and agency in Delhi from the 1920s to the 1940s do not usually find mention with regard to novels written about that significant period. Much celebrated novels such as *Twilight in Delhi* by Ahmed Ali and *The Heart Has Its Reasons* by Krishna Sobti are usually viewed as nostalgic evocations of the lost past of the city as it was moving out of colonial rule and into a new era. This paper examines the complexities of gender relations and segregation as offered in the novels, which mirror and showcase the gradual intensification of the colonised city shifting into a space of independence, although at first with timid hesitation. It displays the novels as structuring and perpetuating gendered relationships between women and men as also, importantly, between women in the household and those outside it. While published in markedly different times, the everyday lived realities of the time as explored in Delhi's literary landscape by Ali and Sobti exhibit great similarities in the gendered ramifications of female dispossession as per policy, and the economic implications of women's property being in the hands of "their" men. Transformations in the city space influence domestic spaces, impacting the female characters. In examining these socio-spatial segregations in early urban Delhi literature, the paper opens the field for further research on economic systems in literary texts.

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Ahmed Ali'nin ve Krishna Sobti'nin Eski Delhi Üzerine Olan Romanlarında Toplumsal Cinsiyet ve Ev İçi Mekân

Öz: 1920'lerden ile 1940'lara kadar Delhi'de kadın bakış açısı ve eyleyiciliğinden, bu dönemle ilgili yazılan romanlarda genellikle bahsedilmez. Ahmed Ali'nin *Twilight in Delhi* (Delhi'de Şafak) ve Krishna Sobti'nin *The Heart Has Its Reasons* (Kalbin Sebepleri Vardır) adlı romanları gibi iyi bilinen romanlar, genellikle sömürgeci yönetimden çıkıp yeni bir döneme giren şehrin kaybolan geçmişinin nostaljik çağrışımları olarak görülürler. Bu yazı, başlarda ürkek tereddütlerle de olsa bir bağımsızlık mekânına dönüşen sömürge şehrinin yavaş yavaş güçlenmesini yansıtıp sergileyen bu romanlarda sunulan toplumsal cinsiyet ilişkileri ile ayrımcılıklarının karmaşıklıklarını incelemektedir. Bu romanların toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı kadın-erkek ilişkilerinin yanı sıra, yine bunlar kadar önemli olan ev halkı içindeki ve dışındaki kadınlar arasındaki ilişkileri de yapılandırıp idame ettirdiğini gösterir. Her ne kadar birbirinden epey farklı zaman dilimlerinde basılmışsalar da Ali'nin ve Sobti'nin kalemlerinden çıkan Delhi'nin edebî manzaralarında karşılaşılan zamanın gündelik yaşama ait gerçeklikleri, politikalar

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gereği kadının mülksüzleştirilmesinin toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı sonuçları ile kadınların mallarının "erkeklerinin" ellerinde olmasının iktisadi çıkarımları arasındaki büyük benzerlikleri sergilemektedir. Kentsel mekândaki dönüşümler, kadın karakterleri de etkileyerek ev içi mekânlara da nüfuz etmektedir. Erken kentsel Delhi edebiyatındaki bu tür sosyo-mekânsal ayrımcılıkları inceleyen bu makale, edebi metinlerdeki iktisadi sistemlerle ilgili yapılacak araştırmalar için bir alan açmaktadır.

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The novel *Twilight in Delhi* by Ahmed Ali, first published in 1940, has been much celebrated for its nostalgic evocation of a lost past of the Delhi—as the country was preparing to move out of colonial rule from the 1920s to the 1940s—and the losses and absences it evinced in the characters' depiction within the age. Completed in 1939, during the intensification of World War II, it was a novel designed to explain India to the critics during the processual march of colonialism, in the "transformation from Indian to 'brown Englishman'" (Ali xiv), even while the nation aimed to regain a sense of Indian culture and individuality as the author sought to re-engage with his self and identity. The "'civilizing' influence of Westernization" (xiii) was seen in "distorted pictures of India presented by British historians, Orientalists, and trained propagandists from missionaries and civil servants to Anglo-Indian journalists," which was demoralising for the locals and introduced "an atmosphere of inferiority" in their midst (xiv). When *Twilight in Delhi* was accepted for publication by Hogarth Press in London, it brought to public attention "the fate of the great city, once the heart of Hindustan and symbol of its glory" (xx), the changing nation's historicity and humanity memorialised in Ali's elegant words. Placing it in conjunction with *The Heart Has Its Reasons* by Krishna Sobti—first published in 1993 in Hindi as *Dil-o-Danish* and the English translation published in 2005, which I have used in this paper—provides the reader with a more intimate storyline to approach Old Delhi. Sobti, a Punjabi who chose to write in Hindi, "remained an outsider to the Punjabi scene" (Gupta). Using the androgynous name of Hashmat for her literary sketches, she did not succumb to marital domesticity most of her life, marrying only at the age of seventy (Gupta), even as she dealt with the subject in novels like *The Heart Has Its Reasons*. While Ali was publishing his novel seven years prior to India's independence, Sobti spent those years of her "childhood in colonial times" and was amongst the first generation of Indians

post-Partition and independence (Kuruvilla). This is perhaps why her work is involved in a nation-building of sorts. *The Heart Has Its Reasons* vividly describes the intricacy of relationships in an upper-class 1920s Delhi household from a mole's-eye view, in Michel de Certeau's words. Although *Twilight in Delhi* is also fairly detailed in its portrayal of the household in the domestic space, it showcases an Old Delhi gently starting to shake off its decrepit, forlorn mannerisms and adopting more "civilised" ways. Thus, while published sixty-five years apart, both novels bring similarities and overlap into ready perception, and together describe "the life of genteel, old-fashioned Muslims in the first half of this century" (D. 529). As Anita S. Kumar states, "Both these novels deal with an era which is past and yet in a way close enough in time to be within the living memory of many. But the lyrical quality of the novels is not limited to the nostalgic explorations of the dead past" (25). In fact, they are "more in the nature of an awareness of a subjective experience" (25).

The intervention that I make in this paper concerns whose subjective experience these novels precisely talk about. Both seem to be written from the male point of view even if the narrator is, for a chapter or two, a woman, as in *The Heart Has Its Reasons*. I examine the ground these novels cover on gender relations and segregation. For both probe "deep into the subjective world of vision and dreams," but focus "attention on the action, the event," and, I argue, as men did in the period under discussion (Kumar 26). Revolving around the female perspective in these two seminal examples of Delhi literature of the period, I pay particular attention to the spaces that the wife and the mistress occupied, in full knowledge of the other's existence in the same man's life, "the gendered self present[ing] opportunities for resisting forms of abject subjection" (Heath and Legg 27). I consider the division between "private spaces and public places [that] has been really crucial in the long history of gender difference between men and women, and the confinement for centuries of women to private space and men being the public figures in the public space" (Massey). Indeed, "[P]atriarchal power is distributed not only in time but also in space . . . domestic and public spaces are gendered, enabling agency for one gender while limiting it for the other. . . . Doreen Massey indicates that the gendering of space further boosts gender constructions" (Wrede 12-3). This leads to gross gender inequalities which are marked and strengthened by the domestic spaces that female characters in the novels are supposed to occupy without question or comment. Even within the *haveli* (mansion), the *zenana* (women's quarters) ensures that female and male perspectives, and physicality, are kept firmly divided, leading to increasing frustrations in modernising-but-still-colonial Old Delhi. Socio-spatial spaces of togetherness being few and far between even at home, the male characters—with complete public agency—seek recourse in courtesans or concubines, often keeping a second home with an illegitimate partner and family. And as "spaces are defined by their parallel and interdependent relationships to other spaces" (Wrede 14), the tension between the two homes—and the women who are at their heart, with nothing much to do except gossip and worry—escalates as children are born and grow older, sons are incorporated into the family

business, daughters are married off, and economic conditions vary, due in part to the cost of keeping two homes. Henri Lefebvre defines the city as "space which is fashioned, shaped and invested by social activities during a finite historical period" (73). In the two novels, the design of the home defines, to a large extent, the activity that is carried out in its public and private spaces: the open design of the *haveli* giving way to smaller rooms with furniture and being determined by activities that men, in particular, are engaged with in the colonial administration. By extension, they foist demands and compulsions on the women to rethink their embedded habits and fears and bring about "improvements" to their dress and customs, social exchanges and festivities. The wide-open *aangan* (courtyard) in the middle of the *haveli*, with the rooms around it where the family gathers to relax and the women engage in repetitive household activities, is surrounded by the family rooms on one floor or two, and the *zenana* where, in the absence of men, the ladies of the house finally let down their guard and do not take the *ghoongat* (veil) over their heads. The design of the home defines much of the activity that is carried out in private and public spaces. The architecture of the *haveli*s that still exist in Old Delhi and where Ali's and Sobti's novels are based structures and perpetuates gendered relationships between women and men as also, importantly, between women in the household and those outside it.

In contextualising the novels in their cultural milieu and socio-spatial considerations, questions of who governs which space emerge, as do issues around economic systems that were in place in the period that the novels are set in. This paper is the first to provide a comparative perspective on female representation in *Twilight and Delhi* and *The Heart Has Its Reasons*. While both novels revolve around similar subjects in the same time frame—an upper-class household in Old Delhi and an illegitimate household set up nearby—this paper draws these themes in the two novels together. In its analysis of domestic spaces in the novels, it brings attention to the interior architecture of the *haveli* and how it perpetuates gender segregation. The subtle nuances of the social divisions thus created are intensified by the embedment of patriarchal tradition, which is mirrored in a colonial Delhi that is increasingly being stylised as modern and liberal. My arguments focus on the perpetuation of gender relationships not only between women and men, but significantly also between women in the *zenana*, as well as the inside and outside women, that is, the wife and the mistress. Ultimately, the everyday lived reality of the time as explored in Delhi's literary landscape by Ali and Sobti are similar in the gendered ramifications of female dispossession, and the economic implications of women being unable to control their material and financial property. Finally, this paper asks the question of whether the emergence of female agency is a by-product of a city striving towards gradual independence.

The covers of the two novels evoke a wistfulness in their muted colour play and whimsical font. The cover of *Twilight in Delhi* (Oxford UP edition published in 1966) emphasises the city's architecture—the dome of Jama Masjid in the rosily dusky sky, pigeons flying against the light reflected off the mosque's minarets. Equally evocative is

the cover of *The Heart Has Its Reasons* (Katha edition translated into English and published in 2005) which focuses on the interior of the home, its hallways and crenellations bathed in a late afternoon glow and a woman's image, seemingly from the early 1900s, in the foreground in the bottom right corner. With a hint of a smile on her face—slightly tilted to display her heavy antique jewels, she seems to be speaking to a hidden world, to secrets the reader may never be privy to. The interpretation of her as the self-satisfied, legitimate wife or the mischievous mistress is left to the reader, an important guessing game, for both novels revolve around the plight of the wife and mistress. They thus aptly suggest the metaphor of the city as a woman, colonial Delhi as the ageing beloved giving way to the fresh, modern, colonial city. *Twilight in Delhi* exhibits a "Western English culture" that is "colored strongly by post-Darwinian determinism and pessimism, [and] is merged with the Eastern Muslim culture that combines a reverence for life with a sense of hope. . . . That the novel was written in English was of significance in 1939, in those last days of the British raj" (Anderson 81). In fact, it is astonishing, in comparison with *Twilight in Delhi*, that *The Heart Has Its Reasons*, being a novel first published in the early 1990s, is translated from Hindi.

The extremity of seasons in both novels—which begin with lyrical descriptions of Delhi—mirrors the intensity of the characters' worlds. *Twilight in Delhi* starts in the middle of the interminable and infamous Delhi summer:

> Night envelopes the city, covering it like a blanket. In the dim starlight roofs and houses and by-lanes lie asleep, wrapped in a restless slumber, breathing heavily as the heat becomes oppressive or shoots through the body like pain. In the courtyards, on the roofs, in the by-lanes, on the roads, men sleep on bare beds, half naked tired after the sore day's labour. . . . The smell from the flowers escapes. . . .
>
> Heat exudes from the walls and the earth;
>
> Here and there in every mohallah the mosques raise their white heads towards the sky, their domes spread out . . . to catch the starlight on their surfaces, and the minarets point to heaven. . . . (Ali 3)

Twilight in Delhi is more immediately illustrative with details, the author musing on changes in the city and consciously portraying city activities and the structure of the home and family in detail. In *The Heart Has Its Reasons*, the reader is thrust into the middle of the plot immediately at the opening of the novel. The quilt maker, Munshi Farman Ali, arrives at the family's mansion, Haveli Charburzi, plunging the reader into the famous Delhi winter: "Winter this year leaves the whole city shivering. The cold wave sweeps over the ramparts of Red Fort, spilling over the steps of Jama Masjid. Out come piles of warm blankets, thick quilts and duvets. Sparkling sunlight pierced by icy winds. Neat rows of stitches set on quilts blooming and blushing with colours mock Dilli's frantic quest for warmth" (7). Both novels engage with the life in "[m]ohallas, neighbourhoods, roadside stalls, ornate terraces, homes," that is, with spaces defined by community and family (146). These are usually patriarchal spaces, with the entire extended family and

communal identity geared towards and situating itself in the patriarch. Indeed, male children are—in the case of illegitimate boys somewhat grudgingly—seen as the heirs of the family and to disinherit them is akin to a capital offence. A map in *The Heart Has Its Reasons* provides the reader with a basic sense of direction. The roads of Old Delhi—going towards Chandni Chowk and branching off into other streets such as Nai Sarak (New Street) and Dariba, monuments such as the famed Jama Masjid and the not-so-well-known Sunahri Masjid, *haveli*s (mansions) such as Begum Samru ki Haveli and Haveli Chunna Mal, the markets of Ballimaran and Chawri Bazaar, and various other detours and turnings—are wide in the novels and move inexorably to the Red Fort, which acts as a lodestar or focal point for the action to branch off from. This is unlike the *gali*s or rabbit warren of narrow lanes—some tight enough for only one person to pass through—that constitute the area today.

In Delhi from the 1920s to the 1940s, the woman's place was either as the legally wedded wife or as the mistress living in the *kotha* or a private residence maintained by way of "her" man's income. Both women were kept in check through "different apparatuses of regulation" (Legg 9), ensuring that they did not cross paths and were in a constant state of curiosity about the other. This resulted in a heavy sense of codependence for each woman, and in particular the wife, who was supposed to perform the specific role of maintaining the household and provide a clean social face for her husband. Wives were not expected to sing or dance, and their raising the question of doing so was immediately scandalous. To fill this gap for entertainment for the man:

> [T]he prostitutes were of two kinds, the cultured ones and whores. The cultured ones were patronized by the rich and well-to-do. Young men were sent to them to learn manners and the art of polite conversation; and the older people came to enjoy their dancing, music, and their company in general. They had, thus, two kinds of lovers, one who came for their own entertainment, and the other who entertained them. (Ali 39)

Towards the beginning of the novel, Asghar, the eldest son of the patriarch Mir Nihal, is shown to be frequenting the *haveli*s of *tawaif*s (courtesans) so often that his dreams are of beautiful maidens born out of a star in the night sky, dancing around him, "[t]heir glowing bodies . . . shapely and naked." He longs for his "erstwhile sweetheart, Mushtari Bai, the graceful dancing girl" (Ali 15). Later, in the early stages of his wife Bilqeece's pregnancy, Asghar is swollen with "pride and vanity at the prospect of having a son" whom he "would give . . . a good education and bring him up according to his own ideas" (185). The tentative, fragile bond that this prospect of a son creates between him and Bilqeece vanishes with the birth of a girl. "Asghar was disappointed at the news" (190). There is no mention of Bilqeece's feelings, for men are part of public life and public discourse in Delhi of the times described; women do not find any voice there. The author and narrator of *Twilight in Delhi* are both male, colouring the perception of the reader.

The women, on the other hand, pass their time "mostly between eating, talking, cooking, sewing, or doing nothing" (Ali 39). The routine remains the same: Every evening

in *Twilight in Delhi*, Begam Jamal, Asghar's mother, and Anjum Zamani, her sister-in-law, come downstairs and prepare the vegetables for dinner or sit idly, cutting areca nut into bits while letting "their tongues loose," talking of "marriage and death, of this and that, but mostly of people and the family" (39). The wives send for their husbands if they wish to speak with them and cover their heads in front of all others. Tempers rise over nothing and quarrels ensue, tears flow, breasts are beaten, and sometimes the women come to blows. Their lives are so repressed, like "cobwebs and mushrooms," that they feign annoyance over the mention of their fiancé's or husband's name, though they secretly enjoy such mention: "To conceal her consciousness of sex she flew into a temper, without, of course, realizing its unconscious and hidden cause" (40-1). Women do not question whom they are told to marry, and it is only in the question of marriage that older women have a say, although a woman has to wheedle her way around her husband and take some decisions without his formal consent, with the unsaid understanding that he will eventually come around. The novel clearly states: "For though women hold a subordinate position in Indian life yet in certain matters they can take the law in their hands, and marriage is one of them" (71). In the matter of Asghar's wedding, his visiting married sister Begam Waheed remarks that the girl in question, that is, Bilqeece, is "quite a nice girl" but that she would not be the right wife for Asghar. Begam Nihal sharply interjects with a "Why not?" enumerating the girl's qualities in bland terms: she is a nice girl who will make a "very good" housewife, she sews well and is a "very good" cook, all in all, she would make Asghar "very happy" (57). Begum Nihal continues in a self-satisfied manner with how she selected wives for Asghar's elder brothers who never complained but were in fact pleased. She recounts some sayings concerned with a potential wife's height and girth which are connected with bearing children. The patriarchal ideology of the society is depicted in what a male relative says, "And a man must marry a girl who would love him and serve him faithfully, one whom he could worship himself" (58).

Asghar is smitten with Bilqeece, whom his mother convinces his father he should marry. However, Bilqeece turns out to be contrary to her husband's expectations due to her lack of education and experience in the world. Also, Asghar is used to spending time with Mushtari Bai, who is talented in the arts of conversation and flirtation, and an unspoken comparison does creep into his marital relationship. His dissatisfaction with his wife cannot find an outlet as she is the perfect virgin wife in all respects, and what more could he ask for. As Asghar gets more Western hence more modern, along with the modernising city—in his ways, his clothes, his mannerisms, his preference for eating at an elaborately carved table while seating himself on a chair in a house that he rents with his wife, separate from his family, he is unable to find in Bilqeece an adequate partner.

> [M]an's discipline which carves out for him the opportunity to earn money, resources and facilities for the household. Besides his own self, his family and the household, he has that public sphere which is the large arena for the expression of his masculine qualities. In contrast to this, the lack of education and financial independence have confined woman to the domestic sphere which has restricted her abilities. Deprived of literacy and education,

> woman has survived and kept herself occupied by drawing upon her innate wisdom and manual skills. (Sobti et al. 35)

What the narrative does not dwell on is Bilqeece's story (but would she possess the words for it?): Her perceived inadequacies have been carefully cultivated by the *zenana* and an inherited, embedded sense of propriety, of pure and impure, of a wife's duties, of women not permitted to indulge in pleasure or curiosity.

> He would have liked to hear her talk of love and happiness, her voice flowing like a sweet murmuring stream, talking of sad and beautiful things. He wanted her to kiss him and caress him, put her arms around his neck and whisper: 'I love you, I love you. . . .' But she was a simple Indian girl, and did not know the ways of love. . . . (Ali 179-80)

She is, therefore, precisely the kind of wife that Asghar should have anticipated and indeed taken pride in. But along with the modernising city certain relaxations have come into operation, and what Asghar wishes for are passion and real companionship. Bilqeece is not trained to provide him what he sees as her right and his, and instead shies away from his embraces: "With all her charm and loveliness, she [sits] like an exhibit at a museum" (175) and does not live up to his imagination. It is, after all, a play of mismatched intentions: what Asghar read in his wife's eyes as awakening love and desire was merely confusion. "I was bewildered when I saw you, and did not know where to hide myself for shame," she murmurs (180).

Much of the conflict in the household is determined by economics. *Twilight in Delhi* displays a class hierarchy by way of tensions created in the *zenana*. Bilqeece, who comes from a family lower in class than Asghar's, is "modernized" by him: He prefers her to be as "English" as possible, with the consequence that the "English shoes" she wears to a wedding cause outrage in the *zenana*, making her feel completely out of place and ashamed of herself. Poor Bilqeece is unable to understand her husband's ambitions of them being viewed as a "modern couple," as not only has she not been introduced to cosmopolitan ideas before her marriage, she also has to maintain ties with both her family and his. A remark on her shoes makes this amply clear: "'Hai hai, sister, have you seen those dirty shoes Asghar's wife is wearing?' said one of the guests. 'We have never seen such a thing before!' 'She looks like a good-as-dead Farangan,' another replied. 'Yes, what else could you expect from Mirza Shahbaz Beg's daughter? They seem to have eaten some Farangi's shit . . .'" (Ali 188). While it is distressing for Bilqeece and her family to be perceived as being associated with *farangi*s or Englishmen, it is conversely a matter of pride for her husband!

For those courtesans who transform into concubines or "kept women," their fate gradually becomes intertwined with their lover's wife. Both women's fate is decided and the weave of their life perpetuated by the strictures of the household that trap them from within. The two women's constant state of resentment and tension regarding the other is only kept in check by way of the unfair situation they are in—that of occupying a different pedestal in the same man's life who is husband to one and lover to the other. It also reflects

in the economics of ownership: of the house, of jewellery, of the right to occupy spaces, all of which is inexorably wrapped up in the narrative. This is significant as both novels revolve around extended joint families living in a sprawling *haveli*, the centre of which is the domain of the women—the kitchen and the women's rooms collectively constituting the *zenana*—that sharply delineate their arena of participation in the life of the society. The women's field of operation is relegated primarily to the temporal; while defined by the spatial, they are not permitted to sketch the borders of the spaces they inhabit.[1] In the *zenana*, things move with the "monotonous sameness of Indian life" (Ali 39). No one goes out anywhere, with the sole entertainment attributed to the visit of a cousin or older relative, and that too mostly during festivals.

> Mostly life stayed like water in a pond with nothing to break the monotony of its static life. Walls stood surrounding them on all sides, shutting the women in from the prying eyes of men, guarding their beauty and virtue with the millions of their bricks. The world lived and died, things happened, events took place, but all this did not disturb the equanimity of the zenana, which had its world too where the pale and fragile beauties of the hothouse lived secluded from all outside harm, the storms that blow in the world of men. The day dawned, the evening came, and life passed them by. (Ali 39-40)

In *The Heart Has Its Reasons*, the patriarch Kripanarayan's wife Kutumb habitually, ceaselessly wrestles emotionally with his mistress Mehak Bano through the years and the growth of both her family and Mehak Bano's. The latter's (illegitimate) children bear the brunt of this acrimony, though the fact of their existence has never been a secret to either woman, each birth being noted and that of a boy especially celebrated. Kripanarayan considers Kutumb with sarcasm, observing that the "sounds and smells of life are unknown to Kutumb in her zenana," that she fails to understand life outside the precincts of the home and "goes on and on, like some stupid sparrow attacking itself in the mirror." As he is articulating these thoughts to himself, "mentally crowning her queen of hearth and home" and assuring himself that he has "given her every due as his wife," he is on the way to his mistress Mehak Bano's residence (Sobti 13). The hypocrisy of these few sentences cannot be more distinct: He blames Kutumb for the way she acts with him, but she is merely following the strictures of the (legitimate) household and the rules of the *zenana*, where she is expected to retire to along with the other women of the household. At the same time, he finds solace in his mistress, who, because she is outside the bounds of legitimacy, appears to be enticing. However, Mehak Bano too performs the role of the mistress that has been unwittingly thrust on her due to her personal circumstances; she would like nothing better than to be legitimised. While granted a few freedoms such as ease of movement to and from her house, this unrestricted coming and going is not without issues of impropriety and an extreme need for caution as regards her public

[1] The literal meaning of the word *zenana* is "of the women" or "pertaining to women," and refers to the part of a house that belongs to a Hindu or Muslim family in South Asia which is reserved for the women of the household.

presentation. The gross imbalance of the situation is ascribed to the man who is perpetuating the situation; instead, the two women nurture malice towards each other's presence in Kripanarayan's life. Bauaji, Kutumb's mother-in-law, surprisingly expresses her support for Kutumb as against Mehak Bano, advising her:

> To a man's lot fall mehfils, mujras, brothels, courtesans, fun and games, and to a woman's lot raising children, festivals, pujas and fasting. . . . The men in this family do anything they please, but keep such a strict eye on us that we are watched not just within the haveli but also outside its gates. . . . Daughter, for a while, keep Kripa out of your heart. If he comes and sits in the room, let him. If you don't feel like talking to him, don't. Show that for all you care he can stay wrapped up in his friends, listening to tappa-thumri all day long. Think about sewing, knitting or satsang. You are the daughter-in-law of this house!" (83)[2]

Interestingly, while the author of *The Heart Has Its Reasons* is female, the story seems to be narrated from a male point of view as well, compounding the argument of this paper on the absence of female voice and agency in the novels. Not only is the banality of the *zenana* described in tedious detail, but the narrators of both novels also emphasise that this is what "Indian life" itself is like, at least for women of the time. This gendered shuttering keeps women away from active decision making and perpetuates an atmosphere of manipulation. Again, to extend De Certeau's postulation, women in the novels utilise the mole's-eye view to manipulate male spaces, as against the bird's-eye view that the males are used to exercising. As Kripanarayan tellingly and perceptively remarks to Mehak Bano toward the conclusion of the novel:

> God knows Bano, if things had been under my control, I would have transformed this house into the haveli. But the community has its own sanctity, its own rules. They apply to everybody. Console yourself with the thought that there are things which are beyond a man's control too. The entire community is waiting for this to turn into a tawdry show, but you show me no mercy nor do I find any there. (Sobti 186)

The impression is that of women being packed into the inner rooms of homes, generating in them a fear of making a single move out of line. To come to notice unfavourably in the eyes of the other women in the household would invariably, through other women's manipulation and deviousness, attract the attention of the men. The men, not usually wishing to be drawn into women's arguments, shrug off a complaint as long as they can then reluctantly take action that is usually detrimental to the woman against whom the grievance is expressed. For instance, Kripanarayan's young, widowed sister Chhunna lives

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[2] *Mehfil* refers to an evening of courtly poetry or concert of Hindustani classical music for entertainment, performed for a small audience in an intimate setting. *Mujra* is a dance performance by courtesans that emerged during the Mughal rule in India. Members of the elite class such as *nawab*s frequented the residences of *tawaif*s at night for such entertainment. *Tappa* refers to the sounds produced by musical instruments such as *tabla* (Indian drums) while *thumri* indicates the tinkling sound of anklets worn by the dancers. *Satsang* is a word that means community prayer, though in this context it could also merely refer to prayer or praying.

in his *haveli* (where she too grew up but on which, due to her gender, she has no claim by law); she enjoys singing and making music but is viewed as being too colourful by the other women of the family. They complain to Kripanarayan that Chhunna is being unseemly and presumably attracting unsuitable male attention to herself from outside the house. They suggest that he should either have her sent to her "real" home, that of her late husband's, or to a house for widows where she would have nothing to do except pray. "A woman's wretched fate, everything hinged on suhag and bindi, signs of marriage, status. Without that, women are either family clowns or nasty portents, not to be seen on auspicious occasions" (Sobti 85). A woman's role in the family is reduced to vying for the coveted position of the best *bahu* (daughter-in-law) of the house. This sense of competition and one-upmanship carries over to every relationship between women in both novels.

However, there are also tentative shifts on the part of women for their own emancipation.

> Representing his family, the Indian male has always kept in check his wife, mother, sister and daughter. . . . The new circumstances and activities of women are a source of worry to men to whom it is evident that the destiny of women is no longer limited to their being wives and mothers only. The meaning of womanhood includes those rights as a citizen which all citizens are entitled to under this land. In such a situation, whether the pace of these changes is slow or fast, the new Indian woman is dreaming of playing an equal role in the national life with new energy, presence and will power. (Sobti et al. 275)

Kripanarayan, the patriarch of the family, is married to Kutumb and lives in the sprawling *haveli* with his children and extended family, but also "keeps" his mistress Mehak Bano, with whom he has two children as well, in a ruined building a few streets down from his home. Early on in the novel, he sees Munshiji,[3] who keeps the accounts for his second household, on the street. Munshiji rushes toward him, exclaiming, "Sahab, congratulations! A son was born at eight minutes past four. Both mother and child are doing well" (Sobti 45). Kripanarayan, elated at the birth—but unable to celebrate it with elan as this son is illegitimate though he will nevertheless bear the family name, gives "Munshiji whatever money" he has in his pocket (45). He asks him to "take home [Mehak Bano's residence] sweets. Motichoor laddoos from none other than Ghantewala's shop."[4] It fails to cross his mind that this lack of celebration would hurt Mehak Bano who, it is now revealed, allows Kripanarayan to "keep" her solely out of financial difficulty. Years ago, he won a court case for her and her mother—he is often referred to as Vakil Sahib (lawyer) in the novel—and holds Mehak Bano's family jewels "in safekeeping," effectively trapping her economically. However, when he returns to the *haveli*, he demands that "the

[3] *Munshi* translates to "secretary," with *ji* being an honorific.

[4] *Motichoor laddoo* is a round sweetmeat in a yellowish orange colour that is made up of tiny *boondi* (roundels) of gram flour fried in clarified butter and mixed with sugar syrup. Ghantewala Halwai, a famed sweetmeat store in Chandni Chowk, was established in 1790 and shut shop as late as 2015.

Jodi and the harmonium be brought out"[5] and that his wife make "fried fish" to celebrate (Sobti 47-8), filling Kutumb with bitterness. The household, instead of rising against Kripanarayan in self-righteous indignation on behalf of Kutumb, only blames the latter for the disharmony she apparently spreads due to this news of her husband's mistress' new baby, another heir; the same complaints about Kutumb carry on throughout the novel. As Chhunna says:

> [B]ad feelings stoke beautifully. And once the heart's fire is flared wild, you can cook anything on it. Mitha chawal, bhuni khichdi, pulav, korma. . . . Which room in the haveli has not heard Bhabhi's grand epic of sorrow and jealousy? . . . She had hung that Farashkhana household around her neck and now the vixen's nicely trapped in her own lair. If you have a genuine grievance, sort it out with your husband, I wanted to tell her. Don't sell out for jewellery, don't push out of sight issues that mock resolution. (Sobti 49)[6]

The women are crying out silently in aid of each other; however, their desperate pleas for help are couched in nasty asides due to a vague, overhanging fear of retribution.

Bauaji, Kripanarayan's mother, having once gifted Mehak Bano a *kangan*, a solid gold bangle, considers the bangle to not be Kutumb's property and wonders why Kutumb often makes an issue of it. As Kripanarayan's legal wife, it is Kutumb's right to ask about the jewellery; however, having been brought up in the prevailing male-biased structure, she is unable or unwilling to challenge or confront her husband. After all, generational history has been embedded within this structure. Chhunna's comment is thus telling, as is Kutumb's insistence; several years later in the story, she visits Mehak Bano to claim the *kangan* that she believes rightfully belongs to her. Actions such as these display the tentative moves that women make, by way of sulking or uneasy confrontation, towards asserting their rights as legitimate or otherwise. For Mehak Bano is not exempt from exercising her own will. Later in the story, the wedding of her daughter is fixed—and this too because the in-laws are willing to accept her only as the daughter of Kripanarayan and Kutumb. Kripanarayan considers Mehak Bano's position dispassionately, detachedly, without any thought for her daughter who is also his own child: "So she's taking my measure. . . . Looking after her children is my responsibility. I am getting her daughter married. Who knows after how many generations a daughter of theirs is being given in marriage" (Sobti 163). When her son Badru starts working with Rajjo, Vakil Sahib's eldest and legitimate son, Mehak Bano is left with practically nothing. Instead of perceiving her life as a lie, she indulges in a relationship with a semi-aristocrat and lands up uninvited at Kripanarayan's *haveli* on the night of her daughter's wedding, to which she has not been

[5] *Jodi* and harmonium refer to Indian musical instruments. While *jodi* is a pair of *tabla* or Indian drums, the harmonium is a modified version of a reed organ, with keys like the piano and bellows to pump air into the instrument.

[6] *Mithi chawal* is basmati rice with sugar syrup, cooked with spices such as cinnamon and saffron and scattered with dry fruit. *Bhooni khichdi* is a one-pot meal with rice, roasted yellow lentils, and vegetables. *Pulav* is a rice dish cooked in stock or broth with spices and vegetables or meat added to it. *Korma* is a dish of braised meat or vegetables cooked with spices, yogurt, and/or cream.

invited. Her daughter is in a fancy palanquin wearing her mother's jewels which Mehak Bano has, after a lifetime of servile compulsion, received from Kripanarayan for a "reward." As the novel inches toward a modernising city, this attitude of rebellion is reflected in the women as well. There are no happy resolutions, but it becomes clearer as to how the city exerts needed changes on the gender relations between its inhabitants; indeed, it acts as an odd equalising gesture. But the equalising needs to be at both ends—for the children of the mistress as well. The social spaces of the *haveli* subsume "things produced, and encompasses their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity" (Lefebvre 73).

In conclusion, the women in the novels are trapped in the urbane aura of traditional construction, fumbling their way, under their *ghoonghat*s, to a city that is rapidly modernising. From being a mere distraction to becoming a beneficiary of the man's earnings from his family's holdings, properties, or businesses, the mistress is viewed not only with resentment by the women of the family but with suspicion and distrust as well. For it was usually married men with social standing combined with old money who "fell into the clutches" of the so-called nautch girls whom their wives obsessed over for the rest of their lives, particularly when the union resulted in children. The mistress or her children had no rights except those bestowed by the man and/or his family, though the illegitimate children in both novels are, finally, by dint of exemplary behaviour and quickness of mind, integrated uneasily into their father's *haveli* family. Although both families reside in the urban area of (Old) Delhi city, one is left to fend for itself in a building going to ruins in a disreputable area while the other reaps the benefits of respectability. The presence of the *zenana*, that segregates the female section of the household from the male, lifts the illusion of the seeming gender equity that this veil of virtue indicates. The influence of the nearly festive air of a spatially transforming Delhi under colonial governmentality affects this gender inequity. The brewing discontent is leading to gender equity, which comes as a shock even when reading the novels in contemporary Delhi.

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