
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Negotiating Colonial Modernity: Material Culture, Cultural Memory, and Everyday Identity Formation in Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*

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ABSTRACT

Colonialism in South Asia operated not only through political domination and economic exploitation but also through cultural transformations that reshaped identities, social relations, and everyday practices. This article examines Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940) as a cultural text that captures the complex negotiations between colonial power, indigenous traditions, and emerging forms of modernity in late-colonial India. Drawing on New Historicism and postcolonial cultural theory, the article argues that Ali's novel represents colonialism as a process that penetrated ordinary cultural practices, material objects, linguistic hierarchies, and domestic spaces. Rather than presenting colonial rule merely as an external political force, the novel reveals how colonial modernity reshaped everyday cultural practices, producing new negotiations of identity, memory, and belonging. Through close textual analysis, the study explores how British colonial authority transformed Delhi's social imagination, disrupted Mughal cultural memory, and generated tensions between inherited traditions and colonial modernity. By bringing New Historicist analysis into dialogue with postcolonial perspectives on power, representation, and cultural identity, this study extends existing scholarship on *Twilight in Delhi* beyond narratives of decline and nostalgia, focusing instead on everyday cultural practices and material objects. It demonstrates how colonial modernity produced simultaneous processes of displacement, adaptation, and cultural negotiation. It argues that *Twilight in Delhi* should be read as a cultural archive of colonial modernity in Asia, where everyday practices, material objects, and urban spaces reveal the uneven negotiations between imperial power and indigenous forms of knowledge. By examining these everyday negotiations, the article contributes to broader debates in Asian cultural studies on colonial afterlives, cultural memory, and the production of modern identities.

KEYWORDS

Colonial modernity; cultural memory; New Historicism; Ahmed Ali; South Asian literature; colonial discourse; identity formation

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1. Introduction

The Indian subcontinent was not only about land and economy in British colonialism. It was rather a cultural enterprise, as Edward Said (1978) has argued, that generated specific types of knowledge, representation, and subjectivity by which colonial rule was justified and maintained. Colonial power was also expressed in the personal aspects of daily life—the languages that people spoke, the clothes they wore, the education they received, and the meanings they gave to themselves and their world. In recent postcolonial studies, however, the focus has moved away from colonial domination as a political entity to the daily ways in which colonial power influenced desires, identities and cultural practices (Dodson & Hatcher, 2017).

Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940), in particular, provides a profound literary engagement with these processes of cultural transformation. Judith Brown (2025) describes the novel as one authored by a founding member of the All-India Progressive

Writers Association, which resulted in the “surprisingly committed” inquiry of passivity as a formal and political tactic to colonial subjugation. Ali’s story does not exemplify activist resistance but “signifies the death of a culture and its afterlife after death, ironically through the medium of the English language and literary form” (Brown, 2025, p. 91). This is a paradoxical survival, of a culture through the language of its colonizers, and this is at the heart of the novel’s significance for understanding colonial modernity and its afterlives. It is the first novel composed in English by an Indian Muslim and in many ways has suffered the fate of being a pioneer.

It appears to be a description of the extinction of “of extinction” (Padamsee, 2011, p. 1). While there is a critical scholarship that has explored the themes of cultural decline, memory, language and colonial representation in *Twilight in Delhi*, it has not focused enough on the ways in which everyday material practices have become sites of negotiation and resistance to colonial power. But much of this scholarship is still focused on issues of decline, nostalgia, and literary representation. Less focus has been on the ways in which ordinary material practices, such as dress, household items, architecture, and everyday rituals, are active sites of colonial modernity that are negotiated and contested. This article explores this lack by looking at the objects, domestic relations, and urban spaces as cultural locations in which colonial modernity reconfigures identity processes. Though both Hamad et al. (2024) and Padamsee (2011) note the importance of colonial decline and urban disintegration, Padamsee concentrates on the novel’s formal complexity and aesthetic negotiation of loss. In this article, I build on these discussions to turn away from the image of decline and toward the cultural practices and material culture that have shaped colonial identities, challenged them, and reconfigured them over time.

The article applies these theoretical frameworks to Ali’s novel and argues that *Twilight in Delhi* is a novel of the process of colonialism, which was able to intrude into the most personal aspects of domestic life. The novel shows how colonial modernity impacted everyday cultural practices, material relations, linguistic relations and family structures, and how identities were constantly negotiated within those spaces. Thus, the novel is a complex meditation on the dialectic of cultural memory and colonial modernity. Colonialism is not a loss but an experience of transformation, negotiation and survival (Hovanec et al., 2023).

1.1 Theoretical Framework

The study is based on two related theoretical traditions: The New Historicism and postcolonial cultural theory. The problematic structure of power in representation, as proposed by Greenblatt (1980) in his notion of ‘self-fashioning’, implies a negotiation of identity formation with social institutions and cultural norms. Greenblatt’s self is not a substance but a process, a construction, a creation out of the cultural materials of a particular historical period. This is particularly important in the context of the colonial subjects’ negotiation of their identities in relation to imperial power. As one commentator points out, “even the most timeless and universal thing has a history” (Greenblatt, 1980, p. 5). The analysis of colonial education, language policy and colonial culture as a mechanism of producing specific forms of subjectivity can be complemented by Foucault’s (1980) analysis of power/knowledge. Foucault’s focus on the role of discourse and the production of knowledge in the exercise of power signals the role of colonial rule in sustaining colonialism not only through force but also through new categories of thought and new ways of being. He studied ‘the types of knowledge subjected to or disqualified by the dominant discourse’ (Foucault, 1980, p. 81). He studied how power produces and circulates knowledge.

Said’s (1978) concept of Orientalism also reveals how colonial discourse constructed the “Orient” as a site of knowledge and power. Said 1978, p. 2) suggested that colonial discourse worked through an “ontological and epistemological division between the Orient and the Occident”. This discursive structure not only helped the colonizers to comprehend India but also helped its colonized subjects to comprehend themselves. The force of Orientalism was that it generated knowledge which was useful for the colonial project yet was claimed as objective and scientific. Said shows how the colonial discourse created unequal systems of representation, while Foucault uncovers how these representations became systems of social regulation. Greenblatt adds to these strategies by demonstrating how people make sense of identity through the use of available cultural symbols. These views enable this study to not only consider colonial modernity as domination, but also as a process of cultural negotiation.

This New Historicist interest in the social forces that flow between texts and their contexts is visible in the discussion of the symbolic in the novel: Asghar’s English boots, Mir Nihal’s pigeons, the changing architecture of Old Delhi. These were not just literary devices but spaces in which colonial power and indigenous identity were negotiated and contested. We take Greenblatt’s lead in this analysis, examining the symbolic elements in terms of larger cultural interactions, as they both reflect and influence the power relations of their time.

1.2 Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. To examine how colonial structures of power, cultural change, and social class are depicted in *Twilight in Delhi*, with particular attention to how the novel represents the operation of colonial power through everyday practices and material culture.
2. To analyze how the novel engages with and negotiates colonial discourse through its representation of symbolic objects, linguistic hierarchies, and domestic spaces, demonstrating how these elements participate in the production and contestation of colonial power.
3. To explore the relationship between the novel's domestic narrative and broader historical transformations in early twentieth-century Delhi, revealing how the intimate sphere of family life became a site for the negotiation of colonial modernity.
4. To demonstrate the value of New Historicist analysis for understanding South Asian colonial literature, extending the application of this theoretical framework beyond its traditional focus on Renaissance English literature.

1.3 Research Questions

1. How does *Twilight in Delhi* represent the relationship between colonial power and everyday cultural practices, and what does this representation reveal about the nature of colonial rule in South Asia?
2. In what ways do symbolic objects in the Novel-English boots, pigeons, urban architecture- participate in colonial discourse and reveal negotiations of power, and how do these objects function as sites of cultural memory and identity formation?
3. How does the novel's family narrative, particularly Mir Nihal's resistance to cultural change, illustrate the workings of colonial power/knowledge, and what does this resistance reveal about the tensions between tradition and colonial modernity?
4. What does the novel reveal about the relationship between cultural memory, identity, and colonial modernity, and how does it contribute to broader debates about colonial afterlives in South Asia?

2. Literature Review

2.1 New Historicism: Theoretical Foundations

New Historicism was born in the 1980s as a critical reaction to the decontextualized abstractions of New Criticism and Deconstruction. Literary texts are not discrete and isolated aesthetic objects, but are part of a network of social and cultural practices, as Greenblatt (1980) showed in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. The movement sought to "breathe new life into canonical texts by relating them to non-literary texts and social practices of their day" (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000, p. 12). This was a radical break with the formalist tendency to give the text its own voice and with the historicist idea that history is recoverable in an objective way. New Historicism, however, had a different agenda: it argued for the constructed nature of literature and history, that both are works of interpretation (Brannigan, 2016).

New Historicism is concerned with how cultural products are tied to, and shaped by, their historical contexts, especially the power relations of the society that produced the cultural products. New Historicism is a cultural approach that examines the relationship between a cultural object and its historical context, its inscription in the political and social power relations of the society which produced it (Levine 2026).

The notion of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1980) offers a powerful theoretical instrument for New Historicist analysis. Foucault explored "the forms of knowledge which are put under subjugation or are disqualified by the prevailing discourse" and how power functions in the production and circulation of knowledge (Foucault, 1980, p. 81). This framework demonstrates how colonial education, language policy and culture built specific subjectivities and social hierarchies. Foucault's ideas about the construction of bodies, minds and behaviours under the regime of disciplinary power have been especially relevant for the analysis of colonial power (Foucault, 1977).

2.2 Postcolonial Theory and South Asian Literature

Since Said's (1978) *Orientalism*, the field of post-colonial studies has been a vital means for examining the cultural aspects of colonialism. Postcolonial scholars have shown that colonial power was exercised through cultural classifications that affected the way colonized societies presented themselves. This observation has become a cornerstone of the subsequent scholarship on the cultural politics of colonialism and has shown that colonialism has always been linked to the production of knowledge that has justified and naturalized the exercise of colonial power.

These theoretical resources have been widely tapped by scholarship on South Asian literature. Hamad, Nawab and Ramzan (2024) have studied Ali's novel *Twilight in Delhi* from a New Historicist perspective and have argued that the novel "mirrors a postcolonial disintegration of the city and its decaying culture as a metaphor for the collapse of the civilization under colonial rule" (p. 606). This analysis affirms that *Twilight in Delhi* is both a literary and historical document that sheds light on the cultural and political milieu of the period (Hamad et al., 2024, p. 612). The novel's engagement with historical events like the 1857

Rebellion, Delhi Durbar of 1911, and the Rowlatt Bills of 1919 shows how it was engaged in larger cultural discourses of colonialism, nationalism, and identity. In this, Nawaz (2025) uses New Historicism to analyse how *Twilight in Delhi* “reflects and challenges the realities of early 20th century British India”. And themes of identity, memory, and resistance, critiquing the negative impacts of colonialism on Indian culture.

Other scholars have investigated the relationship between the novel and cultural memory and cultural identity. Caroline Hovanec and her colleagues (2023) contend that the pigeons in *Twilight in Delhi* “connect the spatial trope of homelessness and the temporal trope of slouching towards extinction” (Hovanec et al., 2023, p. 248). The novel’s patriarch, Mir Nihal, “often reflects on the tragedy of cultural extinction, and his pigeon loft becomes a synecdoche for that endangered culture” (Hovanec et al., 2023, p. 249). One might argue that the novel’s interaction with cultural memory is effected through symbolically charged imagery, which links individual loss to other historical changes.

Alex Padamsee (2011) is more nuanced, rejecting the interpretation that limits the novel to “a purely nostalgic portrait of a moribund Indo-Muslim society” (2011, p. 1). Ali as an Urdu writer’s original location and the constant reference to Urdu poetry in the narrative are not just an authenticating feature of the elegiac style of his portrait, but a form of challenge to realism and the apparently dominant trope of the disappearance of Muslim culture” (Padamsee, 2011, p. 2). The novel’s formal complexity and its refusal of simple narratives of decline suggest that Ali’s engagement with cultural memory is more important and less nostalgic than one might assume. As Son (2020) notes, “the agency of memory can work to counter and even subvert the aftereffects of the forgetting and loss of language and lifestyle in Old Delhi because of British colonialism” (Son, 2020, p. 4), one of the formal strategies that give the novel the power to challenge and even subvert the effects of the forgetting and loss of language and lifestyle in Old Delhi because of British colonialism is its engagement with Urdu and Persian poetry.

2.3 Colonial Modernity and Cultural Memory in South Asia

The idea of colonial modernity in South Asia has been the subject of a great deal of scholarship in recent years. Dodson and Hatcher (2017) argue that colonial modernity was a process of “negotiation and re-interpretation of Western knowledge and modernity” in the context of South Asia. This was not just imposed; it was negotiated between colonial powers and indigenous elites. The idea of colonial modernity is that the encounter with colonialism was transformative, but not one-way; that it involved the appropriation, adaptation and transformation of both colonial and indigenous forms of knowledge and practice.

The scholarship on cultural memory in South Asia has studied the effect of colonialism on the South Asian tradition of remembering and identity building. As one study puts it, “Indian cultural formations have their reflective and generative nodes in the configurations of memory, the body and idiom (verbal and visual)” (Rajan, 2020, p. 45). Under colonial rule, new forms of knowledge and representation reconfigured these configurations, producing tensions between the old and the new forms of modernity. The most striking conflicts are in literature, where writers negotiated their relation between indigenous literary traditions and colonial modes of representation.

Colonial and partition legacies have shaped the politics of memory in South Asia. As recent scholarship demonstrates, “the processes of the construction and contestation of a dominant discourse of nationalism and nationhood are fraught with their own forms of remembrance and forgetting” (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 67). Written on the eve of Partition, *Twilight in Delhi* explores these issues of remembrance and forgetting, a complex meditation on cultural loss and survival that anticipates the traumatic partitions that were to mark the subcontinent. Most importantly, colonial modernity cannot be thought of as a wholesale displacement of indigenous traditions by Western ones. Instead, it created ambivalent circumstances where the colonial subject was both displaced and at the same time engaged in new modes of adaptation.

2.4 The Novel and Its Historical Context

The *Twilight in Delhi* is an important book in South Asian literature. The novel is a depiction of the long fall of a Muslim family under British imperial rule in early twentieth-century Delhi. This image of decay has been interpreted as a mournful remembrance of a vanishing culture, and as a critique of the politics of representation and memory. The city and its decaying culture fall apart metaphorically as the civilization under colonial rule. This can be seen in the analysis by Hamad et al. (2024).

It is necessary to know the historical background to understand the significance of the novel. Between 1910 and 1919, there were three important events: The Indian rebellion of 1857, George V’s coronation in Delhi in 1911, and the enactment of the Rowlatt Bills in 1919. These events changed the political and cultural scene of Delhi, and the city became the colonial capital instead of the centre of the Mughal empire. Ali’s *Twilight in Delhi* is surprisingly passive, an unwelcome association for the writer’s pioneering membership in the activist group (Brown, 2025, p. 91). In discussing these events, the novel participates in broader cultural debates about colonialism, nationalism and identity. Comparative studies have also illuminated the importance

of the novel. Iqbal and Haque (2022) analyzed *A Passage to India* and *Twilight in Delhi* to demonstrate that the two works of literature represent the same colony in two different ways and therefore reflect their cultural and political agendas.

The novel explores these changes as seen in Ali's novel in the context of domestic life and everyday experience. The novel is not a history of great events as such, but it is a history of the way these events intruded into the personal sphere of family life. In this way, the novel shows that the development of Delhi as a city that "expressed the Mughal royalty as an example of an Indian city under British colonial rule" (Hamad et al., 2024, p. 610) is parallel to that of other Indian cities during the same period. This reading is echoed by Bashir and Hussain (2025), who state that *Twilight in Delhi* reflects the "transformation of the culture and politics of the city during the colonial period, between the centuries-old traditional customs and the new trends set in by the British".

2.5 Cultural Studies Approaches to Colonial Modernity in Asia

Recent scholarship in Asian cultural studies has challenged the linear account of modernization by showing that modernization was a product of colonial modernity and that encounters between indigenous traditions and colonial structures were not uniform. According to Chakrabarty (2000), European ideas of development cannot be applied to the histories of the colonies, as the modernity in Asia was the result of complex negotiations between local histories and global power relations. Chatterjee's (1993) notion of 'derivative nationalism' also exemplifies how colonial subjects generated new political subjectivities in both defiant and accommodating ways. The perspectives are useful in analyzing *Twilight in Delhi* (1940): the characters in the novel exist in such contradictory spaces; they are not being colonized while they are also colonizing themselves in their language, education, and social positioning.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The current ongoing study employs the qualitative method and a text-based analytical approach. The study is informed by New Historicist and post-colonial theoretical approaches. The methods also involve three interrelated analytical procedures that can work in tandem to produce a readable and comprehensible account of the novel's engagement with colonial power, cultural memory and identity formation. Besides, the article also adjusted the textual analysis to discuss the exercise of colonial power through symbolic objects, domestic relations, and images of urban transformation.

3.2 Data Collection

The primary source is Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940). Secondary sources are journal articles, scholarly monographs, and historical documents relating to the period. The novel was chosen for its ability to portray complex aspects of urban life during the period of British colonialism while demonstrating the complexities between cultural memory, colonial transformation and new versions of modernity. This novel was also selected because of its importance in the South Asian literary canon and its relation to the cultural politics of colonialism.

3.3 Analytical Framework

First, close text reading and analysis of selected passages from *Twilight in Delhi*, identifying the ways in which language, symbols, and imagery convey the functioning of colonial power. Passages were chosen based on three analytic criteria: 1) representation of colonial encounters; 2) symbolic importance for identity formation; and 3) personal experience and broader historical change. Special emphasis is placed on scenes of English schooling, class segregation, cultural icons (English boots, pigeons, architecture), and family life. This close reading is based on the New Historicist focus on the details of textual representation, seeing that meaning is linked with the particularities of language and imagery that make up the narrative.

Second, historical triangulation, which involves linking textual elements to documented historical events and processes, such as the 1911 Delhi Durbar, the 1857 Rebellion, the British education reforms (Wood's Dispatch of 1854) and the changes in the urban environment of Delhi. This triangulation is the New Historicist approach to the interpretation of literary texts by using historical documents, as both texts and documents are involved in the process of cultural meaning-making. The analysis shows how the novel relates to and reacts to the historical changes of its time, through the use of textual representations.

Third, to apply Foucault's (1980) concepts of power/knowledge and disciplinary power, and Greenblatt's (1980) notions of self-fashioning and textual historicity to each symbolic element and narrative pattern identified in the analysis. This thematic reading is informed by new historicist and postcolonial ideas, and offers a systematic way of reading the novel's engagement with colonial power, making sure that the analysis is based on theoretical ideas that have already been developed.

3.4 Justification of Method

The qualitative, text-based method is appropriate since it allows exploring ideological, symbolic, and cultural aspects of colonial oppression, which cannot be measured quantitatively. The combination of literary analysis and New Historicist theory helps to gain a subtle insight into the workings of colonial power in South Asian settings. New Historicism provides a means for "learning how literature can help us to understand the social problems of our times" (Brannigan, 2016, p. 12).

4. Discussion and Findings

4.1 Colonial Power and Everyday Practices

Mir Nihal refuses to wear Asghar's English boots, an illustration of how colonial power entered into everyday material practice. These boots are not clothes but instruments of colonial masculinity and class identity. This war is revealed through Ali's consumption and appearance as the quotidian of colonial modernity. The *Twilight in Delhi* can be viewed through Foucault's (1980) concept of power, not just as it operates through state institutions but as it operates through micro-practices that discipline bodies and shape subjectivities. The novel demonstrates the invasion of colonial power in the most intimate spaces of domestic life, where daily practices become a contested space of ideas. This is how colonial power enters everyday life, in Foucault's (1980) words, "the productive nature of power": its ability to produce new forms of subjectivity and new ways of being.

English dress is one of the most impressive of these. Mir Nihal scolds his son Asghar for wearing English boots again: "You're wearing those dirty English boots again! They irritate me, can't you wear proper shoes? (Ali, 1940: 13) What appears to be a petty domestic spat is actually a clash of big cultural differences. Asghar's stylization of European shoes is not only aesthetic, but also about his acceptance of the colonial ideas of masculinity and modernity. The boots are a symbol of what Greenblatt (1980) would call "self-fashioning" or the process of forming identity through the use of cultural materials. Asghar is creating a new identity through the use of colonial material culture, placing himself in a group of Western-educated elites.

This sartorial decision was in line with what Macaulay had earlier stated as the objective of a native class: "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste. The boots represent a distinction between Asghar and his father's generation, and link him to a new, colonial modernity. Mir Nihal's resistance to the change in fashion illustrates a larger cultural anxiety about the erosion of Indo-Muslim identity under colonial rule (Hamad et al., 2024). His protest is not only against the boots, but it is also against the changing values, the rejection of tradition, and the adoption of colonial values. The domestic conflict is then the arena for the negotiation of larger cultural conflicts. Similarly, Bashir and Hussain (2025) argue that the novel depicts a society "caught between centuries-old traditional customs and the new trends set in by the British," and that the novel demonstrates how the colonial power infiltrated daily life and the domestic space.

4.2 Cultural Memory and the Politics of Extinction

Symbolic material practices, like pigeon keeping, mediate the novel's relation to cultural memory. Pigeon keeping acts as a cultural archive of the shifting relations between space, identity, and colonial modernity. Hovanec et al. (2023) mention that Ali "intertwines spatial and temporal dimensions of homelessness" (p. 248) through the pigeon imagery. Mir Nihal's pigeon loft is a "synecdoche for that threatened culture" (Hovanec et al., 2023, p. 249), a beautiful and delicate Indo-Muslim civilization. The pigeons are a symbol of a certain kind of cultural practice, pigeon flying, that was a part of Delhi's urban culture, linking the present to a longer history of Mughal civilization.

The narrative dramatizes the link between personal loss and cultural extinction through parallel events in the narrative. While Mir Nihal finds out that his loved one is dead, he also finds out that his favorite pigeon is dead. The loss of the personal and cultural convergence implies that the novel is not only about political domination, but a total subversion of life, knowledge, and feeling. The pigeons symbolize a threatened cultural practice that is being transformed in the wake of colonial modernity.

However, the novel is not easy to be nostalgic about. As more recent scholarship has indicated, Ali's novel was not meant "to call for the restoration of the lost precolonial past, but a means of mobilising a postcolonial future through the remnants of the precolonial past" (Hovanec et al., 2023, p. 250). The pigeons, as symbols of extinction, are also 'refigured as a sign for survival, futurity, and change' (Hovanec et al., 2023, p. 251). The duality of grieving and hoping, of dying out and living on, is at the heart of the novel's relationship to colonial modernity. The novel is aware of cultural loss and also offers a hint of transformation and renewal. The pigeons, therefore, serve as a point of cultural negotiation, a link between past and future, tradition and modernity, as Greenblatt (1980) would put it. This reading is further supported by Son (2020), who studies the use of Urdu and Persian poetry in the novel as an attempt to 'appropriate the dominant English language and revitalize the memory of the past' to counter and even subvert the after-effects of the forgetting and loss of language and lifestyle in Old Delhi due to British colonialism (Son, 2020, p. 77).

4.3 Class Division and the Politics of Education

The novel also reveals the establishment of a new class and the social stratification that ensued from the colonial education policy. The British education system created by Wood's Dispatch of 1854 brought about a division in the education system between the elites (English-educated) and the traditional education system. This system resulted in a dual education system and class stratification. Pupils in universities and other prestigious schools felt themselves to be superior to those attending Madrasa, as Khanna, Dhankhar and Deswal (2025) point out. So education became a way of reworking difference and cultural power within the colonial knowledge systems.

The refusal of Mir Nihal to allow his son to marry a girl from a lower class is the representation of this class division. How can my son marry the daughter of Mirza Shahbaz Beg, says Mir Nihal to his son? Don't want to eat a lowly born person? These are the family name or the honour; I'm not going to get married' (Ali 1940). This 'domestic war' shows how education, language, and the establishment of new class systems, as part of colonial policies, changed the traditional social relations. Mir Nihal's class divisions are not only traditional, but also established and sustained through colonization.

The fear of class is connected to the historical changes that occurred through the Charter Act of 1813 and Wood's Dispatch of 1854, which resulted in the formation of English-educated elites and divisions in Indian society (Brannigan, 2016; Greenblatt, 1988). These were some of the examples of the alteration of local cultures that were created artificially and followed colonial policies. These are the hierarchies that are responsible for Mir Nihal's refusal to marry since his son has chosen a low-born bride. Thus, the novel demonstrates that class divisions were not only economic, but cultural, establishing differences in education, language and taste resulting from the colonial rule (Noreen, 2023).

4.4 The Transformation of Delhi: Urban Space and Colonial Modernity

The changing face of the urban space of Delhi is a significant emblem of colonial modernity. As Hamad, Nawab and Ramzan (2024) state, "the development of Delhi depicted in the novel as moving from the representative of Mughal royalty to an illustration of an Indian city which was under the rule of British colonialism reflects the metamorphosis of the other Indian cities during the same period" (Hamad et al., 2024, p. 610). This was not only a physical change but a symbolic one too. The removal of the Mughal architectural and cultural elements and the replacement with colonial ones.

This transformation is conveyed in the novel through the architectural change. Ali's 'seven reconstructions and seven fights' of Delhi is a metaphor for the destruction and re-construction of cultural identity under colonialism. The contrast between Mughal glory and colonial humiliation is stark as Mir Nihal sees a descendant of Bahadur Shah begging on the streets on his return from the coronation of George V. The scene is about the decline of the Mughals and the emergence of new political and cultural forces.

This urban transformation is a reflection of the negotiation and re-interpretation of Western knowledge and modernity in the context of South Asia, as described by Dodson and Hatcher (2017). The city is a palimpsest where many time periods and cultural forms coexist, and their relationship is determined by colonial power. Ali uses urban transformation to demonstrate how Delhi is a space of contestation where competing memories of Mughal heritage and colonial authority co-habit. The novel also depicts the "cultural and political positions" of the colonizer and the colonized, as mentioned by Iqbal and Haque (2022), and also critically explores the changes in colonial Delhi. This significant critique also resonates with the argument of Ahmed, Afzal and Iqbal (2026) that the colonial and capitalist power structures are not only unveiled in *Twilight in Delhi* but also subverted by providing "an apt sight of resistance."

4.5 Gender, Language, and Domestic Space

The novel also provides a glimpse of the changes in gender relations and domestic space that colonial modernity brought about. According to Padamsee (2011), the novel's relationship with the Urdu poetic and literary tradition poses a "complex challenge to the priority of realism" (p. 2). The challenge is also about how to represent women whose lives appear to be constrained by traditional patriarchal norms and also the disruptions of colonial rule. The novel is a demonstration of the tensions between the old and the new in colonial modernity, and the possibility of new gender relations.

Women in the novel are not allowed to go outside of the house, and their marriages are arranged without their consent. But the novel also exposes the dislocation of colonialism to these existing systems, and how new patterns of conflict and tension are generated in the family. The home becomes a space of contradiction, of a colonial modernity being negotiated, between tradition and change, between patriarchy and new forms of agency, between cultural memory and colonial transformation. The novel's depiction of gender is part of its broader concern with the conflicts of colonial modernity and how such conflicts were lived out in the most intimate spheres of family life.

Zafar, Siddiqui and Ajmal (2023) refer to this aspect in the term "double colonization" and their analysis of the female characters in *Twilight in Delhi* who are "oppressed... both as women and as the colonized. The analysis reveals how colonial modernity

intersected with patriarchal structures, making the subjection of women in the novel more complex. In the novel, this intersectionality of colonial oppression is exemplified by this dual oppression (both colonial and indigenous patriarchy).

Ali's utilization of Urdu and Persian poetry is also a formal strategy of resistance, as Son (2020) argues, "the agency of memory can work to counter and even subvert the aftereffects of the forgetting and loss of language and lifestyle in Old Delhi due to British colonialism" (p. 77). This linguistic approach is further clarified when the use of multiple languages by Ali (English, Urdu, and Persian) is shown to create a hybrid voice in the narrative that resists the colonial linguistic hierarchy and claims the ongoing relevance of indigenous cultural traditions. The use of this language strategy undermines the status of English as the language of literary expression and affirms the ongoing significance of indigenous literary traditions. Here, the novel reveals the power of the agency of memory to resist, and even reverse, the legacy of forgetting and loss of language and way of life in Old Delhi as a result of British colonization (Son, 2020, p. 4). Similarly, Padamsee (2011) notes that Ali's "persistent fascination with Urdu poetry is a complex problem with the primacy of realism and the apparent myth of the extinction of Muslim culture being narrated" (p. 2).

5. Conclusion

This study contributes to Inter-Asian cultural studies by demonstrating how literary texts from South Asia illuminate shared processes of colonial negotiation and cultural survival across the region. The case of colonial Delhi invites comparative analysis with other Asian cities under imperial rule, revealing the transregional patterns of cultural adaptation, resistance, and memory that shaped modern Asian identities. This study has suggested that this is not a simple story of cultural annihilation but one of loss, adaptation, and negotiation in the context of colonial modernity in Delhi. The novel illustrates how the colonial encounters transformed cultural identities, how the novel represented material objects, domestic spaces, language practices, and urban transformation, and how the novel helped to shape the ways of remembering, resisting, and surviving.

The results show that *Twilight in Delhi* is an example of a modernity of the colonial period, which, through daily life, language, education and material culture, transformed the cultural life of Indo-Muslims. The novel uncovers the symbolic nature of objects like English boots, pigeons and urban spaces as terrains of negotiation between colonial power, cultural memory and identity. It is not a nostalgic novel for a dying world, but a critical study of the complex ways in which colonial rule transformed social relations and cultural identities.

It is not a book of fiction. The novel is a piece of literature, but it is also a historical record, which enables the reader to see the culture and the political atmosphere of the time (Hamad et al., 2024, p. 612). It provides an important insight into the colonial history of the Indian Subcontinent and shows how power is exercised not only by laws and institutions but also by the relationships of everyday life. The novel thus illuminates the process of colonial modernity as it unfolded in a complex way, marked by a mix of domination, adaptation and resistance. In this regard, Ahmed, Afzal and Iqbal (2026) argue that Ali's novel is a dynamic engagement with and critique of the colonial and capitalist power structures, rendering it a site of representation and resistance.

This research is situated within the larger discourse of Asian cultural studies on the politics of cultural memory and the colonial afterlife. *Twilight in Delhi* is not only a literary portrait of the end of the colonial period, it is a repository of cultural negotiation. It demonstrates how the quotidian became a site of constant testing of imperial power and native identities. Its complex meditation on the relationship between colonialism and identity is a reflection on cultural memory and the representation of loss, survival and transformation that is still relevant to current debates. Padamsee (2011) posits that the novel's formal complexity and its engagement with Urdu literary traditions defy simplistic narratives of decline and provide for a more nuanced and complex understanding of cultural survival and transformation. Alam (2015) supports this view by arguing that the heteroglossic construction of the novel, the mixing of English, Urdu and Persian, is a formal device of resistance that subverts the hierarchies of colonial languages and restores cultural memory.

This study could be extended to other literary productions from South Asian countries, exploring their interactions with the dynamics of colonial power, cultural memory, and identity formation. The particularities of South Asian colonial modernity would be further illuminated through comparative studies in various regions and colonial contexts. Further, the theoretical approach here developed, which is a synthesis of New Historicism and postcolonial theory, may be used with other cultural products such as film, visual art, and popular culture to explore how these other cultural products engage in the current negotiation of colonial legacies. This article aims to make a contribution to the ongoing discussions in Asian cultural studies by showing that colonial power was not felt only in the political sphere but in the daily cultural encounters of objects, spaces, and practices. *Reading Twilight in Delhi: Material Culture and New Historicism* is a study of colonial modernity as an uneven process in which domination and agency coexisted. This strategy goes beyond binary understandings of colonial resistance and cultural loss, and focuses on how Asian societies wove their way through modernity in the context of empire. Ali's formal strategies of resistance through language and cultural memory exemplify how literary texts can participate in decolonization by subverting colonial hierarchies and reclaiming indigenous knowledge. Such strategies resonate with contemporary social movements across Asia that seek to challenge epistemic

violence and assert cultural sovereignty. This reading positions cultural studies as an activist practice that interrogates power structures and imagines alternative futures beyond colonial legacies.

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