

REVISITING THE PAST THROUGH SMELLS: A DISCOURSE CULTURAL STUDY OF TWILIGHT IN DELHI BY AHMED ALI

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Abstract

The Twilight in Delhi represents a panoramic picturesque of Muslim culture in Delhi. The study revisits the past through a singular yet dynamic aspect of the smells representing the past of the city. This study employs a Discourse Cultural Approach amalgamated with Saldana's coding to decipher the novel in consideration. It is found that the city life depicted in the 1940's is a mixture of many different types of smells, aromas, and odors that reflect the urban culture of Delhi of that time. The imagery of smells is craftily used to associate flowers with religious events for instance; meelad, depicting characters, setting moods, and representing prostitution. On the other hand, obnoxious smells are also found depicting the contrary world of animals, gutter, and for ridiculing others. Hence, the opposing worlds of smells constitute a city's culture reflecting from the verbal depiction in the novel.

Key Words: *Smells, Discourse cultural study, Saldaña's coding.*

Introduction:

Twilight in Delhi, published in 1940, provides changing cultural, political, and social scenarios of the Subcontinent during the Colonial shift. Primarily, the characters depicted in the novel are from Muslim inhabited Delhi. The setting of the novel is pre-war which is the first world war. During that time the family of Mir Nihal the central characters are seeing suffering from the colonial impact on the social set up of Muslims. The major themes include dangers of Muslim identity, hybrid issues, colonial atrocities, and cultural distortion. The novel has invariably received and analyzed through postcolonial lens.

The novel was written in the previous century depicting the colonial setting, it would be interesting to perform a cultural discourse analysis along the parameters of schema theory to revisit the major commonly occurring themes. Discourse analysis involves not only text and talk but it also deals with the sounds, images, audios, videos, and films. On the other hand, the schema theory converges the multimodal nature of the language in terms of their ethnic metaphor embodied experiences which are derived from lived pieces of arbitrary language. For this purpose, specific and clear vocabulary is used to infuse the required image through the verbal imagery. Since the readers and the audience have already experienced the referents of those specialized vocabulary, mentioning them in the texts triggers their mental images.

The aim of this study is to trace the specialized vocabulary items or codes which simultaneously evoke an image of smells and represent some aspect of the Delhi culture depicted through the imagery. To achieve this objective the study adopts Braun and Clarke's analytical framework for qualitative data coding. This analytical approach is rather inductive as it allows the data to direct the researchers and lead them towards findings of the study. It allows to stepwise select

excerpts from the large texts, find codes, categories the data according to dominant and frequent elements and analyze accordingly.

The culture is intertwined with language. Sapir and Whorf are of the view that the way we see our world is directed by the lens of language that we use. Although the setting of the novel is old and the medium of the text is English yet there are traces of cultural tags, expressions, images, and culturally specific items in the depiction of characters, places, events, and even atmosphere.

Literature Review

Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* has garnered critical attention as a seminal work that encapsulates the cultural, psychological, and political dislocation experienced by Indian Muslims during British colonial rule. Scholars have widely explored the novel's representation of colonial resistance, cultural decline, binary oppositions, and identity crisis.

Alam (2016) emphasizes the private space as a refuge for anti-colonial imagination in *Twilight in Delhi*. He argues that the protagonist Mir Nihal, unable to openly resist British dominance, retreats into an imagined Islamic past, crafting a linear and selective historical narrative that reinforces a monolithic Muslim identity. This narrative omits complexities, including the Muslim colonization of India, to serve a unified resistance against the British (Alam, 2016). Partha Chatterjee's distinction between the "material" and "spiritual" domains further elucidates this internal resistance. In Ali's portrayal, the cultural practices, poetry, and language of the private sphere become tools to sustain identity under colonial threat (Alam, 2016).

on this, Khuram et al. (2024) examine the novel through a Fanonian lens of psychological and sociocultural resistance. They position *Twilight in Delhi* as a parable for reclaiming national consciousness, highlighting how Ali critiques colonial subjugation by illuminating the distress and resistance within traditional Muslim society. According to their analysis, resistance is not limited to direct political action but is embedded in cultural memory, language, and historical consciousness (Khuram et al., 2024). The novel thus becomes an act of decolonization, advocating for a rediscovery of cultural dignity through literature.

Pervez (2018) investigates the structuralist concept of binary opposition within the narrative, emphasizing the symbolic contrast between father and son, Mir Nihal and Asghar. The former embodies the decaying yet dignified Muslim traditions, while the latter represents modernity and British cultural influence. These oppositions extend to romantic versus unromantic, conservative versus liberal, and East versus West, signifying deeper societal ruptures and generational conflicts that highlight colonial cultural imposition (Pervez, 2018).

Lakshmi (2020) approaches the novel from the perspective of cultural studies, underscoring how the generational conflict between Mir Nihal and Asghar reflects broader cultural clashes between Islamic and Western traditions. She notes that Ali transforms Delhi into a "living entity" symbolizing the decline of a civilization. The first part of the novel celebrates the beauty of Muslim culture, while the second turns elegiac, portraying decay and cultural loss due to British intervention. Language and imagery in the novel serve as vehicles of resistance and mourning, emphasizing the emotional toll of colonial modernity (Lakshmi, 2020).

These perspectives converge on the idea that *Twilight in Delhi* is not merely a historical novel but a nuanced critique of colonialism. The use of memory, symbolic space, cultural binaries, and psychological introspection forms a rich tapestry of resistance. The fictional narrative becomes a site for preserving dignity and identity, especially in a time when public political expression was stifled.

Discussion and Analysis

The following table is extracted from the novel's text. It depicted the total number of excerpts which is eleven, the total codes derived from the text, and their categorization. Only those excerpts are collected which appeal to the sense of smell.

Table 1 Depicting the images of smells as representative of Delhi's Culture			
Sr No	Text	Codes	Cultural aspect
1	some have jasmine garlands ... The smell from the flowers.. escapes a few yards of air	Jasmine garlands, the flowers	Street flower sellers
2	his servant Ghafoor ... was a gay bird...the oil trickling down... long coats smelling of strong attar...	Smelling strong attar	Character description with attar
3	...the smell of the gutters and the damp was mixed with the pungent odor of uncastrated goats	Smell of gutter, odor of uncastrated goats	A blend of urban and rural aspect
4	The real beauty of the flower lies in its smell,' ... 'But I am such an evil-smelling flower	Beauty of flowers lies in its smell	Verbal seduction and prostitution
5	Rose water was kept in long flasks, and fresh jasmine flowers were laid on a platter. The scented smoke rose and mingled with the aroma of the flowers and filled the house with its sacred smell ... the whole family sat waiting for Asghar to begin reading the meelad.	Rose water, jasmine, scented smoke rose, aroma of flowers, sacred smell	Sacred smells of Meelad
6	The smell of incense and myrrh went into his nostrils ... his heart was filled with the glory of God and the fervor of Islam.	Smell of incense	Smells of flowers on Meelad
7	It rained ... the pleasant smell of the earth rose all around	The pleasant smell of the earth	Petrichor
8	He passed through Balli Maran... his nostrils were filled with the smell of drugs and medicines ... With the smell the thought of death came into his mind.	Smell of drugs and medicine	Depiction of hakeem's shop
9	...roasting meat on their fire. And the smell of ghee, fat, oil and burning meat filled the air.	The smell of ghee, fat, oil and burning meat	Street foods of Delhi
10	Sharfullah, however, suffered the most, for his beard was also besmeared with	Foul smelling oil	Making fun of someone's smell

	the foul-smelling oil; and everyone had a hearty laugh at him.		
11	Grandfather Iqbal was giving ... a very fine-smelling rose	Fine smelling rose	Showing regard

Analysis:

According to the selected data it is evident that the author of the novel depicts diversity in smells. These are pleasant and soothing, pungent, and irritating, obnoxious and disturbing etc. Ali uses scent of attar as a signature for Ghafoor's masculinity. Attar is used to depict the seductive element of his character (2). On the other hand, a conversation between a prostitute and Asghar reveal that mentioning flowers' fragrance is a pivotal part of verbal seduction see (4). It is important to note that the fragrance of flowers is neutral, however these flowers are used for representing sacred religious sentiments as depicted in Melaad. On the contrary, flowers associated with prostitution are considered in discriminatory tagged terms. There were segments of society which are considered as taboos. The use if smells reflect the conflicting ideas associated with them along with the class differentiation.

In (1) (5) (6) the mention of flowers' scent depicts the event of Melaad and use of flowers for religious purpose. It is a typical depiction of any Melaad which is adorned with flowers' smell. In the (8) the smells of typical hakeem shop which has drugs and medicine shows the culture of going to a hakeem instead of a clinic in those days. (7) on the other hand, it is mentioned in the context of rain touching the earth. This feature represents petrichor. The merging of smell of street flowers with the mention of gutters smell puts a sharp contrast in the novel. This symbol of merging smells shows that various segments of society mingle yet they remain isolated. For instance, people like Asghar visit the brothels and meet prostitutes yet they remain apart as prostitution is considered a taboo. However, this mingling does not allow the barriers to dissolve as the elites and the prostitutes remain apart.

Delhi street foods are depicted with imagery full of images, sounds and smells. Fr instance the smell of oil and ghee mixing with the burning of meat is mentioned to describe the culture of Delhi in full color (10). This aroma also represents class distribution as well as religious differences of the Hindus and the Muslims of Delhi. The basic religious difference lies in the fact that some Hindu sects do not consider eating meat as acceptable. Moreover, the roasted meat is something that only the elites would afford. So, this aroma identifies class distribution as well as religious difference found in Delhi of 1940's.

Conclusion:

The novel contains several images of smell. These images help in describing a character, presenting a religious event such as Melaad, showing regard to other by presenting sweet smelling flowers, portray the taboos of society such as prostitution, imaging a hakeem's shop which is a common cultural practice, and making fun of a character who has obnoxious smelling oil dripping from his beard. Hence the picturesque regarding smells is dynamic and diverse.

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