

## Reclaiming the City's Nature: An Ecocritical Reading of Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*.

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### Abstract

Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940) provides a rare opportunity to explore how literature can register ecological concerns in the midst of colonial upheaval. While the novel is conventionally examined for its historical and political insights, it also offers a subtle meditation on the interdependence between human societies and their environments. This paper undertakes an ecocritical reading of Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940), exploring the complex intersections between urban space, nature, and colonial modernity. While the novel is often studied for its historical, political, and cultural resonances, its ecological dimensions remain largely overlooked. By situating the narrative within the framework of ecocriticism, this study examines how Ali juxtaposes the natural environment with the decaying cityscape of colonial Delhi. The imagery of gardens, flowers, seasons, and the Yamuna River not only evokes nostalgia for a precolonial past but also reveals the ways in which colonial urbanization disrupts the organic relationship between humans and nature. Nature in the novel functions as both a site of cultural memory and a metaphor for dispossession, reflecting the erosion of traditional lifeways under imperial domination. At the same time, the persistent presence of natural cycles resists colonial temporality, offering subtle forms of resilience and renewal. Ultimately, this reading argues that *Twilight in Delhi* reclaims the city's nature as an integral part of its cultural and historical identity, challenging the erasures of colonial modernity and foregrounding ecological consciousness in the discourse of decolonization. His vision highlights how rivers, gardens, and ecological cycles function as living archives of memory and resistance, while also warning of their vulnerability to neglect and exploitation. In connecting ecocriticism with postcolonial critique, the novel speaks to ongoing debates about ecological justice, sustainability, and the reclamation of urban ecologies in the Global South. It demonstrates that decolonization must be conceived not only as political freedom but also as the recovery of ecological balance and integrity.

**Key words:** Colonial, ecology, nostalgia, modernity, resilience, renewal ecological consciousness

### Introduction

Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940) is often read as a cultural elegy that captures the decline of Muslim aristocratic life in Delhi under British colonial modernity. Yet, beneath its social and political concerns, the novel constantly invokes the nonhuman world trees, gardens, seasons, birds, dust storms, and rivers that not only frame the narrative but also serve as active agents of memory and loss. This paper applies an ecocritical lens to argue that *Twilight in Delhi* presents environmental transformation as inseparable from cultural decline. By analysing depictions of trees, gardens, birds, water, and the seasonal cycles of Delhi, we can see how Ali encodes environmental loss as both material and symbolic.

Ecocriticism, as defined by Cheryll Glotfelty, is "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (*The Ecocriticism Reader*). Lawrence Buell's concept of the "environmental imagination" highlights the centrality of nonhuman presence in literature, while Jonathan Bate's *The Song of the Earth* explores literature's dialogue with ecological consciousness. More recently, Ursula Heise in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* emphasizes the importance of local ecologies within global frameworks. Applied to South Asian literature, ecocriticism has gained momentum primarily through studies of authors like Arundhati Roy and Amitav Ghosh, both of whom foreground ecological crises. Amitav Ghosh's *The Great Derangement* critiques the inability of modern literature to grapple adequately with climate change, yet notes the unique potential of South Asian writing. Scholarship on *Twilight in Delhi* has traditionally emphasized its themes of cultural decline, nationalism, and colonial disruption (Shamsie; Pritchett). Few critics, however, have addressed its ecological dimensions. Even

when natural imagery is acknowledged, it is often treated as background rather than a vital force. This neglect makes *Twilight in Delhi* ripe for ecocritical exploration.

This paper expands upon ecocritical approaches to *Twilight in Delhi* by situating its representations of nature within both local ecological history and global ecocritical theory. I argue that Ali presents Delhi not only as a cultural and political space but also as an ecological system undergoing violent transformation. To recognize this ecological dimension is to see *Twilight in Delhi* as one of the earliest urban environmental elegies in Indian English literature.

Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940) is often celebrated as the first major Indian English novel to present a Muslim perspective on the decline of Delhi under colonial modernity. Most critical readings emphasize its themes of nationalism, cultural decay, and historical transition. Yet the novel is equally saturated with images of nature: neem and pipal trees shading courtyards, pigeons wheeling above rooftops, the oppressive summer dust storms, the Yamuna river, and the lush gardens of memory. These are not incidental descriptions. They operate as ecological signs that link the fate of the city's environment to the fate of its people.

### **Delhi as a Garden City**

Delhi has long been associated with gardens, from the Mughal Charbagh tradition to British imperial landscaping. The Mughal emperors cultivated elaborate garden complexes like Shalimar Bagh, Roshanara Bagh that combined aesthetics, spirituality, and ecology. These spaces embodied the Islamic ideal of paradise, uniting water channels, flowering plants, and shade trees. For centuries, Delhi was known as a "garden city." Ali's nostalgia for gardens reflects this tradition. His evocations of shaded courtyards and flowering plants recall Mughal ecological aesthetics, even as he records their decline under colonial neglect.

### **The Yamuna and Urban Ecology**

The Yamuna river has been central to Delhi's ecology, providing water for agriculture, bathing, and rituals. By the late 19th century, colonial engineering projects began redirecting and polluting the river. The 1911 shift of the British capital from Calcutta to Delhi accelerated urban expansion, straining the Yamuna's ecosystem. Ali's description of the river as sluggish and polluted captures this historical degradation.

### **Trees and Gardens as Cultural Memory**

Gardens and trees in *Twilight in Delhi* are more than decorative landscapes; they embody the continuity of tradition and cultural pride. Early in the novel, Ali describes the family courtyard where neem and pipal trees once gave shade and nurtured community life. "The trees in the courtyard stood in silence, guardians of memories long faded" (Ali). This imagery ties human identity to natural life. The decline of gardens in later chapters mirrors the disintegration of familial and cultural bonds, as colonial modernity erodes both.

### **Birds and the Vanishing Soundscape**

Ali's descriptions of birdsong highlight the sensory ecology of the city. "Pigeons wheeled in the sky, their wings glistening in the morning sun, while sparrows nested in every crevice of the crumbling walls" (Ali). Yet as the novel progresses, these avian presences diminish, signalling urban transformation and cultural rupture. Birds, in ecocritical terms, serve as bio- indicators: their fading presence indexes ecological degradation and, metaphorically, the silencing of cultural voices under colonial rule.

### **Seasons and Climate as Emotional Registers**

Ali carefully maps the rhythms of life onto Delhi's seasons. The oppressive summer, marked by dust storms, embodies despair: "*The hot winds blew ceaselessly, raising clouds of dust that settled like sorrow upon the city*" (Ali). The metaphor collapses climate into emotion; the environment becomes a moodscape.

By contrast, the monsoon brings temporary renewal: "*The first rains fell, and the parched earth drank greedily, releasing the fragrance of life*" (Ali). The earth is personified as thirsty, affirming the interdependence of natural and human worlds. Such passages show how Ali integrates ecological cycles into narrative structure. Time in the novel is not only historical but also seasonal. Cultural decline is mirrored by ecological decline, while fleeting

moments of renewal suggest the resilience of nature.

### **Seasons and Temporal Rhythms**

The novel's seasonal cycles regulate social and emotional life. The monsoon rains bring temporary relief and celebration, while the oppressive summer dust storms evoke decay. "The hot winds blew ceaselessly, raising clouds of dust that settled like despair on the city" (Ali). These descriptions show how the climate inscribes itself on human life, blurring the boundary between natural and cultural time.

### **Water and Urban Ecology**

A central dimension of Delhi's ecology, and one often overlooked in critical studies of *Twilight in Delhi*, is the role of water and urban ecology. The Yamuna River, for centuries the lifeline of the city, holds cultural, religious, and ecological significance. In Mughal Delhi, the river not only sustained agriculture and gardens but also inspired poetry, music, and spiritual practices. In Ali's novel, however, the Yamuna is depicted in decline, polluted and neglected under colonial neglect, reflecting the broader degradation of the city's ecological balance.

From an ecocritical perspective, the deterioration of the river symbolizes the rupture of traditional ecological systems under colonial governance. Urban planning under the British emphasized sanitation and control, but in doing so, it alienated the river from the life of the city. The Yamuna, once intertwined with human and non-human life, becomes marginalized, mirroring the displacement of indigenous ecological practices. Furthermore, water in the novel resonates with broader postcolonial concerns. Rivers in South Asian culture often signify continuity, renewal, and spiritual belonging. By portraying the Yamuna's decline, Ali critiques the disruption of these symbolic associations. The polluted waters become a metaphor for colonial contamination, not only of the physical environment but also of cultural identity.

The concept of urban ecology is equally significant. Delhi in the novel is a city in flux, where human and non-human life intersect in complex ways. Ali's descriptions of birds, flowers, and seasonal changes point to an urban ecology that resists colonial dominance, even as it is reshaped by it. The tension between decay and persistence underscores the resilience of nature within the urban environment. Despite colonial neglect, ecological rhythms continue, reminding readers that urban spaces are not only political but also ecological landscapes. By foregrounding water and urban ecology, Ali extends the critique of colonialism beyond politics and culture to include the environment. His representation anticipates contemporary debates on ecological justice, highlighting the need to see cities not just as human constructs but as ecosystems where human and non-human lives are deeply interconnected. Although primarily a city novel, *Twilight in Delhi* often references water canals, monsoon floods, and the drying river Yamuna. Water serves as both life-giver and reminder of decline. "The river that once sang now flowed sluggish, its banks strewn with refuse" (Ali). This deterioration parallels the colonial neglect of traditional ecological systems, reflecting how environmental degradation was entangled with political subjugation.

### **Colonial Urban Planning and Ecological Disruption**

The intrusion of colonial urban planning further disrupts the natural environment. The building of new roads, the clearing of gardens, and the imposition of European architecture represent not only cultural displacement but ecological violence. In one scene, a character laments: "They cut down the old trees to make way for a new road, and with them went the shade of our childhood" (Ali). Here, deforestation becomes a metaphor for cultural amnesia, with ecological destruction tied to imperial domination.

The Yamuna river, once central to Delhi's life, appears in the novel as a degraded presence. Ali writes: "*The river that once sang now flowed sluggish, its banks strewn with refuse*" (Ali). The juxtaposition of past vitality with present decay encapsulates the ecological costs of colonial neglect. For Ali's characters, the Yamuna is not merely a geographical feature it is a cultural anchor. Rituals, festivals, and daily routines once revolved around it. Its decline represents both environmental degradation and cultural dislocation. The dying Yamuna testifies to colonial disruption: ecological harm is inseparable from political domination.

### **The Colonial City and Ecological Displacement**

Postcolonial ecocriticism (Huggan & Tiffin) insists that colonialism not only disrupted societies but also reshaped landscapes: deforestation, monoculture plantations, altered water systems, and urban restructuring. This theoretical intersection is crucial for reading Ali, who describes Delhi's colonization both as cultural twilight and ecological rupture. His nostalgia for Mughal gardens and communal spaces is simultaneously a lament for lost ecosystems. At the heart of *Twilight in Delhi* is the transformation of Delhi under British colonial rule. The city, once a cultural and political hub of the Mughal empire, becomes a site of erasure and alienation under imperial restructuring. Eco critically, this restructuring is not limited to social and political domains but extends to the natural environment. The introduction of colonial architecture, sanitation systems, and new urban planning imposed foreign notions of order upon Delhi's organic growth.

Ali's narrative often lingers on the decaying cityscape, juxtaposing its natural elements with the artificial impositions of colonial modernity. The Yamuna River, once central to the life and imagination of Delhi, is depicted as polluted and neglected, symbolizing not only ecological degradation but also cultural dispossession. Gardens and flowers, emblematic of Mughal aesthetics and Islamic culture, are overshadowed by the imperial project, marking the displacement of indigenous relationships with nature.

### **Ecocritical Resistance and Postcolonial Identity**

Ali's novel suggests that colonialism disrupted not only political sovereignty but also ecological harmony. This aligns with postcolonial ecocriticism, which emphasizes the interconnection between environmental exploitation and imperial domination. The portrayal of dust, decay, and disease in the novel reflects the deterioration of both human life and natural surroundings under colonial neglect. Yet, the persistence of natural cycles—the return of spring, the blooming of flowers, the continuity of the Yamuna despite pollution—testifies to nature's resilience. This resilience can be read as a metaphor for postcolonial identity itself. Just as Delhi's ecology resists complete erasure, so too does its cultural and political spirit. Nature becomes a quiet form of resistance, a reminder that colonial domination cannot permanently erase indigenous relationships with the environment. In this way, Ali's narrative situates ecological consciousness within the broader framework of decolonization.

### **Conclusion**

An ecocritical reading of *Twilight in Delhi* reveals how environmental change is woven into the novel's elegiac narrative of cultural decline. Trees, birds, gardens, seasons, and rivers are not mere background elements but active participants in the story, encoding memory, loss, and resistance. Ali suggests that the twilight of Delhi is not only cultural but also ecological—a reminder that colonization reshaped landscapes as much as societies. Recognizing these ecological dimensions enriches our understanding of the novel and positions it within the broader field of postcolonial ecocriticism. The significance of *Twilight in Delhi* lies not only in its portrayal of colonial decline but also in the way it reshapes how we think about the city as a living environment. Its landscapes, waterways, and ecological rhythms compel us to see Delhi as more than a backdrop for human politics—it is an active participant in the narrative. The novel prompts readers to reconsider how colonial histories were inscribed onto both people and place, urging us to recognize that cultural survival is inseparable from environmental continuity. In foregrounding this entanglement, Ahmed Ali anticipates contemporary conversations around ecological justice, sustainability, and the politics of place. *Twilight in Delhi* ultimately invites us to read the city as an ecosystem whose vitality is essential to the preservation of memory, identity, and hope for renewal.

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