

OBJECTIFICATION AND SUPPRESSION OF WOMEN IN *TWILIGHT IN DELHI*: A MARXIST FEMINIST READING

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Abstract

*This research explores the victimization and objectification of women in Ahmad Ali's novel *Twilight in Delhi* from a Marxist feminist perspective. The theory states that the main cause of women's oppression and discrimination is capitalism. In *Twilight in Delhi*, patriarchal practices are evident in the societal expectations imposed on women. Educational opportunities for women are restricted, and they also face many challenges, such as restrictions on personal freedom; women have no right to choose their own marriage. In *Twilight in Delhi*, women are portrayed as objects, viewed by men as possessions to be owned and controlled. Women occupy a disadvantaged position in society, often under the leadership of men. Their actions are restricted by the authority of their husbands or brothers, whereas men have the freedom to disregard the wishes of their wives, sisters, and mothers due to their dominant societal role. The society is manufactured by men and characterized by oppression and depression. Women are suppressed by men throughout the novel. The novel reflects the decline of traditional Muslim culture and aristocracy, and it depicts that women were objectified through traditional gender roles and that their rights were restricted by societal norms in the early 20th century in colonial India.*

Keywords: *Objectification, Suppression, Twilight in Delhi, Marxism, Feminism*

1. Introduction

Ahmad Ali, a Pakistani novelist known for his contributions to Urdu literature, wrote the notable novel *Twilight in Delhi*, which explores cultural and societal changes in Delhi during the early 20th century. The novel, written in 1940 and set in the early 20th century against the backdrop of British rule, depicts the erosion of traditional Muslim culture and aristocracy. It explores the clash between traditional and modern values as seen through the story of the Mir Nihal family and the city of Delhi itself. It depicts the decline of the Mughal era and the impact of British colonialism on Indian society. The term *Twilight* means the diminishing of darkness and the coming of daylight. Mir Nihal's character in *Twilight in Delhi* represents the dominant male figure. Mir Nihal reflects traditional patriarchal values in the novel and shows the power and gender roles prevalent during that time. Azhar (2022) states that the novel highlights Mir Nihal's struggle to preserve his culture and prevent the younger generation from adopting colonial ways, showing the clash between tradition and modernity in the novel and reflecting the theme of cultural identity and the impact of colonialism on society.

Twilight in Delhi highlights the challenges faced by women in a patriarchal society. Women of the early 20th century in colonial India faced many problems, such as restrictions on educational opportunities and personal freedom, and had no right to choose their own marriages. Women were not allowed to live independently and were denied the right to work. In addition, men were free to enjoy their lives, but women were confined within the boundary walls of their homes. Women are objectified in the novel *Twilight in Delhi*. Women's desires and dreams were repressed by men throughout. Bilqeece in the novel is the wife of Asghar, an innocent and cultured woman who faces many problems and dies of tuberculosis in the end. "All the female characters of the novel were marginalized and were victims of patriarchy" (Azhar, 2022, p. 172). The novel *Twilight in Delhi* is about the sufferings of women and the lives of Muslims suppressed by the British. The novel covers almost every phase of a woman's life, such as birth, childhood, marriage, and widowhood. The title *Twilight in Delhi* is used symbolically and thematically to represent the decline, downfall, and destruction of Delhi's culture in the early 20th century.

This study explores the victimization of women and patriarchal practices in *Twilight in Delhi* from a Marxist Feminist perspective. Marxist feminism is a subtype of feminism that promotes dismantling capitalism to empower women. Marxist feminism examines how women are treated in the workplace and society. It focuses on how capitalism impacts gender inequality. It also focuses on how the economic system affects women's lives. A famous Hungarian Marxist, George Lukács, defined Marxism in 1922 as "a scientific method of critiquing art and literature to bring to the front the underlying forces and values that have produced the text or a piece of artistic creation and which are reflected in it." Marxist feminism is built on two main pillars: Marxism and Feminism. Marxism is an economic theory that argues that the capitalist system of ownership and production perpetuates inequality and exploitation. Feminism, on the other hand, is a social theory that focuses on gender-based oppression and aims to achieve gender equality. Gender and class are two of the most important identities that Marxist Feminist literary theory considers. Other identities, like race, sexuality, and nationality, also play a key role in shaping an individual's experiences and perspectives. Marxist feminism is a form of feminism that investigates and explains the ways in which women are oppressed through the economic systems of society and private property. Marxist feminism can be applied to *Twilight in Delhi* because it explores the relationship between economic factors and gender inequality in colonial India. The novel portrays societal changes during the decline of the Mughal Empire. Marxist feminism recognizes that class structures intersect with gender roles and addresses distinct experiences of oppression for women in different social classes. The present study aims to explore how women are objectified and deprived of their rights through the lens of social class and traditional gender roles in the novel *Twilight in Delhi*.

1.1 Research Objectives

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- i. To investigate the major patriarchal practices in *Twilight in Delhi*.
- ii. To explore how women objectified and deprived of their due rights in the novel.

1.2 Research Questions

This study seeks to address the following questions:

- i. What are the major patriarchal practices in *Twilight in Delhi*?
- ii. How are women objectified and deprived of their due rights in the novel?

1.3 Significance of the study

The study provides insights for students, teachers, and researchers who are interested in Marxist Feminist studies. They will be able to explore other novels through the lens of Marxist Feminist perspective. In this study, one of the important points is to highlight the role of women in society and the fact that they are not given equal opportunities in social circles.

2. Literature Review

In literature review, different views of researchers regarding the novel *Twilight in Delhi* are discussed. Bhatti (2021) explored the novel from a postcolonial perspective, analyzing the arrogant attitude of the colonizers toward the colonized. It explains that how the symbols in the novel highlight the negative effects of colonization on India's rich culture and brilliant era of Muslim rule. Ali's successfully identifies the evils, harms, and barbarism of colonizers on Muslim culture. Yaqub (2018) states that Ahmad Ali portrays Delhi in a state of ruin which was once a symbol of strength. There are many instances in the novel that the colonial Delhi has been associated with gloom death and darkness. *Twilight in Delhi* reflects that how female gender is socially constructed within the south Asian context. The unique personality traits of South Asian women portrayed in the novel highlight the impact of their socialization on shaping their identities.

Kazmi (2022) explores how changing cityscape of postcolonial urban transition contribute to the creation of nostalgic longing in *Twilight in Delhi*. It focuses on the memorization of space and compares the ways in which narrative memory frames the perception of urbanization. The study analyses the impact of transformation of the city with colonization and decolonization on Muslims.

Jen (2023) examines the novel *Twilight in Delhi* that how the "Self" and the "Other" interact with the historical backdrop of British colonialism. The tumultuous relationship between the "Self" and the "Other" discrimination reigns supreme and establishing power dynamic. The colonizers viewing themselves as superior deem the colonized "Other" perpetuating a toxic hierarchy. The British by a sense of "Self" proclaimed superiority subjected the Indians.

Zahra (2020) examines modernist discourses that highlight feminine sensuality as a symbol of female autonomy, often rejecting religious or traditional limitations on expression. The study analyzes the portrayal of feminine sensuality among Indian women in *Twilight in Delhi* and explores their perceptions of acceptable choices within the cultural framework of Indian society. The patriarchal structure of society has created psychological barriers in the minds of Indian women, preventing them from fulfilling their desires, even within marital relationship.

Babar (2023) explores post-colonial textual reading and interpretive analysis of the novel *Twilight in Delhi*. The novel depicts Muslim life and culture in Delhi during the 20th century. This study demonstrates the intermingling of cultures through the struggle between the colonial culture with the conventional Indian culture portraying characters clothing, speech, and interactions with one another. The research focused on different characters and highlights their situation regarding society to present their culture.

Pervez (2018) analysed *Twilight in Delhi* through the lens of binary oppositions, focusing on contrasts such as Delhi culture versus realism, and construction versus destruction. Binary opposition, a foundational concept in structuralism-a sociological theory, is used to explore the relationships between different groups, such as the upper and lower classes or the able-bodied

and disabled. The study investigates the characters' true status through this binary opposition, highlighting their lifestyles, behaviors, preferences, and dislikes.

Junejo (2020) analyzed *Twilight in Delhi* through the point of view of Freud's psychoanalytic theory. It focuses on exploring the characters internal conflicts, desires, and dreams, particularly those Mir Nihal, Asghar, and Bilqeece, within the colonial Indian context. Additionally, it investigates the dynamics of the id, ego, and superego, as well as the characters unconscious motivations, human sexuality, and the tension between opposing forces in their minds throughout the novel.

Babar (2023) analyzes *Twilight in Delhi* from perspective of cultural intermingling; A post-colonial criticism. This study centers on post-colonial textual reading and interpretive analysis of *Twilight in Delhi* by Ahmad Ali. By utilizing the theoretical framework of post-colonial criticism, this study seeks to explore and analyze the characters, practices, behaviors, and activities within the novel. Its main focus is on uniqueness Muslim culture at colonial times, the culture showed resistance against the dominant and non-dominant cultures.

Alvi (2019) analyzes *Twilight in Delhi* from perspective of violence and political resistance. The study defines violence arises from colonization, particularly in the context of liberating the colonized mind or nation. It examines the violence and politics of resistance through various images and events depicted in the novel, with a focus on both physical and psychological decolonization.

Rasool (2019) analyzed the novel from perspective of subversion of British raj; Delhi as metaphor of resistance in *Twilight in Delhi*. Taking the city of Delhi as a metaphor of socio-cultural resistance against the Farangis and their Raj, the study explored that the overwhelming nostalgia and the great sense of loss are subversive in their nature.

Joshi (2002) argued that Ali's approach in *Twilight in Delhi* is paradoxical as he adopts the English language and its literary forms but deliberately avoids incorporating the cultural influences associated with them. This technique aims to create a distinction between different cultural narratives, introduce new values and identities, and challenges colonial thought patterns. Essentially, postcolonial writers use the dominant language to reject colonial teachings, present their perspectives instill new view points, and most importantly, emphasize their cultural identity.

Andleeb (2020) analyzed Delhi in *Twilight in Delhi* from two perspectives; Hope and Despair. The study aims to deconstruct the two opposite ideas of hope and despair in *Twilight in Delhi*. This study explores the significance of Delhi as a symbol of political energy which distributes power or snatches it as an active agent of power-history.

Khalid (2024) investigates colonial universal truth and its proliferation in the context of colonial India in *Twilight in Delhi*. The colonizers created an illusionary picture of substandard of the women in terms of race, class, gender and status. Women were realized that they are excluded of any privileges and compensation; consequently, deformation was created in the society in form of gender issues by the colonizers. The study investigates the contemporary functioning of power structures inherited from colonialism on a worldwide level in the name of modernity.

Khan (2021) explored the underlying domestic culture depicted in *Twilight in Delhi* by employing M. A. K Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG), which posits that meaning is embedded within the clause structure. The primary focus of the study is to linguistically analyze the repercussions of social imbalance within family dynamics. Consequently, instances

of implicit authority were observed using language to intimidate and oppress female characters. The analysis revealed a prevalent pattern of power abuse aimed at exerting control over women through various linguistic processes.

Despite numerous analyses by critics and researchers from various perspectives on *Twilight in Delhi*, there is a notable gap in the existing literature as the specific perspective of Marxist Feminism have not been applied to this novel. Therefore, this research aims to fill this gap by applying Marxist Feminist theory to *Twilight in Delhi*, providing insights into the portrayal of gender dynamics and patriarchal structures within the novel. Furthermore, literary research continues to explore stylistic analysis in diverse contexts, examining devices like asyndeton to build suspense and control narrative pacing (Muneeb, Wahab, Fatima, & Ullah, 2025). However, a clear examination of women's objectification through the specific lens of Marxist Feminist theory remains unexplored.

3. Methodology

This research is qualitative in nature. We are going to apply Marxist Feminism to this novel. The source of primary data is the original text of the novel *Twilight in Delhi* written By Ahmed Ali. While for secondary sources, we will study different books, research papers, and articles and will also get help from the internet.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Patriarchal Practices in *Twilight in Delhi*

In the novel *Twilight in Delhi*, female characters are marginalized and oppressed by the patriarchal society that they live in. Mir Nihal, the head of the family, was a wealthy patriarch who indulged in extramarital affairs. The women in the family were closely monitored and had no control over personal matters like marriage. They were prohibited from speaking up in defense of their rights. In the novel, the imposition of purdah on Muslim women's is manipulated by the feudal society to the extent that it becomes oppression. This oppression of women purdah was widespread in the subcontinent during the period when British influence was growing. Ali states, "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" (*Twilight in Delhi*, 1993, p.32). This shows that the women were enclosed in the houses, protecting them from the gaze of men and safeguarding their beauty and virtue with countless bricks. Women were not allowed to breathe independently.

In *Twilight in Delhi*, the role of women is portrayed within the context of traditional Indian society, where they are often confined to domestic roles and subjected to the expectations and restrictions imposed by patriarchal norms. At that time, women were considered as a burden. The marriage of Sheikh Mohammad Sadiq's fourteen-year-old niece with Ghafoor primarily occurred because she became perceived as a burden to her uncle and aunt after her parent's death. Without considering the age differences between the couple, they tried to get rid of the responsibility. Soon after the marriage, she dies of an ulcer in the womb.

The characters in the novel, Baban Jan and Mushtari Bai, vividly illustrate the objectification of women. Mushtari Bai expressed that the true beauty of a flower lies in its fragrance. However, she lamented, I am such an evil-smelling flower that I repulse everyone. I am that candle which burns itself, shedding tears of blood and blackening the walls of the niche with its smoke. No one cares for me. No one ever marries them. No one actually wants to give them respect.

4.1.2 Victimization of Women

The female characters were subjected to victimization and restricted within their traditional roles. They try their best to fulfill the expectations set for them by society and culture, assuming roles such as wife, mother, sister, and daughter. It's evident that despite being aware of her husband's extramarital affairs, Begum Nihal remains the pillar of support for the entire family, notwithstanding her emotional distress.

In *Twilight in Delhi*, in the traditional roles defined by society, the societal norms deprived women of their fundamental right to choose their life partner freely. The right to choose a groom is given in every religion, but here, females were never given the opportunity to express their preferences regarding their marriages and were instead married off to any man chosen by their parents without their consent.

Another victim of this so-called societal traditional role was Mehro, a younger daughter of Mir Nihal and sister of Asghar, who was compelled to marry a significantly older and disfigured man solely because her father mandated it. She was not allowed to question the selection and was not even allowed to see him before marriage itself. When Mehro finally had a look at him after the Nikkah, she accepted him as her fate. Her feelings were portrayed beautifully by the writer as "when after the Vida she saw Meraj she felt like a cow under the butcher's knife" (*Twilight in Delhi*, 1993, p.154). All women suppress their desires and dreams. Girls have no right to choose their husbands in a patriarchal society.

The novel *Twilight in Delhi* is set in a traditional society where men and women occupy separate spheres with limited interaction. Females are taught to follow the customs and values of a Muslim household as well as to obey male authority figures. They are trained to fulfill the role of a dutiful wife and to accept their future responsibilities gracefully. The character of Bilqeece exemplifies the resilience and agency of women within a patriarchal society. Bilqeece is shown to have been taught to behave properly, to cook well and behave like a good house wife. Despite societal restrictions favoring men, she adeptly oversees her household duties, demonstrating within societal confines. Her portrayal underscores women's ability to assert agency in restrictive environment. She internalized her pain and is unable to express herself openly due to societal expectations and norms. She is very depressed and broken hearted by the indifference of her Husband and his extramarital relationships with other women, yet she refrains from voicing any grievances and internalizes her emotions. Ali states "Asghar got more disgusted and annoyed, and treated his wife even worse" (*Twilight in Delhi*, 1993, p. 168). It reflects the challenges experienced by women in a patriarchal society. Asghar does not feel any attraction towards Bilqeece, after some time of marriage, Asghar no longer loved with Bilqeece.

4.1.3 Gender Discrimination

Ali vividly captures the realities of the society and sheds light on the struggles experienced by women. Gender discrimination is also emphasized in *Twilight in Delhi* through the characters of Mir Nihal and his son Asghar. Both characters are the product of the upper class, who enjoy insulting the Mughal family and Mirza Shahbaz Beig's family because of their low status. Both prostitutes led a secluded existence away from the nobility's social status. They were not embraced within the mainstream of society. People like Mir Nihal and his son Asghar, as well as the other feudalists of the society would visit them frequently, but they bound their women in their homes. It highlights the double-standard behavior exhibited by men. The gender-based bias exhibited by men towards women extended beyond the practice of purdah and also encompassed religious beliefs. The novel illustrates how Muslims deviate from Islamic

teachings; The Quran, explicitly states that a widow has the right to marry again after a specified waiting period following the death of her husband. In the past and even today, the women have been forbidden from remarrying, instead compelled to lead lives of self-denial. The plight of women remains constant despite advancements in every sphere of life. There is a considerable need for the enhancement of women rights. A society characterized by male dominance never wants women to succeed in any field. Women were not allowed to breathe independently, men were free to enjoy their lives, and women were confined to the four walls.

4.1.4 Double Standards of Marriage and Remarriage

Men in society do not face the same restrictions as women do when it comes to being widowed. Usually, upon the death of their wives, men tend to remarry promptly. In the novel, Mir Nihal's son Asghar is romantically interested in his sister-in-law and plans to marry her only six months after Bilqeece's death. Ali states "Hardly six months had passed since Bilqeece's death. Yet he was thinking of marrying again. How cruel is the heart of man!" (*Twilight in Delhi*, 1993, p. 200). It shows that in Hindu society, women are not granted the permission for remarriage while men have the freedom to engage in various activities without restriction. Only six months after the passing of his wife Bilqeece, Asghar seeks comfort in her wife Bilqeece's younger sister Zohra. The protagonist Mir Nihal's son, Shams, flirts with the housemaid after his wife's death. It is clear that the female characters in *Twilight in Delhi* were confined to the domestic sphere, unaware of the outside world, lacking any motivation to break free from the constraints of their homes to advocate for themselves or their daughters. In *Twilight in Delhi*, the dominance of men is depicted extensively, allowing them to engage in various activities and roles outside the home. However, women are confined within the boundaries of the home and restricted from participating in activities beyond domestic duties. This limitation reflects the societal norms and gender roles prevalent during that time.

4.2 Objectification of women in *Twilight in Delhi*

In the novel *Twilight in Delhi*, Ali has vividly drawn the picture of old Delhi and its Muslim inhabitants of that era. Women are victimized and suppressed by the men throughout the novel in various ways, and women are shown under the constant influence of patriarchal society. The image of women in the novel is the reflection of whole Indian society, means the female's characters portrayed by Ali is not only of family or particular group, it is the reflection of whole Indian society. The women are objectified and deprived of their due rights throughout the novel. Baban Jan is a young dancing girl and she is in a romantic relationship with Mir Nihal, who is a wealthy person. First, she used to live in Chaori Bazar but after becoming a mistress, she lives in a house rented by Mir Nihal, indicating a change in her living conditions. Here one can easily understand the reason of change in her living condition because she is dependent on Mir Nihal, she was unable to pay the rent by herself because she may not be educated enough to do a job and the reason behind it is that she is deprived of their due rights like education etc. Mir Nihal rented a house for her and in return she used to entertain Mir Nihal through conversation, songs, and her physical attributes. If she was allowed to do education and a job and was independent, she would never choose herself as an employee of Mir Nihal.

When Asghar and Bari came to see Mushtari Bai, she stated "Real beauty of a flower lies in its smell, but I am such an evil-smelling flower that I repulse everyone. I am that candle which burns its own self, shedding tears of blood, and blackens the walls of niche with its smoke. No one cares for me. I am like a caravan-serai where people come, rest their tired bodies for a while and depart" (*Twilight in Delhi*, 1993, p.53). She symbolizes her internal suffering, deep

emotional pain, and mark of sorrow and compares herself with resting place that people interact with them but do not form lasting attachments. Basically, Mushtari Bai paints a vivid picture of her inner feelings of isolation that people come to these courtesans to relieve their minds of domestic problems, everyone thinks of them as time pass and possession that they buy with money. But no one actually respects them, Mushtari Bai is not only talking about herself, through these lines she depicted the reality of women status in the society that women are not given their basic rights.

4.2.1 Degrading Women

Mushtari Bai talks about her misfortune and Asghar tries to deny it. “Bari, who was looking bored with this talk, said: ‘Oh, leave this philosophy of life aside. Give us a song, my dear’” (*Twilight in Delhi*, 1993, p. 53). From here, one can easily understand the insult of Mushtari Bai, she was already sad and was talking about her bad qualities but Bari didn’t give any importance to her talking and told her to sing a song for them, which shows dominancy of male gender and deprivation of women from their rights in the novel. She was in love with Asghar and it seems impossible to marry Asghar because a time ago Asghar was attached to her just and the cause was her entertainment and beauty, but now Asghar was in relationship with another women. And if Asghar was in true love with Mushtari Bai, there was a chance to marry Mushtari Bai because Asghar is (male, dominant gender) he can marry Mushtari Bai (female).

4.2.2 Women and her Sacrifices

In the novel, Asghar talks about mental health crisis of mother, Begum Nihal, and described her behavior as sitting and staring while reciting verses means that she were experiencing hallucinations, or emotional distress. All these signs are the indications of mental illness, trauma and stress and in this condition one may engage in self-harming actions. People usually do this when they have no reason for happiness and self-freedom and Begum Nihal was in exact same situations. Women at that time were not allowed to freely talk about their problems with husbands. Asghar also refers to these days as terrible.

Ironically, men at that time wanted women that were exactly created to their needs and desires, some like slim figure, some like fat, and some like good character, and they expected women to change herself for them because males are dominant gender, and there will be flaws in the males but no one care about it because of their dominancy, but didn’t want women with flaws.

4.2.3 Barrier to women Rights

When Sheikh Mohammad Sadiq said to Mir Nihal, “I have a niece, her parents have both died, and I am anxious about her marriage. You’ll forgives my presumptuousness, but.... ‘If you will give your consent,’ Sheikhji continued, ‘I shall marry her to your servant Ghafoor. Mir Nehal cleared his throat and asked: ‘How old is the girl? ‘She is about 13 14, but she is so healthy that she looks much older’”. This dialogue depicts a clear objectification of women and the deprivation of their due rights like education, love marriage etc. The sheikh asked Mir Nihal in a hesitated way like he was ashamed to be uncle of girl. He wanted to marry her niece with Mir Nihal servant. Her niece is barely thirteen years old but she was burden on him. She was orphan, instead of finding good, wealthy family for her; he wanted to marry her to servant who is quite older than her. And he didn’t even ask from niece about this proposal. They treated their daughters wife’s and others women as object, like they didn’t breathe, they have no hearts at all. Women were deprived of their due rights and were not asked before marriage. Here one can easily understand the insult and low status of women in the society.

Conclusion

To conclude, the present study investigates the patriarchal structure of society and the limited choices available to women. They are repressed, violated, marginalized, and manipulated at every turn. The novel is analyzed through the lens of social class struggles and gender roles. In *Twilight in Delhi*, patriarchal practices are evident in the societal expectations imposed on women. The novel portrays women primarily in two roles: housewives and dancing girls. Analyzed from a Marxist feminist perspective, *Twilight in Delhi* offers a profound critique of the ways in which women are objectified within the socio-economic and cultural framework of early 20th-century Delhi. The experiences of characters such as Zohra and Bilqees vividly illustrate the deep-rooted gender inequalities and the complex layers of oppression that women faced during that time. Zohra's unfulfilled desires and restricted existence highlight the societal constraints placed on women, reflecting how their aspirations and identities are suppressed by patriarchal norms. Similarly, Bilqees's life, marked by her conformity to traditional roles and expectations, underscores the sacrifices women are forced to make to uphold familial honor. Women were objectified and deprived of autonomy. As a whole, all Muslims were suppressed, but females faced even greater hardships. They were confined within the four walls of their homes, not allowed to live freely, and denied the right to make decisions about their own marriages. In contrast, men were free to enjoy their lives without such restrictions.

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