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**A Cognitive Linguistic Analysis of Twilight in Delhi through  
Prototype Theory**



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**Abstract**

This study applies Prototype Theory, a central model in cognitive linguistics, to interpret the characters, symbols, and themes in Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940). By analyzing cognitive-linguistic dimensions such as category gradience, centrality, and experience-based meaning, the paper uncovers how key figures (e.g., Mir Nihal), motifs (e.g., palm tree, pigeons), and colonial symbols (e.g., English boots) function as cultural prototypes. Through close textual analysis, the research demonstrates how these prototypes anchor the narrative and reflect cultural and psychological decline. The findings suggest that the erosion of these cognitive prototypes mirrors colonial disruption, identity fragmentation, and cultural decay in Indo-Muslim Delhi. This analysis supports the value of Prototype Theory as a literary-critical tool, particularly in postcolonial contexts where shifting categories and hybrid identities dominate the narrative terrain.

**Keywords:** Prototype Theory, Cognitive Linguistics, *Twilight in Delhi*, Symbolism, Cultural Decline, Postcolonial Identity

**Background of the Study**

Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940) is a canonical postcolonial novel capturing the socio-cultural disintegration of a Muslim household during British colonialism. While earlier studies have explored its historical narrative and postcolonial themes (Hussein, 2005; Yaqin, 2007), few have examined how readers cognitively process the novel's characters and symbols. Prototype Theory, pioneered by Rosch (1975), challenges traditional categorization by suggesting that human categories are structured around "best examples" rather than rigid boundaries. Applying this framework to literary analysis facilitates deeper insights into how symbolic elements such as the pigeons or Mir Nihal are mentally perceived and positioned within cultural prototypes. By interpreting these elements through the lens of Prototype Theory, we can understand how readers perceive the novel's portrayal of tradition and modernity not only semantically, but cognitively.

### **Statement of the Purpose**

The primary purpose of this study is to explore how Prototype Theory enhances the literary interpretation of *Twilight in Delhi*. Specifically, it identifies the central prototypes within the novel and analyzes their transformations in response to colonial disruption. By doing so, the paper demonstrates how Prototype Theory facilitates understanding of cultural decline, identity fluidity, and the erosion of traditional value systems in literary narratives.

### **Literature Review**

#### **1. Studies on *Twilight in Delhi***

Scholars have praised Ali's narrative for its poetic lamentation of a lost culture. Hussein (2005) highlights how the novel captures "the elegiac tones of a dying civilization" (p. 61). Yaqin (2007) similarly notes the symbolic role of objects like pigeons and palm trees in reflecting social fragmentation and nostalgic identity (p. 194). While these works offer rich thematic interpretations, they seldom apply a cognitive framework such as Prototype Theory to explain how readers categorize and interpret these elements.

#### **2. Theoretical Insights on Prototype Theory**

Prototype Theory, introduced by Rosch (1975), proposes that cognitive categories revolve around prototypical examples rather than fixed definitions. Lakoff (1987) extended the theory by connecting categorization to bodily experience and cultural framing. Langacker (1987) emphasized the dynamic nature of categorization in linguistic meaning, while Taylor (2003) discussed how category membership can be central or peripheral. In literary theory, Stockwell (2002) applied prototypes to character analysis, and Gavins (2007) investigated their role in reader expectation and discourse processing. These insights form the backbone of this paper's analytical framework.

#### **3. Prototype Theory and Postcolonial Symbolism**

Postcolonial narratives often depict the breakdown of traditional cultural categories. Ungerer and Schmid (2006) argue that symbols are interpreted through culturally salient prototypes shaped by ideology, history, and experience. In *Twilight in Delhi*, symbols such as English boots, Mir Nihal's dress, or the henna tree serve as cognitive anchors whose prototype status evolves over time due to colonial pressures. This

study fills a gap in scholarship by using Prototype Theory to interpret these evolving cultural symbols.

#### **4. Theoretical Framework: Prototype Theory in Cognitive Linguistics**

Prototype Theory suggests that human categorization is organized around cognitively accessible best examples rather than rigid definitions (Rosch, 1975). In literary contexts, this means characters and symbols are interpreted not in isolation but through shared cultural and experiential prototypes. Lakoff (1987) and Langacker (1987) argue that such prototypes are shaped by bodily experience, social interaction, and cultural memory, while Taylor (2003) and Ungerer & Schmid (2006) highlight how these prototypes can shift over time. Applying this framework to *Twilight in Delhi* (Ali, 1940), the study examines how figures like Mir Nihal function as core prototypes of traditional Muslim identity, while characters like Asghar, symbolic objects like English boots, and motifs such as the palm tree or henna illustrate evolving or contested categories. Through this lens, the novel's cultural decline is seen as a transformation of cognitive prototypes under colonial influence.

#### **Methodology**

This qualitative study is grounded in the framework of cognitive literary criticism, employing Prototype Theory as its central analytical lens. Drawing upon the foundational concepts of Rosch (1975), Lakoff (1987), Langacker (1987), and Taylor (2003), the study conducts a close textual reading of *Twilight in Delhi* (Ali, 1940) to explore how characters, symbols, and motifs function as cognitive prototypes. The methodology involves four key steps: first, identifying culturally significant characters, objects, and thematic elements; second, evaluating their prototypicality within the socio-cultural and narrative context; third, tracing shifts in these prototypes across the temporal arc of the novel; and finally, interpreting these shifts through the lens of cognitive linguistic theory. The primary text for analysis is *Twilight in Delhi*, while secondary sources include scholarly works on Prototype Theory and cognitive linguistics that provide theoretical grounding and interpretive tools for the analysis.

#### **Analysis and Discussion**

This section applies Prototype Theory, as introduced by Rosch (1975) and later developed by Lakoff (1987), Langacker (1987), and Ungerer & Schmid (2006), to Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940). Literary symbols and characters are examined

as cognitive prototypes central or peripheral members of cultural categories whose shifting status reflects broader colonial transformations.

### **1. Prototypes as Best Examples**

According to Rosch (1975), categories are mentally organized around "best examples" or *prototypes*, rather than fixed definitions. In *Twilight in Delhi*, Mir Nihal is the prototypical representative of pre-colonial Muslim identity, dignified, conservative, and resistant to British influence:

*You are again wearing those dirty English boots! I don't like them. I will have no aping of the Farangis in my house. Discard them!*(Ali, 1940, p. 13)

This rebuke toward Western mimicry shows Mir Nihal as the cognitive anchor of tradition. In contrast, pigeons and the palm tree serve as environmental prototypes of cultural rootedness and continuity:

*The cats devoured them last night... He looked away, outside... the branches of the date-palm which were seared and burnt up with the heat... Old age, he said to himself, and heaved a sigh.*(Ali, 1940, pp. 76–77)

Their destruction reflects the symbolic dismantling of Delhi's cultural identity. English boots, meanwhile, become prototypes of colonial mimicry, situating Asghar in a hybridized cognitive space.

### **2. Gradual Category Membership**

Prototype Theory rejects binary classifications; instead, membership is graded (Lakoff, 1987). Asghar embodies this idea, caught between cultural poles:

*Morning light gleamed on a Sherwani over Western trousers; around his wrists, the jasmine garland rattled... the glossy pumps squeaked on the marble floor.*(Ali, 1940, p. 52)

Asghar's attire fuses Eastern and Western aesthetics, marking his intermediate cognitive status. Similarly, the transition from decaying havelis to colonial bungalows (implied through spatial decline in the text) captures the architectural re-categorization of domestic space from traditional prototypes toward colonial-modern ones.

### **3. Meaning Through Experience**

Langacker (1987) argued that meanings are experientially grounded. In the novel, the pigeons evoke nostalgic meaning for Mir Nihal:

*When his beloved pigeons flew down to perch on the ledge, a storm of self-pity welled up within his breast.*(Ali, 1940, p. 45)

For older characters, pigeons are cognitive anchors of tradition, while younger generations, like Asghar, regard them as outdated. Similarly, the English boots signify loss of dignity to Mir Nihal but symbolize aspiration and social elevation for Asghar demonstrating culture- and experience-contingent prototype mapping.

#### **4. Central vs. Peripheral Members**

Taylor (2003) posits that prototypes help organize categories by distinguishing core from fringe members. The zenana (female quarters), though spatially and socially peripheral, gains emotional centrality through its portrayal as a site of familial warmth and memory.

Conversely, colonial intrusions like **cats** become disruptive symbols:

*Those awful cats devoured [the pigeons]... ‘they have become a dreadful nuisance,’ he muttered.*(Ali, 1940, p. 77)

Cats, previously marginal, now invade the cultural center symbolizing how colonial residues infiltrate traditional cognitive spaces and reconfigure the cultural hierarchy.

#### **5. Prototype Evolution and Cultural Change**

Lakoff (1987) emphasizes that prototypes evolve with socio-cultural changes. This is exemplified in Asghar’s progressive shift:

*For the first time, he felt a thrill at being seen in European clothes... the new collar felt sharper, cleaner.* (Ali, 1940, p. 114)

Asghar’s identity prototype shifts from tradition to colonial modernity. Parallel to this transformation, the visual decay of the palm tree and the empty pigeon-house reinforces prototype erosion:

*There lay a broken stick ... where the palm once crowned the courtyard. And the pigeon-house was empty.* (Ali, 1940, p. 202)

These spatial and symbolic absences mark a cultural vacuum highlighting the disintegration of traditional prototypes.

#### **6. Prototypes as Anchors**

Ungerer & Schmid (2006) state that prototypes function as “cognitive anchors” that help us navigate meaning. Mir Nihal’s paralysis becomes a metaphor for cultural stagnation:

*He fell to the ground... his right side lay motionless. Time stood still as he lay there... the house seemed to echo his immobility.* (Ali, 1940, p. 210)

His immobility serves as both literal and symbolic cessation, a prototype of tradition rendered inert. Recurring motifs such as henna, pigeons, and sherwanis act as mnemonic guides, orienting the reader within a vanishing cultural frame.

### **7. Culture-Specific Prototypes**

Cognitive categories are culture-dependent (Lakoff, 1987). South Asian readers resonate deeply with prototypes such as the henna tree:

*The breeze rustled dry henna-leaves across the courtyard...*(Ali, 1940, p. 77)

To indigenous readers, henna evokes marriage, femininity, and celebration; to Western readers, it may remain exotic or peripheral. This cultural encoding enhances the postcolonial thematic depth of the novel.

### **Summary of The Analysis in Table**

<b>Excerpt</b>	<b>Analytical Point</b>
“Dirty English boots!” (p. 13)	Prototype of cultural resistance (Mir Nihal)
“Cats devoured them... palm burnt” (pp. 76–77)	Symbolic decay of cultural anchors
“He fell to the ground...” (p. 210)	Mir Nihal’s paralysis as metaphor for cultural stasis
“Thrill at being seen in European clothes...” (p. 114)	Prototype evolution under colonial mimicry

### **Findings**

The study reveals that Mir Nihal consistently represents the core of traditional Muslim identity in Delhi. His values, attire, and routines embody the prototypical image of pre-colonial dignity and resistance, serving as a cognitive anchor for the reader. Moreover, recurring motifs like pigeons, the palm tree, henna, and sherwanis act as prototypes of Indo-Islamic heritage. Their decay or erasure in the narrative symbolizes the erosion of culturally central categories under colonial pressure. Besides, Characters like Asghar, who adopt English boots and European habits, are positioned on the periphery of traditional categories. These shifting identities illustrate

the gradual and graded membership that Prototype Theory emphasizes, rather than binary oppositions. Younger characters reinterpret or disregard traditional prototypes, seeing them as obsolete. For instance, pigeons, once symbols of nobility, become irrelevant or annoying to modern sensibilities, demonstrating how cultural experience shapes prototype recognition. Items like mangoes, sherwanis, and mehndi carry rich cognitive significance for South Asian readers, anchoring the narrative in cultural intimacy while enhancing its postcolonial impact. Western readers may view these prototypes as peripheral or exotic, further underlining the colonial disconnect.

### **Conclusion**

This study shows that Prototype Theory provides a powerful cognitive lens through which *Twilight in Delhi* may be read as a meditation on cultural erosion and identity shift. Rather than fixed categories, characters and symbols in the novel operate on a continuum—some central (like Mir Nihal, pigeons, and the zenana), others increasingly peripheral (like Asghar and colonial architecture).

The narrative highlights how colonialism destabilizes traditional prototypes, replacing them with hybrid or foreign ones. These changes are not just aesthetic or external but cognitive—altering how individuals and communities define themselves, their values, and their sense of continuity.

Ultimately, the novel functions as a mourning of lost prototypes, a lament for a world where categories were once familiar and rooted, now displaced by mimicry, modernity, and colonial dominance. In this way, *Twilight in Delhi* not only tells the story of one man or one city, but also dramatizes a broader cognitive and cultural dislocation.

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## **Authors' Contribution**

1. **Dr. Nijat Ullah Khan** (Assistant Professor of English, Abasyn University, Peshawar) conceptualized and supervised the research project, designed the theoretical framework, guided the Critical Discourse Analysis, and critically reviewed and finalized the manuscript.
  2. **Maham Zaib** (MPhil Scholar, English Linguistics, Abasyn University, Peshawar) conducted the primary textual analysis, collected relevant data from the novel, reviewed the literature, and drafted the initial version of the manuscript.
  3. **Kanwal Sami** (MPhil Scholar, English Linguistics, Abasyn University, Peshawar) contributed to data interpretation, assisted in applying the analytical framework, organized references, and participated in revising and editing the manuscript.
- All authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.