

A City Made of Words: Language and the Unmaking of Place in Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*

Zakeria Kamal  M.A scholar, College of International Studies, School: Southwest University, Chongqing 400700, China.

Email: zakariakamal4451@gmail.com

DOI:

Abstract

Ahmed Ali's Twilight in Delhi (1940) has generated a substantial body of criticism that reads it as an elegy for a vanishing city and culture, analyzing its loss as a theme, mood, or structure of feeling. This article instead asks by what mechanism the novel produces that loss and argues that this mechanism is linguistic. Drawing on Yi-Fu Tuan's account of place as a construction of language, sustained through naming, narration, and recitation, it shows that the novel constitutes Delhi as a place that exists only when it is continuously spoken and figures the city's death as the withdrawal of that constituting speech rather than a physical ruin. The argument argues that the city is made spoken, then neglected by a heir who declines its inheritance, overwritten by a colonial idiom, and at last silenced in the muteness of its patriarch. The reading extends an obverse that Tuan registers only in compressed form, the linguistic unmaking of place, and develops it at the scale of an inhabited city where the nonhuman world dies with the names that held it once. It thereby reframes the novel's elegy as a spatial argument and proposes a portable method for reading how places are unmade in words.

Keywords: *Twilight in Delhi*; Yi-Fu Tuan; language; unmaking of place; postcolonial ecocriticism.

Introduction

Twilight in Delhi (1940) by Ahmed Ali is almost without exception and read as an elegy for a dying city and class. The reading is correct but not complete. It registers the novel's grief but does not explain the novel's procedure. The unexamined question is not what the novel mourns but how it mourns: by what means does the text make Delhi a place, and by what means does it unmake one? The answer, this paper argues, is linguistic. In *Twilight in Delhi*, the city is built of words before it is built of stone, and it dies when those words are silenced. The earliest sustained criticism reads the novel as a lyric record of cultural decline (Anderson 83). Later work historicizes that diagnosis, treating the book as the threshold of a postcolonial mode in the South Asian novel culture in English (Hashmi 178). More recent criticism complicates the elegiac surface, locating in the text an ambivalence toward the very nation whose passing it appears to mourn (Anjaria 190). A further strand reads the novel's affinity with the "shahr-ashob", the Urdu poetic genre of lament for a ruined city, as a matter of inherited literary strategy and cultural memory (Joshi 210; Sadana 35). This is the most suggestive connection, and the present argument proceeds directly from it. But these accounts

Article History : Received: 23 June. 2026. Accepted: 16 September. 2026. Available online: 25 October. 2026. Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension) **Copyright**: © 2026 The Author(s). **Licensing** : This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License **Conflict of Interest**: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

conceptualize the “shahr-ashob” as a genre to which the novel is similar, not as a logic that the novel performs. What the resemblance does to the construction of place remains untheorized.

Yi-Fu Tuan argues that language, rather than physical matter, is what constructs place, as the act of naming and narrating “makes objects, formerly invisible because unattended, visible” (Tuan 685). A city “can be thought of as a creation of words as well as stone” (Tuan 686) for this reason. Tuan does not overlook the reverse of this statement. He devotes a section to “making and unmaking”, granting that language can deface as well as build and that places “fade from consciousness” when no longer sustained by use (Tuan 693, 689). But his treatment of unmaking is brief, weighted toward the constructive and drawn almost entirely from European and settler examples. This paper takes that under-developed register as its subject and tests it where Tuan does not look: in a colonial novel that records, in close detail, the nonspeaking of a city.

The novel invites the test on its first page. The opening does not describe Delhi so much as recites it, cataloguing the vanished kings and poets and observing that “the poets are feeling the lack of patronage” (Ali 3). The city is “mourned and sung” in the same breath in which it is named (Ali 3). Within two pages the narrator embeds its verses “to mourn their loss and sing the tale of mutability” so that the prose performs the lament it reports (Ali 4). The logic is stated most plainly in the epigraph, attributed to the last Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah, which charges that the conquerors have ravished the city’s name. Delhi, the epigraph proposes, is unmade by the ravishing of its name. The serial destruction of the city across its recorded history, provide that charge a literal weight (Gupta 54).

This paper develops the proposition into a method. It contends that in *Twilight in Delhi*, Delhi exists as a place only insofar as it is continuously spoken, named, recited, called to prayer, and elegized. Ahmed Ali figures the city’s death not as physical ruin but as the unmaking of a place that follows when its sustaining language is neglected, displaced, and at last silenced. In this sense, the city does not vanishes from the surface of earth; rather, it falls silent. So the claim is modest, not stick, in scope.

Language and the (Un)making of Place

Tuan’s account is instructive, but it is weak on procedure. He establishes that ‘place’ is a linguistic achievement, but he establishes it by accumulating examples, not by stating a method. To read a novel through him, one has to make his remarks into analytical categories. The author distinguishes four such categories, offered as a heuristic distillation of his essay rather than as a scheme he himself proposes. They are naming, recitation, maintenance, and unmaking. Each isolates a distinct way in which words bring a place into presence or withdraw it, and together they convert Tuan’s narrative-descriptive manner into a repeatable reading. Naming is the elementary operation. For Tuan, a name does not precede and describe

a location; it also makes it visible and imparts it character: “to change the name is to change... the feature itself” (Tuan 688). It is with a proper name that a particular identity is pictured in the context of a particular site. A reading attentive to naming asks; what does a text name and what happens to a place when its names are changed or taken away?

The second operation is recitation. It takes time to name. Myth and song, Tuan observes, do not merely describe a world but uphold it, for “the telling itself... has the power to give a place vibrant meaning” (Tuan 687). A place held by recitation is renewed at each performance, its existence a function of continued utterance. Here, Tuan’s emphasis on the semantic word must be widened to admit sound that signifies without stating it. Ritual sound, and the call to prayer above all, constitutes a place acoustically, marking a soundscape as inhabited and morally oriented (Hirschkind 124). Such sound yields what Steven Feld terms an “acoustemology”: knowledge of place gained by hearing it (Feld 97). This widening matters for the analysis to follow, in which the city reaches its inhabitants first as sound.

Maintenance is the third operation, and with it, Tuan’s own account of unmaking begins. A place made by words must be repaired with words, or it will lapse. A name, he writes, “will fade from consciousness if it is not kept alive by social support” or if it is not “passed on by word of mouth or written on a map that is periodically consulted” (Tuan 689). This is unmaking in its quietest form, slow attrition of a place no longer spoken. However, Tuan’s focus is limited to the scale of a single name. His one example, a lonely landmark, Mount Misery, is fading into oblivion, not a populated city whose entire network of names is collapsing all at once. The attrition he describes is real, but its canvas is narrow.

Un-making in its active form receives, in Tuan, a brief and explicitly moral treatment. He grants that “it is easier to destroy than to build,” that malicious speech can “destroy a place’s reputation and thereby its visibility,” and that a place called into being by words “can also be a monster” (Tuan 693, 684). These observations are acute, but they are framed as ethics rather than as poetics. Tuan weighs the moral standing of unmaking, treating denigration and defacement as means and asking whether a made place is good. He does not examine unmaking as a textual procedure, as something a narrative performs across its length through the same resources by which it builds. His case suggests a fading marker and the dubious conjuration of ‘Asia’ extend to the progressive un-speaking of a lived city. This is the register that the present reading develops.

The four operations also resolve an apparent difficulty. *Twilight in Delhi* is, on its surface, a novel of nature as much as of speech, dense with gardens, seasons, pigeons, and the river. A reading centred on language might seem to slight that natural fabric. It does not. In this novel

the natural city is itself a spoken city, known through the names of its flowers, the named festivals that scan its year, and the verses that invoke its river. Postcolonial ecocriticism insists that the colonial remaking of land and the remaking of culture are not separate processes but one (Huggan and Tiffin 6). The novel localizes that claim in language. The names that hold the human city also hold its nonhuman world, so to un-name the one is to un-make the other. The ecological dimension of the text is thus internal to its linguistic dimension, and it is read here from the same evidence, not annexed as a separate theme.

Delhi Spoken into Being

The previous section's methodological claim can be tested on the novel's first page, where the city is created. If making and unmaking were distinct procedures, the opening would build Delhi and defer its dismantling but it does not. The prose that constitutes the city is double from its first clauses, naming the place in the same breath as it records its ruin. Delhi is introduced as a city "built, destroyed, and rebuilt" and as a thing "raped and conquered, yet whole and alive" (Ali 3). The names of the rulers are cut off now from the kingdom as "no king lives there today" (Ali 3). Words carry more weight in describing Delhi. Therefore, the novel's mood of unmaking the city is not just to address the absolute scene in the novel because in that sense, the opening would identify a solid city and later evoke sadness. Instead, the naming and the unnamings arrive together within one syntax. The making of Delhi is not a foundation that declines or erodes; it is an operation that carries its own reversal within it. The first page encapsulates what the rest of the novel elaborates on at length.

Once the concept of doubleness is established, readers can then interpret the process of making itself. The opening is an inventory that doubles as an itinerary. The narrator threads the reader through named quarters toward Mir Nihal's house, and each turning opens onto a further named lane, "a net of by-lanes of its own" (Ali 5). In this way, as Tuan puts it, the undifferentiated nocturnal space becomes a legible city, for the names provide it the presence that the bare extension lacks. The same naming extends beyond the streets. It collects the living fabric of the city; its palm and the henna trees, and the "wild pigeons" in the cornices are part of the spoken city as much as its shrines (Ali 6). Nothing in the sentence marks the trees or the birds as belonging to a different order of description than the shrines; they are called into presence by the identical operation. This is what it means for the novel's ecology to become legible as language: the nonhuman city does not pre-exist as a mute backdrop that the prose then describes, but comes into being, exactly as the human city did, through being named. The natural city is known through its names and its verses, not held apart as a mute setting behind the human one. Yet the natural city, too, is named in the act of its dimming. The gardens and markets are introduced as insufficient to revive the light once carried by

“the waters of the Jamuna” (Ali 5). The river is summoned by name at the very moment its light is declared spent. The nonhuman world is thus held in the same double prose as the human, constituted and mourned in a single gesture, so that its un-naming and the city’s prove to be one event rather than two.

If naming provides the city its outline, sound gives it its presence, and the novel makes Delhi audible before it makes it visible. The day does not break so much as it is called. With the dawning azaan of Nisar Ahmad, his voice ringing through the quarters “and penetrating into the by-lanes and the courtyards” (Ali 13), the narrator writes, the world “came to consciousness.” The order of perception is theorized and crucial. The inhabitants know their city by hearing it. The azaan is not merely ambient noise but orientation, the call by which a community locates itself and its obligations within a shared and morally marked space (Hirschkind 124). Nisar Ahmad, who is compared to the Prophet’s own muezzin, is treated as the defining voice of the city (Ali 67). The double nature of this sound is obvious here. The identical attribution to call Delhi as “rippling with the glory of Islam,” also intones “the impermanence of life and the transience of the world” (Ali 67). Recitation here does not merely build; it builds and mourns at once, which is why the novel’s most affirming sounds are also its most elegiac. The pattern found in the opening prose recurs in the soundscape: constitution and dissolution share a medium.

Recitation also performs the maintenance on which the spoken city depends. Verse is the ordinary medium of feeling in this world, and at one gathering the qawwals hold their listeners by repeating a single line “over and over again” until the words acquire the force of incantation (Ali 34). Such repetition serves as the labor that keeps a culture current, the continuous re-speaking through which, for Tuan, a place is sustained against forgetting. In these scenes, those who continue to audibly express the city’s name keep it alive, renewing its existence. This dependence also exposes the vulnerability of a place, as it can only endure as long as the repetition continues.

The Failing of Maintenance

A city sustained by speech is a city dependent on succession. Its continuance is not secured once and held; it must be conferred anew on each generation by those willing to go on uttering what they received. The deeper subject of *Twilight in Delhi* is the interruption of that conferral. The tragedy of the novel is embedded more in the disinheritance or the reluctance of the adult community to comply with inherited language or words, which puts the novel’s claim of place-making in reverse. The heirs, Mir Nihal and Asghar, live in or belong to two different worlds. The father dislikes what Asghar likes. For example, he wears a combination

of luxury items such as a Turkish cap or English shoes (Ali 10). It is known that clothes are associated with one's culture or tradition to which a person belongs. Therefore, in this context, it represents loyalty, which Asghar's new cultural adaptations shatter. The inheritance breaks, and the elder's authority is undermined as Asghar follows his choice of marriage. It is clear that society does not forbid the transmission of inheritance; instead, individual choices halt it. Moreover, the end of the novel also announces the broken relationship between the poets and their society (Ali 176). The city's memory, which Nora names *milieu de mémoire*, was kept alive through the poetic words of the poets before (Nora 7). It was brought into real-life scenarios rather than kept in texts or just written on monuments. Nora further explains this situation and elaborates that memory still remains for a time, even when the entire environment is destroyed. She calls this *lieux de mémoire*, which denotes that the sense of things is still preserved in sites and written words even when they are no longer available or live (Nora 12). Therefore, we can say that the unsuccessful inheritance or the collapse of patronage carries significant consequences. The history or livelihood of a culture no longer remains visible when that society cannot keep or respect its singers. It can only be archived. Similarly, the city which is kept archived also becomes invisible.

Additionally, there is a sense of degradation that Mir Nihal finds in words which regard the verses as more cheaper now than ever be (Ali 176). Although, they produce a kind of parody through the repetitive sounds but they also lead to arise wishes that the novel aims to promote. For Boym, this kind of situation takes the shape of restorative nostalgia that focuses on bringing back the once lost memories in full form. He also makes it distinguishable from reflective nostalgia that prefers longing and loses without being attentive to the pretence of undone (Boym 41). From this, we can see that the novel favours more the reflective consolation than the first one. Delhi is not came into being from the scratch here; instead, the novel inclines more towards the holes that the cheapened verse or the simple form leave in the shape of degradation. Mir Nihal is more obsessed about inquiring the whereabouts of the poets and mentions Mir and Ghalib, Dard and Sauda, and Zauq (Ali 176). This desire to knowing is presented in the *ubi sunt* mode which forces us to understand that the poets have already left the city and that their names are just ostentatiously made survivable in the city. It should be noted that the names are generally considered alive if attributed to place for the purpose of knowing but they are conceived dead and will aim to leave the city if intended to be spoken as mourning. Therefore, Mir Nihal's inquiry is not something we can call a homage to the city's once lively poets.

In the established order of the city, new communities arise, thereby paying ways to novel mechanisms and worlds. English is introduced into the unfamiliar culture of the city that was never embraced before. The local residents resists this intrusion. The ancient tradition that

was preserved “within the walls of the ancient town” is no longer survivable (Ali 144). This reality can also be traced in Asghar’s usage of English words in the conversation and his overall inclination to dress up in English manner. Mir Nihal senses this change and states that things feel strange at his end and that he is not willing to be “part of it” (Ali 176). So the original language has now been replaced by a foreign language which symbolizes the unmaking of the city in passive manner. The intentions for colonial state were already designed, although the population got influence by it in default manner.

Overwriting and Silence

When a language is introduced to a foreign geographical landscape, it gradually changes the scenario and keeps hold of the written text as well. Tuan lends this active defacement in which the cities are overwritten entirely without caring for reputation or markers. Gupta also extends this by declaring that across history, Delhi saw numerous changes, from being died to rebuilt time to time (Gupta 55). After razing, it has been named and renamed. Here, the overwriting is shown in a different manner. Delhi sees the installation of a new emperor during the Coronation Durbar of 1911 (Ali 99). In the initial stage, the city was mourning without having a king but now, it has been ruled by someone who does not belong to hers (Legg 37). The local population names this “Coronation Durbar” as “Imitation Durbar” (Ali 143).

The inscription is visible as the new Dehli rises beside the old town. The residents see this not as something of advancement but of a demolition of their cultural identity. The town’s physical map was changed to the extent that people got feared of making its “recognition” (Ali 143). Gutters were left opened and the old walls were demolished. In Turan’s terms, the name survives until and unless its features remain there. Therefore, bringing down the walls to dust also sweeps away the city’s historical identity because the walls were the symbolic representation of the old culture of the city. Consequently, Mussalmans were already thrown out of the city in the scuffle of 1857 and were left “stricken dumb” (Ali 100). This indicates that ruin was not the only mean that made the city unmaking but the silence of those whose words were put on hold also shares its part. This imposition of demolition and dumbness is tied to the city’s forms of speech and the loss of place which the narrative represents subsequently.

It also becomes more obvious when Mir Nihal gets effected by a paralytic stroke. In the process, he struggles to call out for help but “could not speak” (Ali 156). The scene is important because the city is about to be awoken by the evening azaan of Nisar Ahmad. So we can say that the city is brought into silence as its main narrator is no longer able to speak.

Earlier criticism have read this feature of the novel as “shahr-ashob” that indicates fixed cultural memory or inherited genre (Joshi 210, Sadana 35). This is appreciated but it lacks to mention the spatial features of the genre. The city is regarded as spoken right at the moment when its name is lost. In this sense, “shahr-ashob” cannot be said to describe just the dejected state of the ruined city (Tignol 562). So the essence of the city’s existence is preserved in the grammar of its disappearance.

Discussion

The reading offered here yields a single finding from which its wider implications follow. In *Twilight in Delhi*, the making of a place and its unmaking are not two processes but one reversible operation. The novel constitutes Delhi through naming, recitation, and ritual sound, and it dismantles the city through the failure and replacement of those same acts. The test set in the second section is thereby met. The language that builds the city and the language that unbuilds it are continuous, the one procedure runs in reverse, as the first page and the final silence alike confirm.

This finding extends Tuan’s account in a specific and bounded way. Tuan registers unmaking in two compressed forms: as the passive attrition of a place no longer spoken and as the moral fact of defacement. The novel prioritizes both and enlarges attrition from a single fading marker to the entire onomastics fabric of an inhabited city that is failing at once. This way, a sustained poetics develops from an ethical principle which is performed by the narrative in length. What Tuan states as a moral observation about isolated cases, the novel works out as a textual procedure at a city scale. The claim is not that Tuan is correct or wrong but that an operation he names in passing is here developed in full, on terrain he does not visit. So understood, the reading proposes a hypothesis for the study of literary place, advanced as illustration rather than law. If a place can be un-made in the same language that makes it, then the instruments developed to read place-making may be turned to read its undoing. Naming, recitation, and maintenance can be tracked in reverse, as they withdraw a city rather than accumulate it. Whether this procedure recurses beyond the present case is a question for other texts. What this novel establishes is that the procedure is legible and that unmaking is not the cessation of place-making but its continuous shadow. Place, on this evidence, is less a possession than an ongoing event, sustained only in speaking and forfeited in the silence (Massey 130).

The point requires one distinction. The condition the novel describes is not placelessness. Relph names placelessness as the bland, interchangeable uniformity of modern landscapes, a weakening of the bond between people and their settings (Relph 79). In the novel, Delhi can

be seen as dumb. But this does not mean that the place is somewhat unrecognizable, instead, it is just withdrawn. The novel also traces environmental operation in the same manner as a mechanism which the earlier criticism had considered as a theme. It is because the natural city became unnamable in the same manner as the human one. The river and gardens are already described dimmed and spent in the novel. We can see that the ecological names of the nonhuman world for which the city was known, have now been disappeared. So it cannot be just a depleted landscape observed from outside (Huggan and Tiffin 6). This is a significant contribution to the ecological reading of the place in terms of linguistic act in the novel, in which cultural and natural landscapes converge into each other. Criticism has also regarded the structural form of the novel as an elegy to which the present analysis contributes in terms of locating its cause. The loss of the city is not just a mood of an action that contributes to the destruction of both culture and language, rather it is also the mechanism that aims to measure the withdrawal of the constituting language. In this way, it brings forth the ambivalence in the text that the critics have noticed so far (Anjaria 190).

Conclusion

The loss in the novel was approached through different angles by the critics. This article interpreted this notion more narrowly and proposed that the sentiment should not just relate with the ruined city. The article suggests that language plays significant role in attributing cultural and physical history to the place and that its withdrawal basis the unmaking of the city. The novel speaks Delhi into existence through named lanes, recited verse, and the call that wakes the city before light. It then makes the city unspeakable, as that language is neglected by its heirs, supplanted by a foreign idiom, and overwritten by an imperial hand until the patriarch who had embodied its speech is struck mute. Making and unmaking prove, at every stage, to be one procedure reversed. This conclusion is the finding that the reading was built to test, and the novel sustains it from its first page to its closing silence.

The scope of the claim should be stated plainly. One novel cannot establish a general law of place, and none is asserted here. The reading offers instead a worked demonstration that the procedure of place-making can be read in reverse, using the same evidence and the same instruments that read its construction. That reversibility is portable in principle, which marks the contribution as a method to be tried rather than a result to be assumed. Other literature of colonial displacement and urban erasure, in which the renaming of a city is also its unmaking, would supply the cases by which the procedure might be confirmed or qualified. This novel does not close that enquiry; it opens it.

There remains the reflexive consequence the novel presses on its reader, and the analysis has earned the right to state it. If a city subsists in its speaking, then the elegy that records its loss also, for the duration of its reading, performs its maintenance. This is not sentiment but the precise office of “shahr-ashob,” as demonstrated above: the form holds a place in being in the act of uttering its disappearance. *Twilight in Delhi* preserves the Delhi that could no longer be sustained in speech, and so the novel is itself the last instance of the process it records. It does not report an unmaking from outside; it is the city’s surviving voice. That is the wager of any elegy written for a place. While reading the words that mourn a city, one can sense the city’s continued existence. Ahmed Ali’s novel, still read, still speaks to the Delhi it mourns and, in doing so, holds open the narrow margin between a place that is lost and a place that has merely fallen silent.

Works Cited

- Ali, Ahmed. *Twilight in Delhi*. 1940. New Directions, 1994.
- Anderson, David D. “Ahmed Ali and *Twilight in Delhi*.” *Mahfil*, vol. 7, no. 1/2, 1971, pp. 81–86.
- Anjaria, Ulka. “Staging Realism and the Ambivalence of Nationalism in the Colonial Novel.” *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 44, no. 2, 2011, pp. 186–207. doi.org/10.1215/00295132-1260950
- Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. Basic Books, 2001.
- Feld, Steven. “Waterfalls of Song: An Acoustemology of Place Resounding in Bosavi, Papua New Guinea.” *Senses of Place*, edited by Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, School of American Research Press, 1996, pp. 91–135.
- Gupta, Narayani. *Delhi Between Two Empires, 1803–1931: Society, Government and Urban Growth*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981.
- Hashmi, Alamgir. “Ahmed Ali and the Transition to a Postcolonial Mode in the Pakistani Novel in English.” *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 17, no. 1, 1990, pp. 177–82.
- Hirschkind, Charles. *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*. Columbia UP, 2006.
- Huggan, Graham, and Helen Tiffin. *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*. Routledge, 2010.

- Joshi, Priya. *In Another Country: Colonialism, Culture, and the English Novel in India*. Columbia UP, 2002.
- Legg, Stephen. *Spaces of Colonialism: Delhi's Urban Governmentalities*. Blackwell, 2007.
- Massey, Doreen. *For Space*. SAGE Publications, 2005.
- Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire." *Representations*, no. 26, 1989, pp. 7–24. doi.org/10.2307/2928520
- Relph, Edward. *Place and Placelessness*. Pion, 1976.
- Sadana, Rashmi. *English Heart, Hindi Heartland: The Political Life of Literature in India*. U of California P, 2012.
- Tignol, Eve. "Nostalgia and the City: Nostalgia and the City: Urdu Shahr Āshob Poetry in the Aftermath of 1857" *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2017, pp. 559–73. doi.org/10.1017/S135618631700013X
- Tuan, Yi-Fu. "Language and the Making of Place: A Narrative-Descriptive Approach." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 81, no. 4, 1991, pp. 684–96. doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8306.1991.tb01715.x