

## Structuralist study of saussurean binary oppositions in Ahmed Ali's novel 'twilight in Delhi'

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### Abstract

The paper intends to give an elaborative overview of Structuralism and saussurean binary oppositions, and how they have been employed by Ahmed Ali in his novel 'Twilight in Delhi'. Researchers have tried to shed light on the statement of Structuralism that ideas or concepts cannot be understood in isolation, rather they have to be analyzed while keeping other factors of the bigger structure they are a part of in view. Researchers have highlighted the binary oppositions employed in 'Twilight in Delhi' by Ahmed Ali: traditionalist vs modernist, preserver vs destroyer, idealist vs realist, romantic vs unromantic. The findings of the study would help the readers in understanding the theory of Structuralism; how the notion of binary oppositions plays its role in all fields of inquiry, especially, literary studies; and, what is the interpretation of the novel 'Twilight in Delhi' in structuralist perspective.

**Keywords:** structuralism, Saussure, binary oppositions, twilight in Delhi, Ahmed Ali

### Introduction

While learning a language, children are taught concepts and notions through binary oppositions. For instance, in order to teach them what 'darkness' is, one has to teach them what 'light' is. Same is the case with good vs bad, beautiful vs ugly, day vs night, etc. Things and ideas, Structuralists say, are part of a bigger structure, and one cannot understand them in isolation. One has to see them in the context of their bigger structure in order to make complete sense of them. Binary oppositions help out in formulating a systematic foundation through which understanding abstract concepts and ideas becomes easier because they put things and concepts into two contrasting yet complementary pairs such as truth vs lie, life vs death, body vs soul, etc. Hence, it is apparent that binary opposition is one of the systematic ways that govern the human mind in understanding complex and bizarre concepts and ideas (Barry, 2002) <sup>[2]</sup>.

The concept of binary opposition was presented by a swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, in his theory of Structuralism. According to Saussure, binary opposition is the means by which the units of language have value or meaning. Each unit of language is defined in reciprocal determination with another term, as in binary code. It is not a contradictory relation but, a structural and complementary one (Fogarty, 2005) <sup>[3]</sup>.

In language, binary oppositions are not limited to abstract concepts or notions. In many disciplines or fields of inquiry, binary oppositions are employed in order to present their ideas. For instance, in the religion of Islam, the concept of heaven and hell; in biology, the concept of males and females; in films, the representation of a hero and a villain; in sociology, the distinction between civilized and uncivilized, etc. From this, it is apparent that binary apposition is fundamental and indispensable in every discipline or field of inquiry including literature or literary studies.

In literature, there are certain strategies that are employed by authors as well as readers. Through employing binary oppositions in their texts, authors, put emphasis on their

intended meaning by highlighting, integrating, and justifying their ideas and arguments. Whereas, readers, through discovery of thematic binary oppositions within a text, can interpret the meaning intended by the author, or drive the meaning of their own. For readers, binary opposition is one of the most crucial and fundamental ways to understand a text because it enables them to look at the text in terms of its bigger and structuralist picture, and thus, readers decode the text and drive out its meaning that was not apparent before. To put it in a nutshell, binary opposition profoundly helps the readers in making sense of what is actually happening in the text.

The present study focuses on one main objective: to identify and analyze the Saussurean binary oppositions employed by Ahmed Ali in his novel 'Twilight in Delhi'.

Precisely, 'Twilight in Delhi' is a novel about a city that is overshadowed by sadness and desire. It mourns for its old glorious past and haunting future. The novel narrates the story of Delhi that has lost its charm and magnificence.

"In this world of shadows nothing ever remains the same." (Ali, 1940) <sup>[1]</sup>

The story revolves around twilight, the in-between hour of bleak light and long shadows. Transience is the only certainty, both in the lives of individual characters as well as that of the city. Ahmed Ali's wife, Bilqees Jehan Begam translated the book into Urdu as "Dilli Ki Shaam", a title that suggests the duality of its meaning. It is not only twilight in Delhi, with all the imagery that entails, but also the twilight of Delhi (Mukherjee, 2018) <sup>[4]</sup>.

The binary oppositions employed by Ahmed Ali have made the plot construction well-knit and unified. The characters of Meer Nihal and his son Asghar are the most important binary oppositions of the novel. Through these two characters, Ahmed Ali presents his main theme of the novel: the tussle between traditionalism and modernism. Meer Nihal, the traditionalist, represents the old glorious past of Delhi. He wears a muslin-coat, and wants his family to

embrace and preserve the old culture of Mughals. Whereas, his son, Asghar, represents the new dawn and the arrival of Englishmen in India. Asghar adores and adopts the English culture and loves to wear English Boots.

### Literature Review

Structuralism is a scientific and methodological approach to define and describe the varieties of concepts, things, and other objects of inquiry into simpler and comprehensible terms. Structuralism assists in interpreting the notions employed in fields of inquiry such as, religion, culture, economics, language, literature, etc. Structuralism assumes that all the objects of inquiry are part of some bigger structures, and cannot be understood completely in isolation, rather they can only be understood while considering the other contrasting yet complimentary parts of the bigger structure (Saussure, 1916) <sup>[5]</sup>.

According to Saussure, 'meaning is generated through a system of structured differences in a language'. Likewise, Barthes believes that "meaning comes from some initial binary oppositions or differentiation". The organization of different and contrasting features in the form of binary oppositions is central in Ahmed Ali's novel 'Twilight in Delhi', and the semantically defined themes, such as traditionalism and modernism are generated from these contrasting yet complimentary dualities. In order to structurally understand the contrasting features of the novel out of which certain concepts arise, one has to see the bigger picture which comprises the system of contrasting yet complimentary underlying structure (Scholes, 1975).

The underlying system, says Scholes, refers to "a complete and self-regulating entity that transforms its surface features while retaining its systematic structure." It means, signs possess meanings just within systems and the meaning of each story as a text is determined by the system ruling the whole collection. It is a system that defines the semantic oppositions and the way signs encased in cultural frame are combined and organized to generate meaning (Scholes, 1975).

Structuralism, says Barry, is the belief that things cannot be understood in isolation, rather they can only be understood in the context of the larger structures they are part of. When interpreting or analyzing a literary work from the perspective of structuralism, one would not aim at defining what the meaning of the literary work is, rather one would focus on explaining how the meaning is being produced in the text. In order to do that, one would analyze the literary work and relate it to other parts of the mega-structure it is part of (Barry, 2002) <sup>[2]</sup>.

Binary opposition is the key concept in structuralism which states that all elements, notions, ideas, and principles can only be understood completely in relation to other contrasting yet complementary contextual units. It elaborates the way elements and features prevalent in cultural studies function in an overall context and produce meaning (Barry, 2002) <sup>[2]</sup>. Moreover, says Barry, authors use binary oppositions in their literary writings in order to explore and elaborate the differences and contrasting features between groups of individuals based on features like, culture, ethnicity, class, gender, etc.

### Research Questions

1. How an author employs Saussurean binary oppositions in a text in order to emphasis on his/her intended

meaning?

2. How a reader can analyze and interpret a text by discovering the thematic binary oppositions employed in a text.
3. How the author, Ahmed Ali, has employed Saussurean binary oppositions in his novel 'Twilight in Delhi'?

### Research Methodology

The nature of the present study is purely qualitative. The researchers have adopted the technique of textual or document analysis. All the collected data for the study was descriptive, therefore, the tools that were employed by the researchers to analyze the data were: definition, explanation, and interpretation. Researchers have analyzed the text 'Twilight in Delhi' with the perspective of Structuralism, and have highlighted the Saussurean binary oppositions employed by the author in the text.

### Discussion/Data Analysis

#### Traditionalist vs Modernist

Ahmed Ali has placed the characters of Meer Nihal, and his son, Asghar, poles apart from each other. Meer Nihal, the patriarch of the family, is a traditionalist at heart. He believes in the old Mughal ideals, and strives to preserve the old Mughal culture and tradition. He is the manifestation of a traditional feudal aristocrat.

"He is tall and well-built and is wearing a shirt of muslin coat reaching down to the knees and embroidered round cap is put at a rakish angle on his bobbed head. His white and well combed beard is parted in the middle and give his noble face a majestic look." (Ali, 1940) <sup>[1]</sup>.

Whereas, on the other hand, Asghar, the fresh blood of Meer Nihal, is an admirer of English culture. In spite of being the descendant of Meer Nihal, the traditionalist, Asghar takes no influence of the Mughal culture, rather, he adopts the English culture and portrays himself as a modernist.

"He is a tall handsome young man with his hair well-oiled and his red Turkish cap cocked as a smart angle on his head. The upper buttons of his sherwani are open and show the collar of the English shirt, that he is leering under it. Mir Nihal stops and turns to Asghar and says you are again wearing those dirty English boots; I don't like them." (Ali, 1940) <sup>[1]</sup>.

#### Preserver vs Destroyer

Meer Nihal being a traditionalist values the perseverance of his culture, tradition and family. Although, he is a strict and aggressive old man, yet he strives to take care of his family by all means. When Asghar expressed his will to marry a low-blood woman, Meer Nihal did not approve initially. But once, he realized that if he did not allow his son to marry her, his family would be broken. Therefore, he agreed and gave his consent for the marriage, and after the marriage, he appreciated the new bride for her traditional and cultural values. Thus, Ahmed Ali portrays the character of Meer Nihal as the preserver in terms of nature.

Whereas, Asghar is a self-centered and selfish young man. All his concerns revolve around him and him alone. He does not seem to care what happens of his culture, tradition, and

family. After his marriage to Bilquees, a few female relatives noticed her wearing English shoes, and expressed their remorse. After listening to their remarks, she was hurt. When Asghar got to know about what had happened, he, at once, decided to leave his father's home as soon as he gets a stable job. Asghar's this quick response to leave his father's home shows that he is a destroyer in terms of nature. He does not think for even a moment about what would happen of his family after he leaves. It is obvious that leaving his home would break and destroy his family, but Asghar being a destroyer does not seem to care much about it.

Moreover, Asghar was also involved in pre-marital affairs before marrying Bilquees. He had an open relationship with Mushtari bai. Asghar was so used to of being entertained by courtesans that after his marriage to Bilquees, he was expecting the same performance and entertainment from her as that of courtesans. Once he realized that Bilquees is unable comfort him like Mushtari Bai did, he started ignoring her. So much so that, Bilquees got depressed and sick. After which, she, eventually, died. For this, too, Asghar is found to be a destroyer. He destroyed Bilquees' life.

### **Idealist vs Realist**

Another binary opposition that Ahmed Ali employs in the novel is that of idealist vs realist. He portrays the character of Meer Nihal as an idealist who thinks of things as perfect. He believes more in what should happen rather than believing in what is possible and can happen. For example, he still glamorizes the long-gone Mughal Empire. He does not value the modern English culture. He does not accept what is reality, and choses to live in the imaginative glorious past. He has created an imaginative world where everything is just the way it was in Mughal time period, and he desires to take it further.

Whereas, Asghar is portrayed as a realist. He seems to believe more in what is practical rather than imagining a perfect utopia where everything would be just the way he wants it to. He realizes the dominance of British and English culture, and adopts it happily. Moreover, marrying a low-blood woman is not likely to be an honor for his so-called royal blood family, yet he decides to marry Bilquees. He does not seem to care what the ideals of his father say; he does what he finds suitable and practical. In this context, Asghar is a realist.

### **Romantic vs Unromantic**

Throughout the novel, Asghar is found to be a romantic being. He had relationships with many women, especially, Mushtari Bai, his first beloved. Asghar's love for peace and tranquility makes him a romantic in true senses. Initially, when he falls in love with Bilquees, he behaves as a hopeless romantic. He believes his life would be incomplete unless he gets his beloved in his arms. Whenever he talks of Bilquees, he talks just as Romantics do, he says,

"She is beautiful Bari, very beautiful. She is graceful as a cypress. Her hair is Blacker than the night of separation, and her face is brighter than the hour of love. Her eyes are like narcissi, big and beautiful. There is their whites and poison in their blacks. Her eyebrows are like two arched bows ready to wound the heart of men with the arrows of their lashes. Her lips are redder than the blood of

lovers, and her teeth look like pearls studded in a row.... I tell you she is beautiful."

Whereas, on the other side, Bilquees is cold, unromantic, and less expressive. She does not seem to have an ignited storm of feelings inside her heart. Throughout her life, she had lived a simple and domestic life. She was conditioned in a traditional Indian home where women are not appreciated to express their desires and feelings. Bilquees is portrayed as a religious lady who, throughout her life, did not wear perfume or uncover her head. She has no sense of what romance is.

As a result of being brought up in family where women are suppressed, Bilquees built up an unromantic personality. She did not know how to love and entertain her husband the way courtesans could. Because of her unromantic nature, Asghar loses his interest in her and soon starts to ignore her.

### **Conclusion**

The researchers have tried to highlight and point out the Saussurean binary oppositions employed in the novel 'Twilight in Delhi' by Ahmed Ali. The novel has narrated the story of the fall in and of Delhi using Saussurean binary oppositions: traditionalist Meer Nihal vs modernist Asghar, preserver Meer Nihal vs destroyer Asghar, idealist Meer Nihal vs realist Asghar, romantic Asghar vs unromantic Bilquees.

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