Delhi as a *Site of Memory*: Remembering and Rewriting the Past in *Twilight in Delhi*

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Abstract

In his seven-volume work *Les Lieux de Memoire* (1984-92), Pierre Nora introduced the concept of "sites of memory". It refers to those artefacts through which collective memory condenses and manifests itself. It can be a place, an event, or an entity that triggers a slew of recollections. As a result, a site of memory is a juncture where space and time collide with memory. This article examines how Ahmed Ali's novel *Twilight In Delhi*, published in 1940, depicts Delhi as a *site of memory*. The novel, set in Delhi, explores the nexus between place, identity formation, and cultural memory. This paper suggests that in *Twilight In Delhi*, the portrayal of the events and places address precisely the complex relationship. The article underlines the metamorphosis of Delhi through the protagonist, Mir Nihal's past and presents to contemporary readers Delhi as a site of contesting claims. Based on close readings of the novel and a critical engagement with Pierre Nora's idea of *lieux de mémoire*, the paper attempts to consider the material dimensions of memory and advocates for the inclusion of this rich textual source on Delhi into broader, interdisciplinary discussions.

Keywords : Cultural memory; Site of memory.

Introduction

The dynamics of memory generation took place predominantly within the confines of the nation-state until recently; coming to terms with the past was largely a national undertaking. This has profoundly changed because of global mobility and movements. Global conditions have significantly impacted memory disputes, and memory has entered the global stage and conversation (Assmann & Conrad 2010). Maurice Halbwachs, a French sociologist and anthropologist, was the first important explorer of the 'social framework of memory,' as he called it, in the 1920s. There are two

types of memories: "individual memory" and "collective memory." When a person participates in two types of memory, he adopts a very different, even opposing, perspective depending on which one he chooses. On the one hand, he considers those of his own that he shares with other people only in the aspect that interests him by virtue of distinguishing him from others. On the other hand, he can act simply as a group member, assisting in the evocation and maintenance of impersonal recollections of interest to the group (Maurice, 1980). Tzvetan finds the term 'collective memory, very dubious. . . . Memory, in the sense of mental traces, is always personal; collective memory, on the other hand, is a type of public discourse rather than memory. It reflects the image that a society or one of its constituent groups desires to project (Todorov, 2003). For Burke, Halbwach's concept of social memory is responsible for memory formation. Individuals remember in the literal sense, but it is social organisations that decide what is "memorable" and how it will be remembered. People identify with significant public events in their communities. They're able to recall a lot of information that they haven't directly encountered. A news piece, for example, can become imprinted in one's life (Burke, 1989). David J. Leichter defined this as a collective reconstruction of the past. (Leichter, 2012).

The relationship between culture and memory has emerged as a key issue of interdisciplinary research in many parts of the world over the last two decades, involving fields as diverse as history, sociology, art, literary and media studies, philosophy, theology, psychology, and neurosciences, and thus bringing the humanities, social studies, and natural sciences together in a unique way. "The interplay of present and past in socio-cultural situations" provides a provisional description based on the broad notion of cultural memory. Individual acts of remembering in a social context to group memory (of family, friends, veterans and others.) to national memory with its "invented traditions," and finally to a host of transnational *lieux de mémoire* as the Holocaust and 9/11––such an understanding of the term allows for the inclusion of a broad spectrum of phenomena as possible objects of cultural memory studies (Erll & Nünning, 2008).

The concept of *lieu de mémoire* or "sites of memory" came into existence with Pierre Nora, a French historian who defines it in the following way:

> If the expression *lieu de mémoire* must have an official definition, it should be this: a *lieu de mémoire* is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community (in this case, the French commu-

nity) (Nora, 1984).

In an attempt to explain more what a *Lieux de memoire* means, Nora provides two pertinent examples. First is the Revolutionary Calendar, and the other is the celebrated *Tour de la France par Deux enfant*. The Revolutionary Calendar was created during the French Revolution between 1793 to 1805 and was designed to remove all religious and royalist influences from the calendar. He writes;

> The function of the calendar, it was thought, would be to halt history at the hour of the Revolution by indexing future months, days, centuries, and years to the Revolutionary epic. Yet, to our eyes, what further qualifies the revolutionary calendar as a lieu de memoire is its apparently inevitable failure to have become what its founders hoped. If we still lived today according to its rhythm, it would have become as familiar to us as the Gregorian calendar and would consequently have lost its interest as a lieu de memoir (Nora 1984).

Similarly, the *Tour de la France par Deux enfant* is also a *lieux de memoire* because it reflects the attachment to a past that is no more. *Tour de la France par Deux enfant* (1877) is a French novel/geography/travel/school book written by Augustine Fouillée, who used the pseudonym of G. Bruno. The book was widely used in Third Republic classrooms, where it influenced generations of youngsters in developing a feeling of France as a unified nation. It was so popular that by 1900, it had a circulation of 6 million copies, and by 1914, it had sold 7 million. It remained in use in classrooms until the 1950s, and it is still available in print today. It is sometimes known as "the little red book of the Republic" (Nora, 1989). This paper argues that by addressing the relationship between place, identity, and cultural memory, the portrayal of events and places in Twilight In Delhi depicts Delhi as a site of memory.

Twilight in Delhi

Twilight In Delhi is a love story between Asghar, a boy from an aristocratic family, and Bilqees, the daughter of a lower-class family. It depicts the life of a variety of people who reside in an ancient Delhi family. Mir Nihal, the head of an aristocratic Muslim family, is fighting colonialism's devastating impact on their culture. Asghar, Mir Nihal's youngest and most rebellious son, defies his family's expectations by marrying his beloved and adopting a foreign way of life. His amorous behaviour eventually ends in

the death of his wife. Mir Nihal's courage was shattered by his rebellious attitude, his family's bleak circumstances, British servitude, and the death of his eldest son. Through the character of Mir Nihal, the novel depicts the fall of Muslim civilization in the city. He acts as a microcosm of Delhi's culture. Nihal aspires to live in the style of the Mughals in the modern era. Characterization is crucial in understanding how Delhi becomes a memory location, as the characters allow us to peep into Delhi's world and experience its fascination. The way people speak and behave is an integral aspect of Delhi's rich culture, which was on the edge of extinction as the 'new modern' took hold.

It is a novel whose story is centred on place and memory, allowing us to examine our own identities and experiences through the lens of a place's (re)discovery. *Twilight In Delhi*'s narrator and protagonist are motivated by the grief found in historical locales. Through the location, memories are recalled, and a comprehensive sensation of grief and remembrance, loss and dislocation is realised. Ali chronicles the everyday rituals of a Muslim household and its members, beginning with the Azaan prayer in a nearby mosque and a summons to lead the Fajr prayer in the mosque. The scene at Jama Masjid and in the surrounding area is recounted in detail. According to Jay Winter, no official certification is required for any building, place, or thing to be considered a site of memory. If people have lived important moments and shared memories, it becomes a site of memory (Winter, 2010). In the novel, the physical contours of the places are influenced by mental corollaries resulting from a location's association with numerous memories. When Ali refers to a specific building or monument, he is referring to a rite or tradition. He connects individuals to a physical item, such as a building, in such a way that each time the location is mentioned, a certain event or memory is triggered. Since he is captivated by memory, he is on the lookout for locations that act as archives for his history: structures that preserve specific feelings and memories for him to return.

> Mir Nihal remembered, tears in his eyes, how the English insisted on deconstructing or converting this mosque into a church in 1857. As he examined this, a horrifying and awe-inspiring vision flashed before his brain. On September 14, 1857, the momentous day when Delhi succumbed to the English, this mosque took on a new appearance. Mir Nihal was ten years old at the time and had firsthand knowledge of everything (Ali 145).

Nietzsche argues that an excessive amount of history is harmful to the

living. History belongs to the living individual in three ways: as an active and striving person, as a person who remembers and idolises history, and as a suffering individual in need of liberation. (Nietzsche 1876). Ali's love for the past has compelled him to revisit historical landmarks, permanently imbuing them with a sense of melancholy. As a result, places act as stimulants for grief.

Pierre Nora believes history has always been against memory, trying to repress and destroy it. So, in the presence of history, the concept of sites of memory is impossible. He writes:

> A generalized critical history would no doubt preserve some museums, some medallions and monuments that is to say, the materials necessary for its work but it would empty them of what, to us, would make them lieux de memoire. In the end, a society living wholly under the sign of history could not, any more than could a traditional society, conceive such sites for anchoring its memory (Nora 1989).

Ahmed Ali chose to write on Delhi as an act of constructing it as a site of memory to seek meaning in enormous historical events and in an attempt to apply them to their tiny social networks. He knew that these linkages would inevitably disintegrate, to be replaced by other forms with new demands and histories. The typical trajectory of memory sites is defined by their development, institutionalization, and dissolution. He tried to put it to a halt.

For historians like Michel de Certeau, Michel Foucault, and Maurice Halbwachs, the practice of history in the West, or, more precisely, the production of history by Western historical discourse, has traditionally been one of attempting to bring the past into a sense of wholeness and order. As De Certeau claims, "[History] customarily began with limited evidence [...] and it took as its task the sponging of all diversity off of them, unifying everything into coherent comprehension"(De Certeau, 1988). However, de Certeau goes on to explain that such a history is what allows the dominant culture of the present to define itself against that past, illustrating how the fantasy of objective and perfect comprehension is at least partially a means of hegemony dominance and manipulation. "[I]ntelligibility is established through a relation to the other; it moves (or 'progresses') by changing what it makes of its 'other' — the Indian, *the past*, the people, the mad, the child, the Third World"(De Certeau, 1988). Foucault, too had a philosophical affiliation with the "others" of the world and at times he is

antagonistic to the traditional (or "classical") "history" that de Certeau describes (Rabinow, 1984). In the Introduction of the novel, Ali writes, "My purpose in writing the novel was to depict a phase of our national life and the decay of a whole culture, a particular mode of thought and living, values now dead and gone before our eyes" (Ali, 2007). By writing this novel, he wants to document the past he has experienced himself. However, Ali did not intend to make a point favouring the subjective study of memories for historiography. Instead, he places collective memories objectively in a historical context in order to assert his identity and construct a modern nation-state that acknowledges the multiplicity of narratives. As Foucault asserts, "The traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for retracing the past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled"(Rabinow 1984).

Since memory defines identity, it became imperative for people from different sections of society to write and revive their history. This is an act of assertion in the public arena. Nora writes:

> Those who have long been marginalized in traditional history are not the only ones haunted by the need to recover their buried pasts. Following the example of ethnic groups and social minorities, every established group, intellectual or not, learned or not, has felt the need to go in search of its own origins and identity (Nora 1989).

This has led to the abundance in the production of individual histories, owing to a multiplicity of narratives based on personal memories. According to Nora, this is a *psychologization of memory.* He elaborates:

> The transformation of memory implies a decisive shift from the historical to the psychological, from the social to the individual, from the objective message to its subjective reception, from repetition to rememoration. The total psychologization of contemporary memory entails a completely new economy of the identity of the self, the mechanics of memory, and the relevance of the past (Nora 1984).

Apart from the actual building and places, Ali also talks about real-life characters and events. He introduces Gul Bano, a granddaughter of Bahadur Shah Zafar[*] who had experienced her share of hardships post-1857. She visits Mir Nihal's home a day before the Coronation of the English

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[*] The twentieth and last Mughal Emperor of India who was also a poet.

king and expresses her sadness over the upcoming event. She narrates the event leading to the usurpation of the Mughal king and the eventual conquest by the British. She vents out her emotions through the writings of Bahadur Shah Zafar and says,

> Suddenly the wind has changed, my soul
>
> Is restless constantly.
>
> How shall I tell the tale of woe,
>
> My heart is rent with agony.
>
> Delhi was once a paradise,
>
> Such peace had abided here.
>
> But they have ravished its name and pride,
>
> Remain now only ruins and care (Ali 2007)

Each word she uttered came from the king who had to give up his throne and kingdom. This bereavement is an act of mourning the loss of wealth, comfort, and sense of belongingness attached to Delhi. The day of the Coronation of the new king, December 7 1911, brings alive the memories of the grandeur of the Mughal kings that people had seen. Even though the procession and the ceremony had been planned the same way the previous rulers organized their Durbar, it lacked the charm that was a part of the Mughal court. Instead of instilling hopes for a new beginning, the ceremony reminded him of all the suffering and bloodshed that the city had experienced. As Mir Nihal walked towards the procession, each building reminded him of the glorious past and the people who had left their traces behind.

> … Mir Nihal was reminded of those days of the slaughter of Indians when too the English guns had boomed far away, and the city had been deserted and dead, strewn all over with the corpses of the brave (Ali 2007).

The city underwent considerable modifications following the British King's Coronation. Ali's writing reflects a yearning for a place in its most natural state, free of the artificiality imposed by the British masters. He speaks on behalf of people who had lived through the past and were present during the transformation. Memory for Freud in "Constructions in Analysis" became a method of reading the past instead of the active recollection of the past (Freud 1964). Mir Nihal is undertaking the same. The transition from the Mughal to the Colonial era was traumatic for the

citizens of Delhi. This change was not well received, and many believed it signalled the end of civilization as a whole. This demise is symbolised by the family of Mir Nihal, which becomes a metaphor for Delhi and its state. Nihal's shift from a vibrant, exuberant individual to a paralysed person and the deterioration of his character are heartbreaking. His son and daughter-in-law both pass away, as do the majority of his acquaintances. Begum Nihal develops blindness. Thus, the title "*Twilight In Delhi*," with its allusion to fading light, explains the depiction of the "Indians" as they approach death and the collapse of Muslim culture with the entry of colonial powers. For this reason, scholars like Nietzsche believes that happiness consists of living in the present moment, unconstrained by the horror that weighs down the brains of the living. He writes, "it is possible to live almost without remembering, indeed, to live happily…however, it is generally completely impossible to live without forgetting (Nietzsche 1876).

Conclusion

The story takes place in the post-1857 era of the European colonisation of India. The interaction between the people and the city is crucial here. Ali places himself in the shoes of the colonised to demonstrate the plight of those disadvantaged as a result of British supremacy. He feels that Delhi, the subcontinent's epicentre for long, is now fading and retreating. Memory in the story is divided into two categories: 'Fictionalized' memory and 'Real' events and experiences. While the fictionalised memory is the responsibility of the characters, their collective memories, and their point of view, the writer's memory is incorporated through the depiction of genuine events and places. The book makes reference to true historical events such as the 1911 'Great Darbar,' the 1919 Amritsar Jallianwala Bagh massacre, and the 1920 political instability in Northern India. Numerous historical monuments in Dehli are detailed in detail in the novel, including Qutab Minar, Humayun's Tomb, Red Fort, and Jamia Mosque. Both of these modes of recall contribute to Delhi's designation as a site of memory. According to Pierre Nora, history speaks in numerous voices emanating from a variety of collective memories that must be considered when conducting historical research. Nora aimed to evoke a sense of French national identity while also incorporating a diversity of narratives (Nora, 1984). To summarise, Ali has combined many voices to produce a cohesive history that acknowledges the plurality of narratives and the range of collective memories that have emerged from the past. These local features enable him to tell the nation's story via Delhi.

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