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Ahmed Ali in Conversation: An Excerpt from an Interview

[The following excerpt is from an extensive interview with the late Ahmed Ali conducted by Carlo Coppola on 3 August 1975, in Rochester, Michigan, during Professor Ali's initial visit to the United States. The entire interview, over sixty pages in length, will be published in a special Ahmed Ali issue of the *Journal of South Asian Literature*, Vol. XXVIII, No. 2 (Summer–Fall 1993), which will appear in 1995. The interview roughly follows the chronology of Ahmed Ali's life. This excerpt deals with the publication of his *Twilight in Delhi*. All footnotes have been provided by the Interviewer. —Eds.]

CARLO COPPOLA: When did you start work on *Twilight in Delhi*?

AHMED ALI: In the summer of 1938, during the summer vacation in Delhi.¹ I spent the whole summer vacation in Delhi. I did not go to Aligarh to visit Mohsin Abdullah's family² that year. It was my habit to

¹Ali was employed as a lecturer in English at Lucknow University at the time.

²Mohsin Abdullah was a high-school friend of Ali's in Aligarh, the son of Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah (1878–1965), renowned Muslim educator and libertarian who championed the cause of Muslim women's education, and younger brother of Dr. Rashid Jahan (1905–1952), who later became a friend of Ahmed Ali and a fellow member of the so-called "*Āṅgārē* Group." This group of friends published the highly controversial anthology *Āṅgārē* (Burning Coals), which ushered in the radical leftist "progressive movement" first in Urdu, and later, under various names, into most of the major literatures of India.

spend a month in Aligarh before I came on to Delhi to my mother's house.³ Mohsin's home was another home to me, and I could not just go there to visit for a short time, but was expected to stay there for long periods. But that year I went immediately to Delhi because I had the idea in the back of my mind that I wanted to write this novel. I went and met as many old people as I could and I watched everyone's actions as I walked down the street. I watched everything.

I watched people as I went to the Edward Memorial Park and when I went to the Jama Masjid. I watched everyone—the pigeon sellers, the pigeon buyers, the pigeon flyers—all those wonderful kaleidoscopic scenes and crowds. I also looked from the steps and platform of the Jama Masjid to the Red Fort in the distance. I was trying to picture in my mind where the fights in 1857 took place between the Muslims and

Dr. Rashid Jahan, a gynecologist by profession, was also a communist political organizer and writer. Her works include two volumes of short stories: *'Aurat aur Dīgar Afsānē* ("Woman" and Other Stories; 1937; rpt. 1967; "Woman" is, in fact, a play) and *Sho'la-e Javvāla* (Raging Flames; 1974); she also wrote a number of radio plays, including a dramatization of Premchand's famous short story "Kafan" (The Shroud).

In 1934 Rashid Jahan married another member of the *Āngārē* Group, Mahmuduzzafar (1908–1956), a member of the royal family of Rampur, who was educated at Sherborne School, Dorset, and Oxford. He taught history and English as Vice-Principal of the Mohammaden Anglo-Oriental (MAO) College, Amritsar, between 1934 and 1937, then became a full-time worker for the Communist Party of India (CPI), editing the Urdu political journal *Āngārī* (Sparks) from late 1938. In 1948 he was General Secretary of the CPI in Uttar Pradesh and was thereafter forced to go underground during the early regime of India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru (prime-ministership: 1947–1963). His major work is the travelogue *Quest for Life* (1954), in which he describes the trip he made to Russia with Rashid Jahan, who was at the time terminally ill with cancer, and his travels throughout the Soviet Union after her death in 1952.

The fourth member of the *Āngārē* group was Sajjad Zaheer (1905–1973), son of a prominent Shia family of Allahabad, where his father was a judge of the High Court of Judicature. Educated at both Lucknow and Oxford universities, he helped establish the All-India Progressive Writers Association as one of the organizers of its first meeting in Lucknow in 1936. He also helped establish the Communist Party of Pakistan in the early 1950s.

³Ali's mother was Ahmad Kaniz Asghar Begum, whose distinguished lineage is traced back to a family of Hadramaut Syeds who had been brought to Delhi by the second Moghul emperor Humayun (1508–1556).

Indians on one side, and the British on the other, and where the cannons were fired from, and where the people, the spectators, watched the “fun,” as they considered it.

I kept on watching, observing, and imagining. I would try to see as many people in the *muhalla* [district, neighborhood] as possible, as many members of my family as I could. I never used to go see my relatives. My mother would always ask me to, but I never bothered. But this year I went out to see everyone. I was glad that it pleased my mother, but she didn't know that I was doing it with something in the back of my mind. But in any case, I was glad to establish, or reestablish, contact with them. And all those old people were very glad that I came, especially all those wonderful old ladies of that time.

I was simply preparing the background, the notes, for this novel. Perhaps it was then that the end of the story had come to me; I didn't have a beginning yet. The beginning came when I returned to Lucknow, and it was then that I started writing out plots, thinking them out, preparing family trees for the whole book, rethinking events, evolving characters, giving them names, and so on. After that, I started writing and completed it in February or March 1939. Then that summer vacation I spent typing it out in Simla, as I remember. I had to buy a typewriter for that purpose. Soon after that I went to London for study leave and left India near the end of July.

c c : Did you have real individuals in mind when you wrote the novel?

AA : People grew out of my notes, out of my observations. Not one of them is fiction because no novelist can evolve fictitious human beings, unless they are the computerized automatons of today's fiction.

What I had in mind when I wrote the novel was the awareness or the consciousness of the past, the sadness and the agony of suffering and of sacrifice. Also, a certain feeling for the glory that was gone, the failure of the people of India, and of the Muslims especially, to have held on to life, to have been able to look at things in terms of cause and effect. And behind this sadness and sorrow was the reason for the disappearance of this glory: the *bêtes noires*, British imperialism and the British people themselves.

c c : The novel does not seem to be anti-British.

AA : I never wanted to write against the British. I wanted to write about

what happened to society itself. If I had written an anti-British novel, it would only have been a political sort of thing. But I was depicting a phase of the life of India that had passed, and the reasons why it had passed do come in in the middle of the book, going back to 1857 and then to the 1911 Durbar of George V, who was crowned Emperor of India. One has to connect him with his grandmother, Queen Victoria, who was the first empress of the dominions and of the Empire of India.

c c : The parade scene at the durbar is an extraordinary piece of description, perhaps one of the high points of the book. One gets the impression, though, that at the end of the novel none of the people, especially the hero, realizes fully the reasons for the situation being what it is. There seems to be no self-awareness on their parts at the end of the novel.

AA : You're quite right. If I had given the reasons why there is no self-realization or why the situation at the end of the novel was the way it was, the novel would not have come off. It would have been I who gave these reasons, I as the author, not the characters themselves. You see, in all the months and months of my study of the people in Delhi, no one, not one single person, was conscious of or had any awareness of why things were the way they were—why the Muslims lost their power over India, why the British were there, etc. No one knew why, so how could I go beyond my characters? How could I go beyond the consciousness of my characters without spoiling what I had built up in the novel, the unity of my characters and the story? I would have impinged on their consciousness, on their awareness, if I had done so. Since they did not have this awareness, I could not mention it. If this awareness had come through me, it would have been extraneous. But I did show it through my symbols. What happened, after all? A society was dying. I did not show that a society was coming to life. I showed that it was moving towards death, yet living, marching on, for it did continue to live right down until 1947–1948. It was the war and then partition that made many changes, that altered the very basis of our thoughts and our attitudes.

c c : Do you think that any of the Progressives understood your

symbolism?⁴

AA: They never really bothered to give the novel the reading it deserved. They condemned it as a reactionary thing. But later on something interesting happened. Muhammad Hasan Askari, who had been with the Progressive Writers group as a short-story writer and is now a Professor at Islamia College, Karachi, wrote an essay back in 1949, the best essay in Urdu on *Twilight in Delhi*, in which he analyzes all aspects of the novel, including his own reactions to it.⁵ He tried to judge the book nine years after it had first appeared. But even he at that time did not realize the significance of the symbol of Mir Nihal,⁶ which I have been discussing here with you, the fact that he does not die but is paralyzed and watches everything around him. Askari has written something approaching such an understanding of this symbol. The best essay in English on the novel is by David Anderson, who does seem to be conscious of my symbolism.⁷

CC: You then took the manuscript to London. What about these days in London? You arrived there in July 1939?

AA: No, I didn't. I left India in July. I then went to Italy, first Naples and later Genoa—those wonderful cities of Italy. I stayed in Italy for nearly a fortnight or three weeks. Then I went to Paris, where my dear old friend Binu Banerjee, my old class fellow in English Honors from Lucknow, was living. He was a sort of vagabond. He wasn't studying

⁴Progressives: this term describes the left-oriented literary movement established in Urdu, and later in other South Asian languages, after the first meeting of the All-India Progressive Writers' Association in Lucknow in 1936. The leader of the group was Ali's friend, Sajjad Zaheer, with whom he had a serious breach after about 1938. The breach was caused as much by personal reasons as by differences in political ideology which developed between Ali and Zaheer.

⁵Muhammad Hasan Askari essay is entitled "Aḥmad 'Alī kā ēk Nāvil" (A Novel by Ahmed Ali), *Makhzan* (Lahore; May 1949). [For an English translation of this article, see pp. 73–84, below in this issue. Askari died in 1978. —Eds.]

⁶Mir Nihal: the old-fashioned patriarch in *Twilight in Delhi*, who, at the end of the novel, suffers a stroke and is reduced to silently and helplessly watching the events in his family and his country play themselves out.

⁷"Ahmed Ali and *Twilight in Delhi*," *Mahfil, A Quarterly of South Asian Literature* (later *Journal of South Asian Literature*), 7:1–2 (1971): 81–86.

either but was rather chasing some of his revolutionary ideas with M. N. Roy⁸ or some communist organization or other. I was in touch with him. Wherever he went, he was the harbinger of the revolution. He'd go from one place to another—for instance, Spain—and he did have some experiences. Sometimes he had no money and used to cover himself up with newspaper at night to keep warm. So I stayed with him in Paris.

But then I did have a mission, so I moved on to London to try to get the book accepted by a publisher. I thought at the time I would return to Paris and stay longer. Of course, that never happened.

I reached London on 4 August 1939 and on 5 September war was declared, and all my plans just went by the board. You see, I had actually sent the book to an American publisher who had already read some of my stories in British journals, and I think one of them had been reproduced in America.⁹ The American publisher was Simon and Schuster, and they had written to me.

C C : What about the writers you met in England?

A A : There were a number of them. I recall my first visit to Morgan Forster's¹⁰ flat. He himself had made tea and brought the tray himself. I still remember very well that the whole flat was full of a smell. I didn't realize what it was at the time, but Morgan had left the gas running and had forgotten to turn it off. I was much impressed by the great man bringing tea, making it himself and serving it to his mother and to me. Very charming, very sweet. He was a man who had a great love for India and for anyone who came from there. It was my cousin Hashim Ali who had met Forster earlier and who sent me to meet him. Hashim was a

⁸M. N. Roy (1887–1954): a revolutionary Marxist who helped establish the Communist Party of India in the 1920s. He was for several years a member of the Executive Committee of the Communist International. After independence, he broke with the communists and founded the Radical Humanist group.

⁹It was his "An Old-Style Muslim," which appeared in *Asia*, 39:3 (March 1939): 155–57.

¹⁰E. M. Forster (1879–1970): considered by many one of the finest British novelists of the twentieth century, perhaps best known for his *A Passage to India* (1924). In 1906, while serving as a tutor at Cambridge, he became close friends with Ross Masood, a distant relative of Ahmed Ali's.

nephew of Ross Masood, who was, of course, Forster's very close friend.¹¹ When I visited Forster for the first time there were, of course, inquiries about my family and everyone.

I mentioned to him that I had brought a novel, and he said, "Yes, I'd like to see it." So I just gave it to him. Naturally, a young writer with a novel is anxious to get reactions to it. Of course, Forster was very good about reading it. He wrote me very soon—after a few weeks—and said how wonderful it was, how much he had liked it, and how at the end one had the feeling that poetry and daily life had got parted and would never meet again. There were other very complimentary things that he had to say.

Then when we met again I said, "Now my problem is how to get it published." He said that the best thing was to get a literary agent. I told him that I knew no one, so he suggested Spencer Curtis Brown. I wrote Brown and met with him. He liked the novel and agreed to be my agent. In the meantime, Forster was introducing me to other people, and the war started. I'd been hoping to have meetings with John Lehmann,¹² but he had been evacuated, the Hogarth Press had been evacuated, and *New Writing* had been evacuated [from London to outlying areas]. For three months after the war started there was no one whom I could meet. The whole of life was dislocated.

John Lehmann did write to me that as soon as he returned to London, we would meet. Eventually, as things settled down and people

¹¹Ross Masood (1889–1937): grandson of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, the important nineteenth-century Muslim educational reformer. Intelligent, handsome, articulate, and self-assured, Masood himself was a writer and educator, and became close friends with his Latin tutor, E. M. Forster; he is said to be the model for Dr. Aziz in *A Passage to India*. Masood's correspondence with Forster appears as *Forster-Masood Letters*, ed. Jalil Ahmad Kidwai (1984).

¹²John Lehmann (1907–1987): poet and critic educated at Eton and Cambridge who did much to encourage young writers as founder and editor of the important political little magazine *New Writing* (1936–1950). Its offshoot, *Penguin New Writing*, reprinted earlier contributions as well as much reportage and journalistic materials related to World War II. Other volumes were also called *Folios of New Writing*, *New Writing and Daylight* (1940–1942), and *New Writing in Europe* (1940). Lehmann was a partner (with Leonard and Virginia Woolf; see Note 18 below) and general manager of the Woolfs' Hogarth Press from 1938 to 1946, during which time Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* was published. After 1946 Lehmann founded his own publishing house.

got used to the blackout and the war, John Lehmann slowly, quietly, returned to London. Since I had been published by *New Writing*,¹³ I was considered one of the *New Writing* group. John Lehmann invited me to their receptions and now and then to their meetings. I met Stephen Spender and became quite friendly and intimate with many people in this group, some of whose names have escaped me.

I recall meeting Orwell¹⁴ in London. He was a wonderful, tall figure, sort of hollows in his cheeks and below the eyes. But such a human figure he was! And there were other people as well—John Lehmann’s two sisters, Rosamond and Beatrix.¹⁵ I recall Spender and his boyfriend, the Bloomsbury Group, Harold Acton and his brother, the painter William Acton¹⁶—that utter confusion of heterosexual and homosexual worlds of

¹³Ali’s “Our Lane” appeared in *New Writing* 4 (Autumn 1937), pp. 77–88.

¹⁴George Orwell (pseudonym of Eric Blair; 1903–1950): born in Bengal and a member of the Indian Civil Police in Burma, he became a bitter critic of Britain’s colonialist policies. Best known as the author of *Burmese Days* (1934) and *Animal Farm* (1945), he worked in London for the Overseas Service of the BBC during World War II. During this period Ali lived in Delhi and worked for the BBC as well, Orwell serving as his superior. Orwell’s letters contain various references to Ahmed Ali.

¹⁵Rosamond Lehmann (1903–1990): British novelist, educated at Cambridge, known for her sensitive insight into female characters; her works include *Dusty Answer* (1927), *Invitation to the Waltz* (1932), and *The Gypsy’s Baby and Other Stories* (1946); she also helped edit *New Writing* and *Penguin New Writing* with her brother.

Beatrix Lehmann (1903–1979): English actress and, secondarily, writer; debuted on the stage in 1924 and acted in many films and highly successful stage productions in London; she also wrote two novels, the more notable being *Rumour of Heaven* (1934), and a number of short stories.

¹⁶Stephen Spender (b. 1909): a writer who made his literary reputation as one of England’s foremost poets in the 1930s, prior to World War II. A fair-minded critic and essayist, he served as co-editor of the influential journal *Horizon* with Cyril Connolly (1903–1974) in 1939 until 1941.

Bloomsbury Group: an informal group of remarkable writers and painters who lived and met in the rather seedy west-central district of Bloomsbury from about 1910 to 1940. With a firm sense of their own intellectual superiority, many members of the group attained considerable distinction in their field; these included Virginia (see Note 18 below) and Leonard Woolf, critic Lytton Strachey (1880–1932), economist John Maynard Keynes (1883–1946), occasionally, E. M.

London of those days. I became great friends with Will Acton. He had a wonderful way of painting portraits of the aristocratic ladies; he would paint beautiful portraits of them, but hanging by their hair. Oh, it was wonderful.

Will and I used to go out hunting for ... [hesitation] various things. We would go out at night into the alleys and bylanes of London during the blackout and come across bum boys [boy prostitutes] and, out of sheer pity for them and out of love for them, Will would take out a pound or two and give it to these boys. Then we would come home to a wonderful meal that his housekeeper had prepared for four or five of us, and we would gorge ourselves on this wonderful food. We'd meet at one friend's and then again at another's.

Then there was the Morgan Forster group, with his friends, Joe Ackerley, Nat Fisher,¹⁷ some doctors and others. So then I built up quite a wide variety of friends from various groups: Lehmann's group, Forster's group, and there was another group of younger poets and writers—there were so many of them, and I was so happy in that world; it was a wonderful world, in spite of the blackout, in spite of its dreariness. It had its own richness, a richness which the bright-lit, neon-signed London of today will never know again. The blackout, I think, took us not only into the back alleys of London, but also into the back alleys of our minds, the mind that went further back into the subconsciousness, until subconsciousness itself then met this great void in which the whole of this universe, the cosmic universe, and life exist. It was wonderful!

Forster (see Note 10 above), Desmond MacCarthy (see Note 21 below), and many others.

Harold Acton (1904–1994): author of several volumes of poetry (including *Aquarium* [1923] and *An Indian Ass* [1925]) and various books on Renaissance Italian art and Chinese literature. He is believed to have served as Evelyn Waugh's model for the effete esthete Anthony Blanche in *Brideshead Revisited* (1945).

William Acton: no biographical data available.

¹⁷Joe Ackerley, i.e., J. R. Ackerley (1896–1967): trained as a lawyer, he served in India as private secretary and tutor in the household of the Maharajah of Chhatarpur, a friend of Forster's, an experience which serves as the basis for his best-known work, *Hindoo Holiday* (1932). For twenty-five years he served as literary editor of *The Listener*, published by the BBC, and was a close friend of Forster's.

Nat Fisher: no biographical data available.

c c : Did Forster have anything to do with the novel? An introduction perhaps...

AA : No, no! Forster did not write the introduction to the book—no one wrote an introduction. My book was launched absolutely on its own merits. Not on the merit of E. M. Forster or Joe Ackerley or John Lehmann or Virginia Woolf!¹⁸ Oh, no! I am happy, I am glad, that I was not introduced by anyone to the world. My book introduced itself into the world, and the moment it came out, all the great critics—all the greatest living critics of England at that time—wrote the finest, most glowing reviews of it.¹⁹ They paid compliments to my English, to the lucidity of my style, the depiction of life which was so vivid.

c c : Had you yourself negotiated with Hogarth Press?

AA : Actually, what happened was that Spencer Curtis Brown had sent the novel off to a number of publishers, who had all turned it down. He was getting weary from all that effort; after all, it wasn't his fault that they were turning it down. It was the war, for publishers were not willing at

¹⁸Virginia Woolf (1882–1941): the eminent British novelist who, together with her husband, Leonard Woolf (1880–1969), founded the Hogarth Press in 1917; its publications were initially handset by the couple. Initially Virginia Woolf and her siblings, and later, Leonard Woolf, served as the center of the remarkable Bloomsbury Group (see Note 16 above).

¹⁹*Twilight in Delhi* received critical attention from a number of prominent litterateurs. In a letter to Ali, E. M. Forster stated, “It is beautifully written and very moving. The detail is almost all of it new to me, and fascinating. It is a sort of poetical chronicle. At the end one has a poignant feeling that poetry and daily life have got parted, and will never come together again.” Forster’s comments were used as a blurb on a paper band around the book.

Critic Bonamy Dobrée (1891–1974), writing in *The Spectator* (London; 8 November 1940), called the novel “poetic and brutal, delightful and callous.” Maurice Collis (1889–1973) stated that the book “is so delicate and charged with such colour and emotion, that a bold statement of what it is about can give no ideal of its quality. . . . It may well be that we shall not understand India until it is explained to us by Indian novelists of the first ability, as it was that we understood nothing of Russia before we read Tolstoi, Turgenev and the others. Ahmed Ali may be the vanguard of such a literary movement” (*Time and Tide*; 30 November 1940).

that time to accept many books, a first novel especially, and by an Indian writer at that. Why take the risk!

Then one day I was talking to John Lehmann or someone and they suggested the Hogarth Press. Maybe it was Forster who suggested it; I really cannot recall. Anyway, Spencer Curtis Brown said that the Hogarth Press would not pay very well, for, after all, it was the Hogarth Press and because it was owned by the great goddess of literature, Virginia Woolf, a woman whose style I had admired. John Lehmann was connected with the Hogarth Press, for he had joined Virginia Woolf in the venture of the Hogarth Press, and I was hoping for a sympathetic reading. Because of John Lehmann's connection and because I was a *New Writing* writer, the Hogarth Press accepted it.

Spencer Curtis Brown was pleased, even though the press was not willing to advance much money—only 100 guineas at that time. But I wasn't worried about the money; I was delighted that the book had been accepted and was going to be published. As a matter of routine John Lehmann passed it on to his printers, who were in the country. Then suddenly one day a letter came at noon; it was from John Lehmann. I received the galley proofs and along with the proofs this letter from John Lehmann in which he said, "I received this letter from the printers in which they say it's unfortunate but they would be unable to print the book." Lehmann then asked me to come for lunch. I went to lunch and was disappointed that the printers would not print the book as it was. They felt that it was subversive to law and order and, until such-and-such a chapter and such-and-such portions of the novel were deleted, it would not be published.

I was very saddened, but what could I do? Lehmann said, "Ahmed, I'm so sorry that this has happened. What a wonderful book it is! Why don't you just delete these portions." I answered, "John, I cannot! Nothing can persuade me to cut these sections out of the book; they're part of a whole. They are the quintessence of the book—the portions dealing with the durbar and comments about the 1857 Rebellion—I could not."

And even towards the end of lunch Lehmann, who was anxious just to get the book out, kept on saying to cut out the problematic sections. Finally I agreed to one condition: if Morgan Forster says they should be deleted, I would do so. Lehmann agreed. Then we discussed who should send it to Morgan, he or I. I thought that he, as the publisher, should send it to Forster. So he wrote Forster, who responded, "Unfortunately, you cannot cut out any portion without emasculating the whole." That

pleased me very much but John Lehmann was disappointed. But what could he do! He'd lost the bet, and I had won. But things were still as they were—the book could not be printed.

Then one day Morgan Forster was in London and we had gone to meet him. He said, "Come, Ahmed, I'm going to the London Library." He was writing a book on Beethoven²⁰ and needed some large tomes from the library. As we entered the library we met, of all persons, Desmond MacCarthy,²¹ who was a friend of Forster's for a very long time. Morgan said, "Look, Desmond, this is Ahmed Ali and he's written such a beautiful book." He then told MacCarthy what had happened with the printers and so on. Desmond said that he would think about it, for there must be a way out. MacCarthy returned to the country, and after I did not hear from him for a while, I wrote him and reminded him of the matter. Then he finally did come up with an idea. He suggested that we send the novel to Harold Nicolson, the official censor and a friend of Virginia Woolf's.²² It was sent to Nicolson, who passed the book, and the printers' case collapsed. The book finally came out. But in the meantime I had returned to India.

c c : Was it the printers' union that objected?

AA : No, it was just the printers hired by the Hogarth Press. I've forgotten their name; it's there on the original edition of the novel.

c c : Did you meet Virginia Woolf?

²⁰Forster never completed a book on Beethoven; however, the music of Beethoven figures prominently in *Howards End* (1910), and allusions to this composer and his music are found in many of Forster's essays.

²¹Desmond MacCarthy (1877–1952): British writer and critic, educated at Eaton and Cambridge; worked on the *New Quarterly* and *Eye Witness*, which later became *New Writing* edited by John Lehmann (see Note 12 above); a radio broadcaster of repute and literary editor for *The New Statesman*, he was knighted in 1951.

²²Harold Nicolson (1886–1968): primarily a diplomat, he also published important literary studies of writers such as Paul Verlaine, Tennyson, and Byron. His wife was the novelist Vita Sackville-West (1892–1962), whose works include *All Passion Spent* (1931). She had an affair with Virginia Woolf, who used her as the model for the hero/heroine of *Orlando: A Biography* (1928).

AA: No, as a matter of fact it so happened that I didn't. She was ill at that time and was not in London very often. She did come in once, and I was to meet her but something happened—either she didn't come or something went wrong. But she was always hovering in the background when I was there. But, unfortunately, I never met her.

CC: Could you tell us more about Forster?

AA: Forster was one of the great men, a man whom I respected all of my life. He was a man, not only a humanist, but much more. So human, such a wonderful friend. Somehow, within his mind, within his soul, he had no reservations about anyone whom he considered a friend. Once a person was his friend, he was always a friend. Forster was one of those persons who lived that great principle which the East and India once practiced: that once a person called himself a friend—whatever happened—that person remained a friend.

Forster reminded me a bit of the character of Mir Ashiq in *Twilight in Delhi*. If you recall, this character would go around the neighborhood and stopped only to talk to friends; he would do this out of habit and would not stop anywhere else or talk to anyone else. There were some young men sitting in a shop who, one day, decided to try to get Mir Ashiq to greet them. They tried several times but he did not salute them; he didn't even notice them. One day, though, they were having a quarrel, and one of them called out for Mir Ashiq to help him, which Mir Ashiq did. From then on Mir Ashiq would always stop at that place and greet that friend, even though there was no other contact or relationship beyond that one incident.

Morgan Forster was that type of man. Once a friend always a friend, regardless of what happened. And no one, absolutely no one during that period of hate which had been generated by the war, not only between the Allies and the enemies but even otherwise between friends who belonged to either side of the battle lines, had the courage and the guts to say what he said in that little essay called "What I Believe," where he wrote: "I hope that I have the guts to acknowledge my friends in [*sic*] the other side."²³

He was a man who lived up to what he believed. After I left India, he always remembered to write. I remember when I was leaving England he

²³ *What I Believe* (London: Hogarth Press, 1939).

came to Victoria Station, London, to see me off, both he and Joe Ackerley and other friends. I remember how he waved goodbye to me. It was wonderful. There was such a difference between him and me, not only in age, but he was a man of stature, a great man whom I looked up to. And there he was, coming to see an insignificant person off, just like that! Not only with good wishes but with good will as well.

Then when he came to India after the war.²⁴ The trip was arranged through the British Mission of Information, the BMI, for which another wonderful man, Guy Wint,²⁵ was working. Wint had arranged the whole trip. Forster was staying with me in Delhi. The meeting for which he had been sent ended as a fiasco. It was to have taken place one evening at the Red Fort, but it fizzled out.

I recall on this visit that we went to Jaipur. On the way there we came upon a mosque in ruins and suddenly the whole caravan of cars stopped. I, like he, was filled with a remarkable feeling walking around the mosque, which was perhaps 500 or 600 years old and in ruins. No one seemed to have remembered the mosque, but all the same it had retained its spirit, its atmosphere. After we all returned to the cars Forster stood there alone, not only contemplating but crying, thinking of so many things.

That reminds me that we also took him to Nizamuddin Aulia's tomb.²⁶ Our host brought us to the entrance of the tomb from the back steps of his own house. Morgan stopped us all from going further inside the tomb as he himself went alone inside the innermost chamber. He remained inside there for forty-five minutes or so and came out with tears in his eyes and his cheeks puffed up from weeping.

He was a great man, a great soul, which most people did not know. Perhaps no one knows that particular aspect of Morgan's life, of his real, innermost faith in something which was not merely religion, which was not merely Christianity, nor was it merely Islam. It was a greater

²⁴Forster's trip to India was for the Jaipur P.E.N. Conference.

²⁵Guy Wint (1910–1969): worked in India as a civil servant after World War II; later he wrote extensively on Asia, including *India and Democracy*, with Sir George Schuster (1941), as well as books on mainland China, the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Korea.

²⁶Nizamuddin Aulia: the great thirteenth-century Sufi saint who lived and taught in and around Delhi, whose tomb is located outside of Delhi and is an early example of Indian Muslim architecture.

principle, a higher principle of life which he found in Christianity and in Islam and perhaps even in Hinduism. But he had a greater feeling for western religions, I think.²⁷ I don't know, but it was something, an eternal idea which he always had in the back of his mind. I remember that we went to the Jama Masjid for, God knows, the tenth time, the hundredth time, and he just got lost in looking at everything, lost in his own thoughts, even though that was not his place of worship.

I also remember that when I went to China, the partition of India suddenly took place. When I had left in January 1947 there was talk that it would take place, but we all felt that it would not happen. Suddenly it came, and I was in Peking during the holiday vacation. I had been appointed a Visiting Professor of English by the British Council at the National Central University in Nanking. Suddenly, while I was in Peking, partition came, and I did not know that it had happened. There was only one English weekly in Peking, and I saw in it some news of what was happening in Delhi, how this locality had been attacked, how fires were burning in different parts of the city, etc. I was very worried about my family, my mother, my brother, my sister, and all of those whom I had left behind.

Later on I got letters, but after quite a few months. In one of these letters someone wrote that my mother's account had been frozen by the Government of India. I was worried, for I could not send her any money, and I did not know what was happening. I just happened to mention this fact to Morgan in one of my letters, for he himself had in the meantime written me asking what had happened to the family. He had been to my house, all over the house, and had talked to my cousins and uncles and everyone. He was making inquiries about them name by name. I mentioned that my mother's accounts were frozen. He was so wonderful that he sent her 100 pounds straightaway. How many people would have done that? Not many, I tell you.

c c : When was it that you took him to Jaipur?

a a : Yes, sometime during late 1945, the winter of that year.

c c : Did you see him again after that?

²⁷Given what follows, it is possible that Ali is misspeaking here and intends to say that Forster had a "greater feeling for" *eastern*, rather than *western* religions.

AA : Yes, in 1954, when I went to England again. My wife [Bilqis Jahan] and I had gone there on leave. He was very fatherly towards my wife, whom he liked very much. He was always sending her presents. I went down to Cambridge to see him before leaving the country. It was wonderful.

CC : Was that the last time you saw him?

AA : No, I saw him again in 1959 when I was on my way back to Pakistan from Morocco. I stayed in London for four months. After that I never came out of Pakistan for the last fifteen. I've been buried there between the sand and the sea, completely out of touch with the world, with humanity, with human beings, more or less in my seclusion.

CC : Did you save your correspondence with Forster?

AA : Some of it, but a great deal of it was lost. The pre-Partition letters are all lost; these were the lengthiest, very long letters running four or five pages. I was in Calcutta then, and my library and all my things had been left in Calcutta when I went to China. They were all lost. I have a few letters which he wrote me since, maybe six or seven of them. They're all I have.