

ALAMGIR HASHMI

Professor Ahmed Ali

NOVELIST, TRANSLATOR, POET AND CRITIC, Ahmed Ali died on 14 January 1994, thus concluding a most important and eventful chapter of our cultural and literary history. Ahmed Ali, popularly known as Professor Ahmed Ali, was an epoch-making personality. He was the father of modern Pakistani literature; in fact, his work helped shape twentieth-century South Asian literature in both English and Urdu.

He was born in Delhi in 1910 and educated at Aligarh Muslim University and Lucknow University. At Aligarh, he was a student of Eric Dickinson's; for a time Ahmed Ali and Raja Rao were classmates there. Ahmed Ali began a career in teaching in 1931, as a lecturer in English at Lucknow, and apart from an appointment as Director of Listener Research for BBC's New Delhi office during World War II, served as professor at Agra, Allahabad, and Calcutta, before leaving for China in 1947 as a British Council visiting professor. Following Partition, he moved to Karachi and joined the Pakistan Foreign Service, established Pakistan's embassies in China and Morocco, and retired in 1960. For two decades afterward, he worked as a businessman and as a visiting professor with various Pakistani and US universities.

Ahmed Ali started his writing career as a poet and playwright and soon found his forte in the short story and novel, developing fast as a bilingual (English and Urdu) writer who wrote most of his short stories in Urdu, but his plays, poems and novels in English. In fact, it can be argued that some of the characterization and symbolism in his novels *Twilight in Delhi* (1940) and *Ocean of Night* (1964) were drawn from the sociological and structural kernel of his plays and short stories of the 1930s

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which ranged stylistically from the realistic and the allegorical to the autobiographical/psychological and the surrealistic.

In the 1930s, Ahmed Ali was the main founder and the most creative component of the Progressive Writers Movement, which later became the League of Progressive Authors, and still later the Progressive Writers Association. If it had not been for the publication of *Aṅgārē* (Burning Coals) in 1932—and its aftermath and offshoots in several South Asian languages—it is hard to imagine what future Pakistani literature would have been like. One imagines that, despite an Iqbal or a Premchand, the nineteenth century would have continued unabated. “Holding up a mirror to society” required new perceptions, new attitudes, and new techniques besides courage and familiarity with the Western literary tradition.

Ahmed Ali had the right equipment. *Twilight in Delhi* and *Ocean of Night*, as well as much of his fiction in Urdu, focus on the culture of colonial India. As in Iqbal, broad humanistic concerns are studied through the prism of the Muslim community and its destiny; his first-hand knowledge of this community qualified it for artistic availability, and his literature’s immediate feel gave it a special significance.

Accordingly, *Twilight in Delhi* is set in the great Indian center of Muslim civilization, Delhi, and the plot revolves round a simple love story of a boy and a girl, of Mughal and noble Arabic extractions respectively, who go through the cyclical joys and difficulties of having their love accepted, formalized, and renewed despite social barriers or death. Around this story is built a whole way of life—customs and ceremonies that sustain a colorful though declining feudal culture, including the father’s (Mir Nihal) pigeon-flying pastime, the *zanāna*, and wedding rituals. In the outer circle, round the old house in a bylane of old Delhi, *history* is seen at work in the Great Durbar held by the King-Emperor in 1911, the public reactions to the First World War, the influenza epidemic of 1919, the Jallianwalla Bagh massacre of 1919 in Amritsar, and the political turmoil of 1920 in Northern India. The excellent subject matter and innovative style here were enough to interest Bonamy Dobree, Edwin Muir and E.M. Forster, who commended the novel—as well as those elements which could barely pass the British censor’s examination of the manuscript during the Second World War. In the process, Ali was able to enlist active interest and support of such distinguished figures as Virginia Woolf, Desmond MacCarthy, John Lehmann, and Harold Nicolson. The book was rated a classic in Asia; its author was recognized as the first Muslim novelist of any consequence.

Ocean of Night, dealing with life between the two World Wars, was published in 1964. It explores the possibility of the modern spirit within a feudal structure, and whereas E.M. Forster finds the “heart” [*sic* —Eds.] to be undeveloped in *A Passage to India* (1924), Ahmed Ali finds it here half atrophied, half searching in confusion. The novel is set in the other great Muslim center, Lucknow. The mood is somewhat subdued, the atmosphere one of repose and contemplation amidst a celebration dance and Muslim ideas of love, peace and friendship. The Nawab’s mistress is a fine courtesan, and the young lawyer in love with her cannot overcome the class barrier to find fulfillment. The intellectual and mystical elements in the Muslim tradition are related to the political degeneration of the Muslim civilization and both ordinary feelings and the more delicate emotions are seen as atrophied or sacrificed to the remaining oligarchy’s reckless lifestyle and idle, indiscriminate social pursuits.

These early novels are concerned with the last of Muslim civilization in British India and are written in the realistic-poetic tradition. Ahmed Ali’s third, post-colonial novel, *Rats and Diplomats* (1986), deals with general decay in the world, in which representatives of the “newly-freed fourth world” find analogs of their own decay and depravity prevalent on a universal scale.

Consequently, the poetry disappears completely. And so does realism. Before the very end, the protagonist wakes up one morning transformed into a rat, with a tail grown at his back. The ratty business has taken its moral toll, whose evidence is biological and (un)aesthetic. The narrative aspires to the moral status of a fable. The historical imagination in the earlier works did not offer to subvert history so as to reorder the moral universe; and such verve and humor had never been at the forefront, as they are in *Rats and Diplomats*.

Ahmed Ali’s example in this respect is most instructive. Leaving introspective historical fictions—at a time when reconstructive urges were paramount in the writing in major Indian languages including English, as in the writings by Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao and K.A. Abbas—his long fictional silence and preparation only led him to wield what he called the “scalpel.” Evidently an ironic instrument of discourse, the “scalpel” had to replace the realistic and reconstructive fictions of the colonial period which insufficiently grasped either the historical forces at work or the tremendous flux that they had caused in the fundamental structure of colonial societies. Yet Ahmed Ali’s penetrating mind would not rest easy for answers on triumphs of style. He had experienced the twentieth century too fully to settle for simplistic solutions and continued

to see a precise definition of modernity. It is in regard to this resoiling of culture that the search for harmony, love, and renewal is found to be at the heart of Ahmed Ali's fiction, as much as in his poetry.

His poems reflect the influences imbibed from Chinese lyric, English Romantic, Urdu, and Persian traditions. Often written in a deliberately antiquated style—as if an English translation of old Chinese—these poems achieve a certain distance and “impersonality” while dealing with personal details or human, moral and metaphysical themes; they also lend themselves both to personal and political allegories, to which most of Ahmed Ali's work since the 1930s responds rather readily.

Translation to him was an important medium of reading cultures and he remained engaged in this vast enterprise throughout his life. Besides a fine contemporary translation of *Al-Qur'ān* (1984) and a critical anthology of Urdu poetry in *The Golden Tradition* (1973), he brought out the first volume in English drawn from Indonesian work, *The Flaming Earth: Poems from Indonesia* (1949). His translations of poetry from pre-revolutionary China still await publication. In the 1970s, I used his translations as texts in teaching courses in Comparative Literature, and also tested—positively—the popularity of his fiction among ever-growing numbers of students in Western universities. His erudition and insight into culture and literature set a standard in their own time, whether the subject was *Mr. Eliot's Penny-World of Dreams* (1941), *Muslim China* (1949), or *The Problem of Style and Technique in Ghalib* (1969). He was the happiest of authors in that he was still at work in the middle of his eighty-fourth year, leaving behind a shelf full of unpublished manuscripts: he revised his novel *Ocean of Night* to *Where Love is Dead*; he prepared new versions of his translation of Mir and Ghalib; he completed his Chinese poetry anthology, *The Call of the Trumpet*; he compiled a large anthology of his own English poetry, still called *Purple Gold Mountain* (after the title of his first poetry collection). He was still writing a history of the region comprising Pakistan, and called it *The Indus Flows On*.

Ahmed Ali's career spanned the better part of the century and his work put us in touch with both our past and our present. His renderings of the literatures of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Far East established links which were not yet known, and are remembered respectfully. His creative writings still draw wide interest and are an enduring contribution to international letters.

As he wrote in 1985 (“Afterword,” *The Prison-House*):

[...] I am still a progressive, and try to face the actualities of life,

and look at it with unclouded eyes, untrammelled with baseless conservatism or ideality, or the shibboleths of our own making, the tin gods who sit in judgment over our freedom of thought and expression, and restrain us from growth and progress and emancipation from the shackles of blind orthodoxy that hold us back from marching towards the goal of higher perception and purpose of life, the intenser realisation of man's destiny for which he was ordained from the beginning of creation. (pp. 168–69)

Ahmed Ali truly lived up to his credo till the very last moments of his life.

Just months before his final departure, the University of Karachi honored itself by making him a Doctor of Literature. A few years ago when the Government of Pakistan conferred on him the *Sitāra-e Imtiyāz* (The Star of Distinction), it only saw what had long been obvious. He was one of the brightest stars in the firmament. His star came down to be with us for a bit, and is back there again, shining away.