

## Ahmad Ali's Progressive Fiction: Trajectories of Tradition and Modernity

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### Abstract

*Ahmad Ali, a Pakistani-cum Indian novelist, with his *Twilight in Delhi* not only pioneers Pakistani novel in English but also sets the foundation of modern South Asian subversive novel in English. Considering Ahmad Ali's realistic fictional depiction of the socio-political aspects of the Muslim society in British India during the first half of the twentieth century, this paper, through the use of close reading, aims to trace trajectories of traditions and modernity in Ali's work to bring a more meaningful reality in an interesting and appealing way to the modern readers. Emphasizing on Ali's realistic portrayal of the changing facets of the Muslim society and the eclectic socio-cultural ethos of the post 1857 India, the paper highlights how Ali's work underpins nostalgic, non-communalist, ant-imperialist, and modernist trends prevailing in the Muslim society of the early twentieth century, establishing the blending of tradition and modernity and past and the future.*

**Keywords:** Ahmad Ali, Progressive fiction, Trajectories of tradition and modernity, post 1857 Delhi

### 1. Introduction

Ahmad Ali not only pioneers Pakistani novel in English but also sets the foundation of modern South Asian novel in English. Generally regarded as one of the first English novelist who attempted to look realistically into the life and culture of the Muslim society during the first two decades of the twentieth century, Ali has debuts with *Twilight in Delhi* (henceforth called *Twilight*), one of the first subversive fictional texts written by a Pakistani-cum Indian Muslim novelist. Depicting the changing facets of the Muslim

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society of the early twentieth century India which has gone “beyond nostalgia and recognition” (*Twilight* x), Ali portrays eclectic socio-cultural ethos of the post 1857 era highlighting the emerging ant-imperialist, non-communalist, nostalgic and modernist trends prevailing in Muslim society of the early twentieth century, and thereby establishing himself as a modern progressive Pakistani-cum Indian Muslim writer.

Bringing to the fore both domestic and social life in a realistic manner, Ali underscores in his fiction the emerging modernity and progressiveness in the twentieth century Indian Muslim society envisaging a modern South Asia. Whereas realism as a literary influence in the Indian English literature came from the West, romanticism was a local Indo-Persian literary trend and Ahmad Ali as a progressive writer thoroughly commixed tradition with modern progressive trends.

## **2. Literature Review**

Muslims left indelible imprints on the culture and civilization of India. During their long history spread over centuries, both the Muslim rulers and common folks gave India a new civilization. It was a blend of Vedic and Buddhist cultures with Arab and Central Asian values. During the medieval period of Indian history, the process of reconciliation and amalgamation started with the establishment of the Sultanate of Delhi (Turks and Afghans) and reached its zenith during the Mughal era. This unification gave birth to new models of taste in art, literature, language and society. Muslim transformed, and were transformed by, India. India generously opened her treasures to the Muslims who in turn gave her what she needed most: democratic norms and equality (Azad, 1956, p. 101). They gave India a unique cultural and political unity. It was predominantly the religious thoughts, political system, and Muslim Sufism that changed the ancient Indian culture into a vibrant Indo- Muslim culture.

The qualitative effect of this process was unity and continuity of the ancient social and cultural life painted anew. Kabir (1964) refers to this unification as ‘Medieval Reconciliation,’ elaborating that the Indian culture is the result

of a unique process of continuity, synthesis and enrichment. In the early periods of Indian history, the reconciliation of many opposite strands was slow. With the advent of Islam in India the process was intensified a great deal. The conflicts during medieval India, however, were due to struggles for political power and supremacy. We hardly find any trace of conflicts based entirely on religion (pp. 37-65).

Epitomizing the splendid Muslim culture spreading over the immense expanse of the subcontinent, Delhi emerged as the capital of an empire whose demographic composition posed challenges and offered opportunities on a global scale. As the nucleus and soul of the Medieval India, Delhi became a truly cosmopolitan city both in tastes and manners and like a civilized human being, wore a civilized and cultured temperament. Politeness, tolerance, mannerism, courtesy, sociability, and amiability prevailed among its diverse populace (Zameer, 1934, pp. 9-10). Ibn-e-Battuta, a great Arab scholar and traveler of the fourteenth century, remembered Delhi as “a vast and magnificent city, uniting beauty with strength...surrounded by a wall that has no equal in the world, and is the largest city in India, nay rather the largest city in the entire Muslim Orient” (Singh, 2001, p. 10). The wealth and culture of Delhi was at its zenith during the Shah Jahan era, “probably the wealthiest man in the world of his time”. He erected a new city at Delhi; ‘Shahjahanabad’ that took nine years to complete and cost 6.5 million rupees (Singh, 2001, p. 26). Samsam-ud-Daula, the eighteenth century historian in *The Building of Shahjahanabad* quoted that one of Amir Khusro’s prophetic sayings that he long ago had composed in praise of Delhi, was fulfilled: “Verily if there is a Paradise on earth, / it is this, it is this, it is this” (Singh, 2001, p. 29).

The last phase of the Mughals was “twilight” in Delhi in the true sense of the word. The city had turned into a passage to tragic events one after the other. Nadir Shah and Ahmad Shah on one hand and Marahattas and Jaats on the other hand ruined the grandeur of Delhi. Meer Taqi Meer, a great Urdu poet, lived in Delhi in the mid-eighteenth century, lamented on the fall of Delhi: “there once was a fair city, among cities of the world the first in fame; it hath been ruined and laid desolate, to that city I belong, [and] Delhi is its name” (Singh, 2001, p. 56).

After the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, the Muslim rule in India began to derail and finally it went off the tracks in the aftermath of the Sepoy Revolt in 1857. Of all the other cities of Mughal India, Delhi, then still the symbolic centre of the Indo-Persian Muslim culture and power, got the worst share of the English animosity. Ghalib, one of the greatest Urdu poets of the nineteenth-century Delhi, was also a witness to the fall of Delhi at the hands of the British. He saw them overrun the city in all directions. He saw them cut and kill all whoever they found in the streets. He found that every road in the entire city was a battlefield and the British slaughtered the helpless and burnt their houses. They took every territory by force of arms. He lamented at the pains, sufferings, and agonies of the people of Delhi. Ghalib adds "at the naked spectacle of this vengeful wrath and malevolent hatred, the colour fled from men's faces, and a vast concourse of men and women... took to flight through the gates [of the city] . . . My lamenting pen, while the tears fall from my eyelashes to mingle with the word of blood I write" (pp. 57-58).

Thus, the Mughal Delhi was wiped out, while its culture lay out beyond the confines of the ancient walled city and New Delhi of the British Raj with its wide boulevards and European army uniforms, symbolic of a new order was replacing the old. Delhi's dominant Muslim character began to transform after the War of 1857. Defeat of the last Mughal ruler at the hands of the British precipitated the process of change. This British impact was alien to a great extent. The Mughals had established balance, stability, unity, and order in almost every walk of life. During their rule the social and cultural aspects of Muslim civilization dominated in the prevailing society. The introduction of this new element was a threat to the established Muslim culture.

The West burst in with its growing capitalism and the development of a complex social consciousness. Thus, far-reaching changes in Indian modes of life were inevitable. Many of these changes could be called as threats and challenges to the established social and cultural values of Muslim society in India. The social, economic, political, and cultural institutions and values of

the medieval Muslim society were crumbling. India was literally in a melting pot. Everything from the material conditions of life to the buttresses of tradition and faith was fading away. The loss of Delhi was irreversible. Delhi had been devastated many a time but none of those earlier looting and plundering was as deadly as the present one. The wound inflicted this time went deep down to the soul of the city and its scars would be visible for a long time to come. The face of the city would bleed for long (Kabir, 1964, pp. 78-86).

Whereas literature is common human phenomenon, it depicts the concerns of each society differently. It differs from History which is the external record of human affairs. Literature performs two-fold functions; it brings us not only the internal history of a particular age but also the external peculiarities of the peoples of that age. This function of literature is performed through a comparatively vast canvass of the novel which reflects both the society and individuals, with their external and internal conflicts and motives. Thus, the novel is the intellectual and ideological expression of a certain nation, or a society (Kashfi, 1964, p. 62).

Realism became an important mode of literature in the subcontinent during the first half of the twentieth century. The word realism is used in two broad senses. On the one hand the term is used to refer to the kind of writing that expressed itself during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the works of writers like George Eliot, Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, Leo Tolstoy, and Honore de Balzac. In this kind of writing, authors explore lives of the middle or working class people whose lives are shaped by forces beyond their control.

The British rule in India engendered Anglo-Indian literature. "Broadly speaking, the term Anglo-Indian literature includes literature dealing with India which is written in English. Strictly speaking, it includes literature describing mainly the life of Englishmen in India". A beginning had been made in this literature in 1783 with the arrival of Sir William Jones, the first Anglo-Indian poet in India, a scholar in Oriental studies and a translator of *Shakuntala* (Sareen, 1990, p. 19).

Following the interaction of the Indian writers with the western writing traditions and the freedom struggle going on inside the country, fiction writers of the subcontinent adopted social realism as a dominant mode of

writing. The writings of this period sprang from a society undergoing a more massive upheaval under the influence of the British-Indian confrontation. It was more prominent on the cultural grounds rather than on any other bases. In the beginning of the twentieth century the Britain's political and cultural relations with her occupied world had changed.

The First World War, like elsewhere brought enormous social, economic, and political changes in the life and society of India. The Indian took active part in the freedom struggle. This struggle resulted into the growth of socio-cultural consciousness and rise of the spirit of nationalism in India which led inevitably to freedom of the country. Following this the educated Indians studied the British liberal thoughts that were flourishing in England. The Indian English emerged and developed out of the socio-cultural and political consciousness, nationalism and Independence. Thus, the overall literature of subcontinent led to production of realist literature.

The conflict between the gaiety of the past and the gloom in the post 1857 India has been one of the most dominant themes in various works of Indian literature since the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, we see a growing emphasis on depiction of the social, cultural, religious, economic, and political aspects of life. This tendency made literature a sort of social criticism. As a result, a quick transition started from the earlier dominant romantic traits (inherited from the Arabic, Persian and Turk traditions) to social realism and progressiveness in literature of the subcontinent. Epitomizing the literary spirit of the 1940s giving impetus to writers like Ahmad Ali debuting with *Twilight*, Sajjad Zaheer, a pioneering member of All India Progressive Writers Movement writes that "the biggest aim of literature is to infuse the passion of freedom, love for humanity, support of the working class, and democracy in a nation. It shuns tyranny, ignorance, and superstitions (2005, p. 36).

Such progressive writers stood against Imperialism, Fascism, Nazism, economic exploitation, and superstitions that were prevailing in India during the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. They promoted Socialism and

Internationalism. In fact, this movement was supported by those writers who on one hand were against the traditional literary conventions such as escapism and art for art's sake, on the other hand they were trying to write against their imperial masters so that literature breeds beauty, novelty, and nicety which are the assets of such minds which are the products of social activism.

The progressive literature is not a monopoly of a particular age, nation, and language. The writers in every age encouraged to promote healthy trends in society and denounced oppression and tyranny. Progressiveness polishes the creative tendencies in society. Literature is the intellectual creativity of life. As life changes so change the aspects of literature. This is true of the progressive literature. The Progressive Writers' Movement was not an accident or a conspiracy. It was rather the product of the socio-political outcomes of the First World War. There was a great political and social activation in the country. In the post war scenario, the British exploitation of the Indian resources and people on one end and the Bolshevik Revolution on the other end made the setting for the progressive currents in the subcontinent (Zaheer, 2005, pp. 74-75).

Thus, a progressive writer would promote the best values of great civilizations of the past because such values would be the product of social experiences of that particular time and would add to them the shared cultural, intellectual, and artistic currents of the prevailing age. This writer would conform to the truthful expression of the true and real values of life and would deny whatever hinders the social and cultural unity and beauty of the present time. All this was possible in a free environment; therefore, a progressive writer would, predominantly stand for the freedom loving and democratic forces (Zaheer, 2005, pp. 130-131).

### **3. Discussion**

Ahmad Ali was born in Kocha Pandat in Delhi in 1910. He belonged to a religious family of Syeds. His family tree traces back to Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jilani (1077-1166) of Baghdad. They came to India in the rule of King Akbar. His family strictly observed religious and traditional rituals. They were considered the Delhi nobles. His family, like the other nobles of Delhi, suffered during the 1857 massacre. As the family lost their land in the riots

so they joined service. His father was an extra assistant commissioner and was posted to various cities in India. His father died when he was ten and he came under the patronage of his uncle who himself was a government officer (Kamran, 2010, pp. 15-17).

Ali completed his early schooling at Azamgarh in UP. In 1923 he went to Aligarh and in 1926 he got admission in Aligarh Muslim University. It was there that Prof. Eric C. Dickinson saw the literary spark in him and he encouraged his creative literary potentials. Over there he was introduced to Raja R3.ao, who became a famous writer at some later stage. In the same year his first English poem, 'The Lake of Dreams' was published in *Aligarh Magazine*. Then, in 1927, he joined Lakhnow University to study English literature. There he was open to the new ideas and the current literary and intellectual thoughts. He also met and befriended Laurence Brander, who was a lecturer in English at Canning College Lakhnow.

In 1929, Ali's first English short story, 'When the Funeral Was Crossing the Bridge' was published in the *Journal of Lakhnow University*. It was in 1931 that Ali got his Masters in English Literature. Soon he started teaching English literature; first, at Lakhnow University (1931-32), then, at Agra College (1933-34), after that, at Allah Abad University (1934-36), and again at Lakhnow University (1936-41).

The subcontinent English novel written during the colonial India broadly addresses the issues of culture, politics, religion, and race. All India Progressive Writers' Association was a conscious effort in tilting the minds and pens of the writers of the subcontinent towards these social and political concerns. Ahmad Ali was one of the pioneering members of this movement. He actively played his role in furthering the cause of All India Progressive Writers' Movement even after parting with the movement. Henceforth he emerged both as a mainstream writer in Urdu fiction and as a mature novelist in English with three remarkable novels to his credit: *Twilight in Delhi*, *Oceans of Night* (henceforth called *Night*), and *Of Rats and Diplomats*.



The period between 1931 and 1941 was most remarkable in his literary career all such important literary events like; the publication of *Angaare* (*Burning Coals*; 1932), the organization of All India Progressive Writers' Movement, the quitting of Ali from the Movement, and the publication of his most remarkable literary work, *Twilight*, had occurred during this time (Kamran, 2010, pp. 17-20).

During the same period Sajjad Zaheer had shortly returned from England and was living in Lakhnow where he met Ali. Sajjad Zaheer, Mahmuduzzafar (1908-1954) and Ali Published *Angaare*. Two of Ali's short stories were included in this bold anthology of ten Urdu short stories. Most of the stories in this anthology were lacking in sobriety and patience. They were against the prevailing conservativeness. In certain places, the stories were sensual and they depicted explicit influences of James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence (Zaheer, 2005, p. 30).

*Angaare* thrilled the then socio-politico-literary environment during the first half of the twentieth century. The book was considered offensive by both public and the government. The writers of *Angaare*; Ahmad Ali, Rashid Jehan, Sajjad Zaheer, and Mahmuduzzafar were denounced and condemned in the press and the literary circles. Nevertheless, *Angaare* revolutionized the then literary setting. Referring to the creative and progressive aspects of the book, Kamran quotes Shabana that the writers of *Angaare* were aware of the realities, values, and demands of their age. They had deep understanding of such issues. They not only reacted to the social, political, and cultural inequalities but also discussed those dimensions of their characters which were considered taboo. They saw the human relationship and the deeds of people in the light of the social realities of their age. They analysed them in the political, social, religious, and economic perspective. Their writings were bold and thought-provoking (Kamran, 2010, pp. 24- 25).

In *Angaare* Ali's stories were more prominent because of their picturesque and realistic depiction of the bitter facts of life in the most artistic manner. In his initial stories, Ali depicted the middle class Delhi women and their problems most realistically. He was particularly interested in Delhi life and people. It was this initial impact of Delhi on Ali's writing that can be seen in his latter works (Alvi, 1995, pp. 66 -67).

*Angaare* was followed by *Shoole (Flames; 1933)*. These short stories were the live pictures of the surroundings, streets, houses, inhabitants, beggars, hawkers, wanderers and such others. Ali observed every movement of the characters and was their confidant. He made his characters immortal. He revolutionized the form, style, and contents of the then short story. His stories were innovative because he introduced the modern psychological trends, and new economic currents and issues to this genre in the subcontinent. All this was truly progressive and it transformed the whole domain of fiction to a great extent. His fiction is the depiction of the ordinary characters mostly familiar, but we have overlooked them and their idiosyncrasies. Ali made us aware of them and that is the very essence of his art (Alvi, 1995, pp. 66-67). In 1936 he wrote stories like 'Our Lane' and 'Mr. Shams-ul-Hasan', but onwards he gradually parted with the mainstream progressive writers overwhelmed with somewhat Marxist trends, (Kamran 34). Refusing to accept the views of his other Marxist friends like Sajjad Zaheer, Mahmuduzzafar that only the stories written about the proletariat and peasantry are progressive, Ali broke away from the Marxists and continued writing following his own brand of progressive approach to life and society. After pioneering modern Urdu short story, and writing some remarkable English short stories, Ali's creative genius called for a wider and bigger canvas and he started writing novels. Referring to this shift, Ali writes in an autobiographical article 'Baqalam e Khud' (Urdu) published in *Jamia*:

One can, but to a very limited extent depict the conditions of life and the changing face of history in the short story. . .As if the short story is a segment, and remains a segment despite its meaningfulness, of a greater body. I was in search of a vast and bigger canvas and therefore I chose novel. You will see that in [*Twilight in Delhi*] that there is history, civilization, the ups and downs of life, the bloom and gloom of life (1994, p. 179).

In 1940, he wrote *Twilight* and took it to the famous Hogarth Press in London. The editorial staff of the Press considered some parts of the novel subversive, but later on they published it in 1940. It found immediate favor

with critics E. M. Forster, Edwin Muir, Bonamy Dobree (1897-19740), Morris Collins (1889-1973), and several others. The novel was published several times and was translated into Urdu and several other European languages. Since its first publication, it has been lauded for its cultural and historical fascination by the renowned universities in Italy, the USA, France, and the UK. Thus, Ali established himself as a creative literary figure and got an international fame (Kamran, 2010, p. 41).

By and large, *Twilight* kept influencing Ali's later literary pursuits. His short stories worked as the apprenticeship to *Twilight*. In the years that followed he brought two other anthologies of Urdu short stories; *Hamari Gali* (Our Lane; 1942) and *Quaid Khana* (The Prison House; 1944). Some of the short stories from these books were translated into English by Ali himself. They came with the title *The Prison House* (1958). Coppolo (1977) considers these stories 'autobiographical' and 'progressive' (Rehman, 1991, pp. 29-38).

Set in the great center of the Muslim Civilization, Delhi, *Twilight* is Ahmad Ali's brilliant and vivid picture of the life and conditions of the pre-partition Delhi. It is a nostalgic tale of a middle-class Muslim family in wake of encroaching British colonialism in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is a lament on the fading of a particular mode of thought and living' as the writer himself refers to it. Vividly and realistically, the novel reflects the multiple facets of the Muslim culture in Delhi. Delhi-born Ahmad Ali was rightly familiar to Delhi's sensibilities. His portrayal of the transforming Muslim middle-class 'Delhiwallah' is realistic and authentic. Further, he is bold and innovative in his depiction and representation of a particular outlook of Delhi and Delhiwallahs. The novel begins with a most realistic but poetic depiction of the city of Delhi and its people on a typical summer night.

Night envelops the city, covering it like a blanket. In the dim starlight roofs and houses and by-lanes lie asleep, wrapped in a restless slumber, breathing heavily as the heat becomes oppressive or shoots through the body like pain. In the courtyards, on the roofs, in the by-lanes, on the roads, men sleep on bare beds, half naked, tired after the sore day's labor. A few still walk on the otherwise deserted roads, hand in hand, talking; and some have jasmine garlands in their hands. The smell from the flowers escapes, scents a few yards of air

around them and dies smothered by the heat. Dogs go about sniffing the gutters in search of offal; and cats slink out of the narrow by-lanes, from under the planks jutting out of shops, and lick the earthen cups out from which men had drunk milk and thrown away. (Ali, 1984, p. 1)

When an author writes in the mode of social realism, one should do justice to both history and realism, presenting the characters, the setting, and the plot in a realistic manner. *Twilight* as a story with “a historical document” first “examines the Muslim civilization in Delhi”, then “narrates the history of British colonialism in India” and after those challenges “the existing canon of imperial literature by providing a Muslim view of the colonial encounter” and it “depicts nostalgia for the past glory of Mughal India in an elegy for an older Islamic order” (Ahmad, 2010, p. 15).

*Twilight* recounts a bold and realistic account of Delhi’s social reaction to British Imperialism during the first two decades of the twentieth century, emphasizing the notion that the established Indo-Muslim culture of Delhi felt the greatest threat after the fall of Delhi in 1857 setting the 1857 War of Independence as a metaphor of disgust and revenge for the overall populace of the city, springing mainly in two strands: the reactionary and the conformists. However, the former strand has overwhelmed the latter one.

*Night* was written after *Twilight* and not published until more than two decades later. Set in Lucknow, the second great cultural center of Muslims after Delhi, the novel brings to the fore the traditional residual of Muslim civilization in British India. Reflecting a somewhat subdued mood, *Night* recounts “the atmosphere one of repose and contemplation amidst a celebratory dance and Muslim ideas of love, peace, and friendship” (Hashmi, 1964, p. 179). “The intellectual and mystical elements in the Muslim tradition are related in the novel to the political degeneration of Muslim civilization in India, and both ordinary feelings and the more delicate emotions have atrophied or been sacrificed to the reckless and idle lifestyle of the remaining oligarchy” (Hashmi, 1964, p. 179).

Both *Twilight* and *Night* are in the realistic-poetic tradition, using “verse quotations as vantage frames to explicate, moralize, and foreshadow the events within the straightforward prose narrative” (Hashmi, 1964, p. 179), underscoring cultural residual commingling with the modern trends. Ali recounts the issues related to the changes. Comparing Ahmad Ali to his contemporary South Asian novelists, Alamgir Hashmi writes:

“Ahmed Ali's example in this respect is most instructive. Writing historical fictions of decay at a time when reconstructive urges were paramount in the major Indian literatures, including English? as in the writings of Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, K.A. Abbas, and Ali himself? he is led by his long fictional silence and preparation only to wield what he calls the "scalpel. (p. 181)

#### 4. Conclusion

Culture, a national character of a people, is a complete way of life including religion, creed, knowledge, behavior, social conduct, and rites of a particular community. It distinguishes a people from a people. A community's culture is influenced by both internal and external factors. The internal factors are its geography and history. When depicting the Muslim ways of life in the post 1957 subcontinent in both *Twilight* and *Night*, Ali gives regard to both the internal and external factors. Ali is aware of the changing facets of the aforementioned cultural commingling. After the emergence of the Muslims in the Sub-continent, the local geography and culture had their impact on them. With the passage of time these Muslims were frequently influenced by the Arabs, Persian, Turks, and Afghan factors. With the arrival of the Western the Muslim society started transforming and *Twilight* is a realistic depiction of this transformation. Ali placed a mirror to the city of Delhi and her people and observed the fading Indo- Muslim outlook of the city, her withering culture, its crumbling walls, her waning eccentricities and idiosyncrasies. Maurice Collins (1889-1973) considers Ali “the vanguard of the literary movement” that should make us understand India (Kamran, 2010, p, 62). Besides this observation, Ali's fiction depicts the impacts of the nostalgia for the by-gone grandeur and splendors of the past on one hand and the growing reaction of the Indians against the British rule in India on the other hand. As a writer of immense intellectual and artistic curiosity and substantive personal charisma, Ahmad Ali, in Coppola's words [moved

with equal ease between] West and East and has served as an important, though often unrecognized, intellectual bridge and artistic link between these two polarities. Through his creative writings, scholarly publications, and translations, Ahmed Ali brought Asia and some of its choicest literary works to the attention of the often indifferent West (53).

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