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Ahmed Ali (1910–1994): Bridges and Links East and West

In exile my sun has set.

—Ahmed Ali, “In Exile I Remember My
People and Feel Sad”

AHMED ALI, THE DISTINGUISHED Pakistani short-story writer, novelist, poet, translator, critic, anthologist, teacher, diplomat, and businessman, died on Friday, 14 January 1994, in Karachi. He had been in ill health for several years. Writing in both Urdu and English, Ali produced a number of innovative literary and scholarly works which have received acclaim from critics in both South Asia and the West.

Born in Delhi on 1 July 1910, the first child of Syed Shujauddin, a civil servant, and Ahmad Kaniz Asghar Begum, Ali started his formal education at age five by learning Qur’ānic recitation. After his father died in 1919, he went to live with his father’s elder brother, Syed Bahauddin, a man of circumscribed vision, attitude, and taste. Ali started his study of English in 1922 at Wesley Mission High School, Azamgarh, and in 1923 enrolled in Government High School, Aligarh, where he met and became life-long friends with Mohsin Abdullah, son of the dynamic, liberal champion of Muslim women’s education, Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah, and the entire Abdullah family, which included the eldest daughter, Rashid Jahan.

In 1926 Ali matriculated at Aligarh Muslim University, where, by chance, he enrolled in an English poetry class with Eric C. Dickinson, a minor Oxbridge poet serving as Professor and Chairman of the Department of English, who then became the young man’s mentor. Ali also met another of Dickinson’s students, Raja Rao, who was preparing to study in France. At this time Ali published his first English poem in *Aligarh*

Magazine. In 1927 he transferred to Canning College, Lucknow University, where he published his first English short story, “When the Funeral Was Crossing the Bridge,” in the *Lucknow University Journal* in 1929. The following year he graduated first-class, standing first, in English Honors from Lucknow University, having achieved the highest marks in English in the history of the university. He also received the prestigious White Memorial Scholarship.

Nineteen thirty-one was a particularly eventful year for Ali. He published his first Urdu short story, the experimental “Mahāvaṭōñ kī ēk Rāt,” in *Humāyūñ* (January); produced his English-language play, *Land of Twilight*, themes from which would reemerge in his novel *Twilight in Delhi*; and received both his M.A. in English Literature from Lucknow University, along with the Jhallawar Gold Medal, and an appointment as Lecturer in English at his alma mater. These events, however, were probably not as important as meeting Sajjad Zaheer in Lucknow and Mahmuduzzafar in Mussoorie, both sons of distinguished Shia families. A year later, these three young men, none of them yet thirty, together with Rashid Jahan, now a gynecologist, published *Aṅgārē* (Burning Coals), an anthology of nine short stories (two by Ali, including “Mahāvaṭōñ kī ēk Rāt”) and a short play, which, for the times, was considered radical, daring, and, according to some, obscene. Though wanting artistically—Ali called it “that brave, adolescent book”—*Aṅgārē* has proven to be one of the most historically important in South Asian literature, for in the wake of the furor which followed its appearance and eventual proscription—which remains in effect even to this day—the four authors solidified as a group, forming a center around which the All-India Progressive Writers Association (AIPWA) would emerge. The AIPWA held its historic first meeting in Lucknow on 9–10 April 1936, of which Ali was one of the chief organizers and featured speakers. In that same year he published his first solo collection of Urdu short stories, *Sho‘lē* (Flames).

At this time a rift started to develop between Ali and the other members of the *Aṅgārē* group based on personal differences and a disagreement on the function of art and the artist in society. Zaheer and his group adhered increasingly to the politicized and doctrinaire requirements of Socialist Realism, one of the most fashionable literary trends of the 1930s. Ali did not. In light of the rise of Fascism in Germany, Italy, and Japan, this kind of schism was going on simultaneously in other parts of the world as writers energetically, even vitriolically, debated whether art could, or should, become heavily

involved with politics, and still remain art and not become propaganda. The break between Ali and Zaheer's faction was completed, not without acrimony on both sides, in 1938. Zaheer, a writer of modest talents, went on to dominate the powerful AIPWA for several years, probably the result of his membership in the Communist Party of India; he eventually established the Communist Party of Pakistan.

Ali, unwilling to define the word *progressive* as "communist," "proletarian," or "socialist realist," went his own way. In the summer of 1938 he visited Delhi and made preliminary notes and sketches for the work for which he is best known, his first novel, *Twilight in Delhi*. Completing the novel the following year, he sailed for Europe and arrived in London on 4 August 1939, a month before the outbreak of World War II. [*Events related to the publication of Twilight in Delhi are described in "Ahmed Ali in Conversation: An Excerpt from an Interview," elsewhere in this issue. —Eds.*]

In Britain for thirteen months, Ali made the acquaintance of many writers from the Bloomsbury and *New Writing* groups, and helped a number of Indian expatriates, including Iqbal Singh and K.S. Shelvankar, edit the journal *Indian Writing*, the first number of which contained an excerpt from *Twilight in Delhi*. After making arrangements with the prestigious Hogarth Press of Virginia and Leonard Woolf to publish his novel, he returned to India, where he was appointed Director of Listener Research for the BBC, Delhi. His immediate superior in London was George Orwell, with whom Ali was in close contact throughout the duration of the war. *Twilight in Delhi* was well received in Great Britain. In India Ali published two additional collections of Urdu short stories, *Hamāri Galī* (Our Lane; 1942) and *Qaid Khāna* (Prison House; 1944). Resigning from the BBC in 1944, he joined the Bengal Senior Educational Service and was appointed Professor and Chairman of the Department of English, Presidency College, Calcutta. The following year he published his fourth volume of fiction, *Maut sē Pablē* (Before Death), and hosted E. M. Forster's visit to Delhi. Ali attended the first All-India P.E.N. Conference, Jaipur, 20–22 October 1945, with Forster, who was the chief speaker.

In January 1947 Ali accepted an appointment as British Council Visiting Professor of English, National Central University of China, Nanking, where, in addition to teaching English, he began his study of Chinese and, with poet Fang Ying-Yang, started to translate an anthology of modern Chinese poetry, which, to date, remains unpublished. The partition of the Indian subcontinent thousands of miles away was

especially traumatic for Ali. As a result of what can only be described as misunderstandings and recriminations between him and the head of the Indian embassy in Beijing at the time, Ali “opted” for Pakistan, where he arrived in late summer 1948. His immediate family had fled from Delhi and arrived in Karachi earlier.

Ali then started his career in the Pakistan civil service as Director of Foreign Publicity for the Government of Pakistan. Together with a group of Indonesian diplomat friends living in Karachi, he published *The Flaming Earth: Poems from Indonesia* (1949), possibly the first anthology of modern Indonesian poetry in English translation, and *Muslim China* (1949), a study of China’s Muslim populations, an outgrowth of his interest in China. In January 1950 he was appointed to the Pakistan Foreign Service as Senior Deputy Secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where he opened the China File. That same year his first of four anthologies of English translations of Urdu poetry, *The Falcon and the Hunted Bird*, appeared. Ali also edited the first anthology of Pakistani writing in English translation, the *Pakistan P.E.N. Miscellany*, having founded the Pakistan P.E.N. with his long-time friend and fellow poet-diplomat, Shahid Suhrawardy. In 1950 as well Ali married Bilqis Jahan, a writer and painter in her own right, who would eventually (and splendidly) translate *Twilight in Delhi* into Urdu (1963), and then left for China as Counsellor Chargé d’affaires in Beijing to negotiate the establishment of diplomatic relations between Pakistan and the Peoples Republic of China. Ali returned to Pakistan in 1952 and resumed his position with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Travelling through England, France and Spain during 1954, he revisited China again in 1956, and in 1958 was appointed Counsellor-Chargé d’affaires to Morocco.

On 27 October 1958 Field Marshall General Mohammad Ayub Khan, Commander-in-Chief of the Pakistan Army, executed a *coup d’état* and became head of state. Ali was recalled to Pakistan, where, in 1960, he was retired from government service by the military regime. Returning to private life, he found employment as a public relations advisor to Indus Chemicals and Alkalis Ltd. and the Zafarul Ahsan Group of companies, in which capacity he worked for a number of years. He also started his own business, which manufactured toweling. Despite full-time business concerns, Ali continued with his literary activities, publishing his first volume of poetry, *Purple Gold Mountain: Poems From China* (1960); the remaining anthologies of poetry translations, *The Bulbul and the Rose* (1960), *Ghalib: Selected Poems* (1969), and *The Golden Tradition* (1973); and his second novel, *Ocean of Night* (1964).

In 1975 Ali made the first of two visits to the United States, serving as Visiting Professor of Humanities at Michigan State University, returning again in 1978–79 as Fulbright Professor of History, Western Kentucky University, and Fulbright Professor of English, Southern Illinois University. By 1980 he completed his acclaimed translation of the Qur’ān, which was published by Akrash Publishing, Karachi (1984) and by Princeton University Press (1988). In 1981 Ali was awarded the *Sitāra-e Imtiyāz* (Star of Distinction) by the Government of Pakistan for exceptional service to the country. Four years later, his third novel, *Rats and Diplomats*, appeared. Despite the onset of ill health and the marked deterioration of both his sight and hearing, Ali remained busily engaged in new writing projects and revisions of older pieces as long as he was able. Just a few months prior to his death, on 3 October 1993, he received the degree of Doctor of Letters (*honoris causa*) from Karachi University.

Ali is survived by three sons and a daughter: Eram (b. 1951), a computer engineer living in the United States; Orooj (b. 1953), his publisher and literary collaborator; Deed (b. 1957), a wild-life biologist; and Shahana (b. 1959), an attorney, the latter three living in Pakistan.

A complex man of wide-ranging intellectual and artistic interests (he was, for example, an avid collector of Gandharan art and Sung Dynasty porcelains, as well as a hobbyist painter) and considerable personal charisma (at times charming and prepossessing, at times acerbic and trenchant, but always elegant and cosmopolitan), Ali 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.