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| Ali, Ahmed (1910-1994) |
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| Ahmed Ali is one of the pioneers of modernism in the Indian subcontinent. Publishing his works both in Urdu and in English, and with both South Asian and Anglo-American publishing houses, his influence has been transnational in scope, but his major works are deeply rooted in an Islamicate, largely Urdu-speaking cultural milieu. In 1932, Ali collaborated with Sajjad Zaheer on a collection of Urdu short stories called *Angarey* (*Burning Coals*), considered by scholars to be the event that instantiated experimental writing in the Indian subcontinent. *Angarey* was subsequently banned by the British colonial government for its potential to offend Muslims. Ali continued to publish short stories in Urdu throughout the 1930s, and helped found the All India Progressive Writers Association (AIPWA) in 1936. However, Ali soon distanced himself from the AIPWA, and in subsequent years he published both in English and Urdu, often translating his own Urdu short stories into English for publication in British and American magazines. In 1940, Ali published what is now considered his most influential work, *Twilight in Delhi*, in English, and through the England-based Hogarth Press. *Twilight in Delhi* applies stream-of-consciousness techniques to consider the decline of an elite, Urdu-speaking culture in Delhi. |
| Ahmed Ali is one of the pioneers of modernism in South Asia. Publishing his works both in Urdu and in English, and with both South Asian and Anglo-American publishing houses, his influence has been transnational in scope, but his major works are deeply rooted in an Islamicate, largely Urdu-speaking cultural milieu. In 1932, Ali collaborated with Sajjad Zaheer on a collection of Urdu short stories called *Angarey* (Burning Coals), considered by scholars to be the event that instantiated experimental writing in the Indian subcontinent. *Angarey* was subsequently banned by the British colonial government for its potential to offend Muslims. Ali continued to publish short stories in Urdu throughout the 1930s, and helped found the All India Progressive Writers Association (AIPWA) in 1936. However, Ali soon distanced himself from the AIPWA, and in subsequent years he published both in English and Urdu, often translating his own Urdu short stories into English for publication in British and American magazines. In 1940, Ali published what is now considered his most influential work, *Twilight in Delhi*, in English, and through the England-based Hogarth Press. *Twilight in Delhi* applies stream-of-consciousness techniques to consider the decline of an elite, Urdu-speaking culture in Delhi.  Ahmed Ali was born in Delhi on July 1, 1910 in an elite, Urdu-speaking household. His father, Syed Shujauddin, worked as a civil servant in the British colonial administration, and this engagement with British colonialism helps set a pattern of cross-cultural engagement that continues throughout Ali’s career. While Ali’s early education was in Urdu, in 1922 his family enrolled him in an English-medium school, the Wesley Mission High School in Azamgarh. Later he enrolled in the Government High School, Aligarh. In 1926, Ali joined Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), one of the major hubs of reform and progressive thought in British India at the time. AMU, following the reform-minded ideas of its founder, Syed Ahmed Khan, was oriented to directly encouraging its Indian (largely Muslim) students to engage with modernity, sometimes in contradiction of traditional Islamic practices and beliefs. This reform orientation strongly influenced the young Ali, and seems to have played a decisive role in shaping him as one of the most radical Muslim intellectuals and writers active in India throughout the 1930s.  Ali’s experience at AMU and subsequently at Lucknow University also brought him into contact with English literary aesthetics and the Anglo-American modernist movement. Critic Carlo Coppola notes in particular the importance of Ali’s meeting with a British poet, Eric C. Dickinson, then serving as Professor and Chair of the English department at AMU.  Ali began publishing short stories in Urdu in 1931, and from the first he appears to have been deeply interested in both a highly experimental style and in an aggressive antagonism to Indo-Islamic traditions and values. To wit, one of Ali’s short stories published in 1932 in the banned *Angarey* collection, ‘The Clouds Don’t Come,’ (Urdu: ‘Badal Nahi Aati’), features a first-person stream-of-consciousness narration in the voice of an unnamed Muslim woman in Delhi. She meditates on the crushing heat at the peak of Delhi summer, but also on her unsatisfying marriage, at times making explicit mention of her miserable sex life with an abusive husband. At the peak of the meditation, Ali’s protagonist directly laments the conservativism of her family and cultural milieu (‘How unfortunate that we were born in a Muslim household, may such a religion perish. … What good is [religion] to a woman!’). Such confrontational (indeed, blasphemous) language was quite rare in writing by Indian Muslims prior to 1932.  Despite being banned, and therefore not widely read upon first being published, the *Angarey* short story collection nevertheless can be seen as a pivotal moment in the arrival of a South Asian literary modernism. Three of the four contributors to the collection, Sajjad Zaheer, Rashid Jahan, and Ahmed Ali himself, would go on to be major figures in the Progressive Writers Movement that would emerge in 1936, with Ali as one of its chief intellectual architects. Ali presented an influential lecture on literary progressivism at the first meeting of the All India Progressive Writers’ Movement (AIPWA) in April 1936 in Lucknow (‘Art ka Taraqqi Pasand Nazariya’), and published a collection of short stories in the Progressivist idiom in 1936 (*Sholay*).  However, while the AIPWA would continue to expand throughout the years leading up to independence, Ali soon distanced himself from the group along aesthetic and ideological lines. While peers such as Zaheer fully embraced the Socialist Realist style, Ali remained invested in what might be seen as a high modernist style, and did not support the AIPWA’s drift towards outright embrace of Communism.  In 1939, Ali visited London and remained there for thirteen months. There he met a range of writers, including Indian expatriates as well as British luminaries in the Bloomsburgy group. Ali worked with Leonard Woolf and received a commitment for publication from Hogarth Press for his first novel, *Twilight in Delhi*, in 1940. The novel was well-received by critics in England (E.M. Forster in particular admired it), but its publication was largely overshadowed by the increasingly dire material conditions of wartime England and the British public’s preoccupation with the war.  As for the novel itself, *Twilight in Delhi* may be seen as a work of modernist pessimism, positioning its characters in a historical setting, who are themselves looking forward blindly. The book is an elegy for Delhi life in the 1910s, just before the British recreation of the city, the massive building project designed by Edwin Lutyens that eventually led to the advent of New Delhi. Within the novel, Ali’s characters are split, with the elderly Mir Mihal largely glancing nostalgically to the glory days of his youth as well as the fallen Indo-Islamic heritage of the subcontinent, seen in ruins after the failure of the 1857 Mutiny. Mir Nihal's son Asghar, by contrast, aims in fits and starts to find a way to a possible future, only to be stymied at every turn by a conservative social order. The novel is divided in its attention between father and son, ultimately committing to father over son, past over future, aware that its retrospective gaze can only be a tragic one.  Returning to India in 1940, Ali worked for much of the war years for the BBC in Delhi. Upon resigning in 1944, he took up a faculty position in the English department at the prestigious Presidency College in Calcutta, and continued to publish short story collections in Urdu (often with some self-translated selections published in English in magazines such as *New Writing*). In 1947, however, his career would take a surprising and somewhat unplanned turn when, after a brief stint as a visiting professor in China, he was met with resistance from the Indian Embassy in Beijing in response to his request for permission to return to independent India. The exact details of what transpired at this point are unclear, with some biographical accounts suggesting he was refused re-entry to India; the important outcome is that Ali would spend the rest of his career based in Karachi, Pakistan, in a milieu and locale very different from the one where he had been brought up and where he had come to prominence as a writer in the 1930s. In Pakistan, Ali changed directions as a writer, effectively moving away from the radical aesthetics and confrontation of his earlier work. While Ali did continue to publish occasional works of fiction over the next three decades, none of the novels or short stories he published subsequently have the vitality or edge of his work from the 1930s and 40s, and are not as widely read by scholars of South Asian literary modernism. List of WorksNovels *Twilight in Delhi*. London: Hogarth Press, 1940.  *Ocean of Night*. London: Peter Owens, 1964.  *Rats and Diplomats*. Delhi: Orient Longman, 1985. 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| Further reading:  (Coppola)  (Gopal)  (King)  (Joshi) |