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Ahmed Ali and the Emergence of
Muslim Fiction in English

A single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.

Thomas Babington Macaulay

Where the empire went, the cannon and the Canon went too.

—Robert Scholes

WITH THE 1940 PUBLICATION OF AHMED ALI'S NOVEL *TWILIGHT IN Delhi*, literary history was being made. It was the first novel written by a Muslim ever to be published in English, thereby projecting the perspective of a colonized culture and civilization that had hitherto been denied the opportunity to speak for itself. Before publishing his novel in English, Ali was already an established writer in Urdu; however, he might have been prompted to write in English because prominent works had already been published in English by two well-known Indian writers who were Ali's contemporaries. Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* appeared in 1935 and *Coolie* appeared in 1936; and Raja Rao, already an established writer of stories in Kannada, brought out in 1938 his first novel *Kanthapura*, articulating in the foreword what has become in essence a motto for many non-English writers who appropriate English as a medium of their self-expression: "to convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own" (n. pag.). Of course, this phenomenon of belated self-representation in texts written in European languages has become too familiar a situation that applies not only to Ali's Indian Muslims but also to practically almost all colonized, "third worldists." Indeed, the first publication of the novel in war-preoccupied Britain

has a fascinating story of its own. After Ali had finished writing the novel, he traveled to London—a taxing trip and a costly undertaking for an Indian in the late 1930s—to have the manuscript printed. However, because Ali’s narrative recalls highly pronounced scenes of the 1857 revolt (referred to in colonial officialese as the “Mutiny”) of the Muslims of old Delhi against the British occupation of India, the printer found the book too politically subversive to be in circulation. Had it not been for the intercession of E. M. Forster with the censor and had it not been for Virginia Woolf’s readiness to publish the novel in her Hogarth Press, *Twilight in Delhi* might have never seen the light of day (Anderson 439–40).

Apart from being a forerunner in an emerging (now established) literary tradition of Muslim fiction in English, the novel handles its specific historical material on two levels. First, it depicts the life of a middle-class Muslim family in Delhi during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Through this family, Ali projects the political ethos of Indian Muslims in periods when Britain was still firmly clutching its crown jewel. In his introduction to the novel’s second edition, Ali, who is “a Muslim fourth to the Indian big three of the 1930s—Rao, Narayan and Anand” (King 244), articulates his authorial intention:

My purpose was to depict a phase of our national life and the decay of a whole culture, a particular mode of thought and living, now dead and gone already right before our eyes. Seldom is one allowed to see a pageant of History whirl past and partake in it too. (*Twilight* vii)

Toward such an end, Ali’s complex strategy led him to “juxtapose and correlate a detailed and variegated external reality with the passionate dreams and delusions experienced by his characters . . . [and] to overarch both fragmentary worlds, external and internal, with the author’s unifying voice of symbolic insight” (Stilz 380). Second, while blending the private with the public, the familial with the communal, the novel interlinks the present with the past. More specifically, the reader senses the deliberateness of these historical flashbacks when the family’s wedding ceremony coincides with the Raj’s Durbar, celebrating the 1911 coronation of George V, which in turn evokes in the mind of the protagonist, Mir Nihal, graphic memories of the British ruthlessly quelling the 1857 revolt. From Mir Nihal’s perspective, being as it is the novel’s privileged voice, the gaudy celebration of a British monarch in Delhi has turned the city “which was once the greatest in Hindustan” [the Urdu name for India] into “an exhibition ground” (138):

Here it was in this very Delhi, Mir Nihal thought, that kings once rode past, Indian kings, his kings, kings who have left a great and glorious name behind. But the Farangis came from across the seven seas, and gradually established their rule. By egging on Indian chiefs to fight each other and by giving

them secret and open aid they won concessions for themselves; and established their “empire.” . . .

The procession passed, one long unending line of generals and governors, the Tommies and the native chiefs with their retinues and soldiery, like a slow unending line of ants. In the background were the guns booming, threatening the subdued people of Hindustan. Right on the road, lining it on either side, and in the procession were English soldiers, to show, as it seemed to Mir Nihal, that Delhi has been conquered with the force of arms, and at the point of guns will she be retained. (149)

Interlocking the political with the religious, the narrative details the celebration of the British and their lackeys as they pass by the main mosque, Jama Masjid, center and symbol of the anti-colonialist resistance:

The procession passed by the Jama Masjid whose facade had been vulgarly decorated with a garland of golden writing containing slavish greetings from the Indian Mussalmans to the English King, displaying the treachery of the priestly class to their people and Islam. (150)

Interestingly, the idiosyncratic narrator of Ahmed Ali’s third novel, *Of Rats and Diplomats* (1985), refers to the same historical incident by stating satirically that “the British [were] celebrating the death of an Edwardian king by holding a grand Durbar on the ashes of Mughal pride in ravished Delhi” (5). The historiographical rendition of selective events recuperated from collective memory injects the narrative in *Twilight in Delhi* with an emotionally charged rhetoric. The specificity of the locale, the Jama Masjid, provides an emblematic focus that integrates nationalism with religion, anti-British sentiments with Islam:

It was this very mosque, Mir Nihal remembered with blood in his eyes, which the English had insisted on demolishing or turning into a church during 1857. . . . Sir Thomas Metcalf with his army had taken his stand by the Esplanade Road, and was contemplating the destruction of Jama Masjid. The Mussalmans came to know of this fact, and they talked of making an attack on Metcalf; but they had no guns with them, only swords. One man got up and standing on the pulpit shamed the people, saying that they would all die one day, but it was better to die like men, fighting for their country and Islam. (150–51)

This religious, anticolonialist fervor continues to the early days of the independence drive when Gandhi’s non-cooperation movement evolves. On hearing about the death of a Muslim youth who had been killed while attending the movement’s meeting, Habibuddin, Mir Nihal’s perceptive and favorite son,

declares, "The English frankly say that they fear no one but Muslims in India and that if they crush the Mussalmans they shall rule with a care-free heart" (262). This statement is validated by numerous letters and documents published by British officials in India. For instance, William Howard Russell wrote in the *Times* in early 1858 that

the Mahomedan [*sic*] element in India is that which causes us most trouble and provokes the largest share of our hostility. . . . Our antagonism to the followers of Mahomed is far stronger than that we bear to the worshippers of Shiva and Vishnu. They are unquestionably more dangerous to our rule. . . . If we could eradicate the traditions and destroy the temples of Mahomad [*sic*] by one vigorous effort, it would indeed be well for the Christian faith and for the British rule. (qtd. in Khairi 28–29)

Because the Muslims were the dominant force behind the revolt of 1857, the British, who called it "a Muhammadan rebellion" and "a handiwork of the Muslims" (qtd. in Khairi 26), singled them out as their most mortal enemy from among the population of India. Thousands of them were massacred or "were blown to bits from the mouths of cannon. Still thousands of others were, after a trial under Martial law lasting a few minutes at the most, found guilty and sent to their death" (Khairi 27). W.W. Hunter, a British civil servant, stated in 1868: "After the Mutiny, the British turned upon the Mussalmans as their real enemies so that failure of the revolt was much more disastrous to them than the Hindus" (qtd. in Akbar 32). In his autobiography, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India, also affirms this British policy of anti-Muslim discrimination: "After 1857 the heavy hand of the British fell more on the Muslims than on the Hindus. They considered the Muslims more aggressive and militant than the Hindus, possessing memories of recent rule in India and therefore more dangerous" (460).

The thrust of Ahmed Ali's thematics in this novel is to suggest passionately, prophetically, but always lyrically, that India's Muslims are falling on perilous times as they face the British occupation, conveying through the novel's title a dejected premonition of the subsequent fragmentation of Muslims in the subcontinent. The novel thus functions through nostalgia for the glorious era of the Mughals and prophecy about the pending collapse of the Muslim power and glory in India, with the ruins of Delhi becoming "symbolic of the ruin of Islam" (King 244). Interestingly, in Anita Desai's novel *Clear Light of Day*, whose title and setting evoke Ali's novel, similar, yet syncretically contexted, sentiments are expressed about Old Delhi's decline in postindependence India: Bim, the novel's privileged voice, bemoans the fate of Delhi:

Old Delhi does not change. It only decays. My students tell me it is a great cemetery, every house a tomb. Nothing but sleeping graves . . . here nothing

happens at all. Whatever happened, happened [a] long time ago—in the time of the Tughlaqs, the Khiljis, the Sultanate, the Moghuls—that lot. (5)

The dual agents of nostalgia and prophecy become further pronounced in Ali's second novel, *Ocean of Night* (1964), where he dramatizes the process of degeneration of the Muslim nobility of Lucknow toward its self-inflicted doom. The amorality and recklessness of Nawab Chhakkan, a descendant of an old Taluqdar (landowning) family that collaborated with the British during the 1857 uprising to be rewarded with feudal privileges, foreshadows the disintegration of a community when it loses the sense of its destiny. The Nawab's drunkenness and debauchery cause his ruin, leading to his demise by a murder-suicide. As one of the novel's minor characters, the Marxist Siddiqi, puts it to a friend, "We as a nation are suffering from nostalgia. Go back to the past is your constant cry. But how can you go back to the past? Which past? I tell you you can't" (54). The argument here is that no nation, community, family, or individual can overcome current misery through recalling past glory. As with the doomed fate of Delhi in *Twilight in Delhi*, the prophesied decline of Lucknow in *Ocean of Night* symbolizes the fragmentation of the Muslim community in India. While *Ocean of Night* succeeds in evoking an ambience of decay and decline, it lacks the focus and lyrical vibrancy of *Twilight in Delhi*. Its effectiveness is also tarnished by the preaching, essayistic quality of its narrator. (Indeed, one glimpses such a tendency in Ali's earlier novel too, but it is kept relatively restrained.) Moreover, the swift, synoptic shifts of discourse and the occasional racy reversals of the characters' mood and actions "mak[e] the narrative disjointed" (Raizada 19) and undermine the novel's dramatic impact. These limitations could prompt one to consider *Ocean of Night* "more of a phantasy [*sic*] than a novel" (Raizada 22) and to evaluate Ali as a "one-novel novelist" (Trivedi 43). However, one could appreciate Ali's strategy here as being based on storytelling techniques derived from the oral Indian/Muslim tradition, whereby an intrusive, often digressive, teller plays such a dominant role that it licenses him or her to impede or redirect the narrative flow by recurrently reciting nostalgic poetry, culled from collective memory, and injecting it (as Ali often does) into the narrative. Being a powerfully effective mode of emotional and cultural expression, poetry operates as an apt emblematic commentary on character and action, and because of its *ancienneté* in Eastern societies, it serves as a literary linkage with a nostalgic past and a repository of its civilizational glory.

While a gap of a quarter of a century separated the publication of Ali's first two novels, his third, *Of Rats and Diplomats* (1985), appeared after a gap of almost another quarter of a century. While the first two novels aim at representing decay and decline within an Indian context, the third expands the perspective toward universal levels of signification. Instead of foregrounding nostalgia and prophecy, the narrative deploys farce and satire as condemning tools of a reality that has metamorphosed so corruptly that it is fatally and fatalistically beyond redemp-

tion. With an acerbic style that recalls at once Jonathan Swift's and Franz Kafka's, the novel is an allegory of the hypocrisy and moral degradation of life in the twentieth century: the narrative reveals the vulgar machinations of diplomacy, skillfully operating with a veneer of politesse and suavity. Through the antics of a quirky, profligate, emblematically named narrator, Ambassador Sourirada Soutanna, recently assigned to Ratisan, we are introduced to the steamy, gossipy, intrigue-filled world of "well-dressed men with no brains" (1). With conflicts and wars in the background, post-Hitler humanity seems to have learned little from the cruel carnage of an earth "all cluttered up with broken cars, tangled tanks and crashed planes, brainless skulls and tattooed limbs" (1). Unabated, the preparations for other wars continue, toward which the conspiratorial duplicity of "dunces and diplomats" who "show off . . . opulence and behave with superiority" (72) becomes instrumental. In fact, diplomacy in the novel functions, predictably and calculatingly, as simply a continuation of war through other means. While war kills openly, diplomacy corrupts surreptitiously. Being himself an experienced diplomat, Ali suggests that diplomacy is a world where there is no honor in agreements, no trust in relationships, and no loyalty in friendships. Savagery in the past was at least brazen and unpretentious; in modern times, it has become insidiously camouflaged, rendering itself more confusing and lethal.

Twilight in Delhi was so exclusively focused on the Muslim community that one notices the almost total absence of Hindus in the crowd of one hundred or so named characters in a novel set in the capital of India, even though "within the walled city as well as in the wider municipal area, Hindus had been throughout more numerous since before the Mutiny" (Trivedi 65). Moreover, the female characters seem passive and their role secondary, notwithstanding a subtle authorial respect for their perspective and sympathy for their marginalized status, as, for instance, shown in the depiction of the pathetic, forced marriage of Mehroo, Mir Nihal's daughter, to a man she does not love (193–95). We should, accordingly, discern the Delhi of the title to be the male Muslim Delhi of the Mughals. These limitations appear strikingly odd in a novel that many critics considered to be of "epic structure" (Niven 5), "composed in open form" (Raizada 11), and concerned with "presenting through concrete and evocative little details the very texture of a way of life" (Sharkar 75), thereby becoming "very likely the most indigenous and home-spun of all Indo-Anglian novels" (Trivedi 70).

This selective focus is replaced by a more inclusivist viewpoint in *Ocean of Night*, where we encounter several non-Muslim characters, albeit secondary, taking part in the action. Moreover, since the events here occur in the decade preceding India's independence, a faint background exists of concern with prevailing national issues in Indian politics, such as the policies of the Congress Party (53–54) and the Shi'a-Sunni riots in Lucknow during Muharram (139); there is also a passing reference to Hitler marching into Czechoslovakia prior to the Second World War (139), and the Marxist Siddiqi even quotes Lenin to debunk the Gandhian concept

of nonviolence (55). Equally significant is the dominant role given to Huma, the sympathetic courtesan who functions as the novel's heroine. The recurrent projection of her perspective and the foregrounding of her capacity for warmth, courage, and genuine generosity—as with her noble act of returning the Nawab's expensive gifts to his aggrieved widow—make her, in essence, the novel's moral signifier. All these features indicate a more open perspective, a definite shift in Ali's sociohistorical stance from what we observed in *Twilight in Delhi*. In *Of Rats and Diplomats*, the narrative moves toward global issues of international politics through the deployment of the all-embracing agency of allegory. When proceeding sequentially from one novel to the other, one can thus see the progressive expansion of the narrative optic. Nevertheless, the satirical style in *Of Rats and Diplomats*, half-farcical, half-macabre, represents such a radical departure that “hardly anything in Ali's earlier longer fiction (excepting some of his Urdu short stories) could have suggested the development of his present style” which takes “Ali's fiction into the postcolonial era and into a postcolonial mode . . . a step away and more than a step forward from what he has done before” (Hashmi 150).

More importantly, the three novels by Ali are permeated by a certain view of history that is quintessentially Sophoclean: tragic and fatalistic. On the one hand, individuals and communities bear a clear responsibility for their own decline. Their lack of profound understanding of themselves and their surroundings, their inalertness to sociohistorical transformations, and their imperviousness to an ever-changing reality all contribute to their self-induced malaise. In *Twilight in Delhi*, the self-indulgence of Asghar, Mir Nihal's younger son, who seems “unconcerned whether the country lived or died” (259), leads to the misery of his emotional life. In *Ocean of Night*, Kabir, Huma's potential alternative lover after the Nawab abandons her for a more sensual courtesan, fails to appreciate and respond to her genuine affection, leading to his ultimate defeat and despair; and the Nawab's collapse is clearly caused by his own moral and financial recklessness. On the other hand, the characters' fates seem metaphysically and strategically circumscribed by conditions beyond their choice or control, such as minority status, colonial constriction, historical process, and cosmic destiny. The fatalistic motto is articulated toward the end of *Twilight in Delhi*: “Who can meddle in the affairs of God?” (287). The agonies of Mir Nihal's final days are described within a similar context of predestination, whereby “life remained over which men had no command and must go on . . . at the mercy of Time and Fate” (288). Despairing over the doomed decline of Delhi, the narrator describes the irreversible transformations underway:

The old culture, which had been preserved within the walls of the ancient town, was in danger of annihilation. Her language, on which Delhi had prided herself, would lose its beauty and uniqueness of idiom. She would be the city of the dead, inhabited by people who would have no love for her nor any

association with her history and ancient splendour. But who could cry against the ravages of Time which has destroyed Nineveh and Babylon, Carthage as well as Rome? (206)

In *Of Rats and Diplomats*, Ambassador Soutanna concludes the novel with a reflective remark on the relentless cycles of metamorphoses in which “mankind has been caught . . . completely” [emphasis added]: “whether renewal or decay, the wheel of law will not cease so long as the earth survives and the skies endure. . . .” (154).

Astutely observant and prescient, Ali captures a crucial phase in Indian history and, drawing on his intimate knowledge of the Muslim community, he projects his vision to posterity with fidelity, lucidity, and elegance. His first two novels recreate a memorable civilizational ambience through evoking fascinating, though fast-fading, images of Delhi and Lucknow. E. M. Forster graciously connected Ali’s magnum opus with his own, stating in a note to *A Passage to India* that “the civilization, or blend of civilizations, which produced Aziz has been movingly evoked by the novelist Ahmed Ali in ‘Twilight in Delhi’” (368). Now a landmark in Indian and Muslim literary tradition, *Twilight in Delhi* initiated an exciting path leading to works by several other writers in English who derive their inspirational and narrative material from cultures and civilizations rooted in Islam. Of course within this exciting literary phenomenon, the name of Salman Rushdie comes first to one’s mind, not only because of the sad saga surrounding *The Satanic Verses*, but also because in a certain curious sense Ali’s *Twilight in Delhi* anticipates Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. The four decades that separate the two texts have witnessed considerable qualitative progress in the works of Muslim writers in English. The remarkable critical and popular success of *Midnight’s Children* signifies a strategic shift in the paradigms of marginality and canonicity. Specifically, not only is Rushdie’s work more prominent and recognizable—for myriad reasons beyond the current concern of this analysis—but is also radically different technically and thematically. While Ali portrays lyrically and nostalgically a world that is traditional and static, Rushdie sees reality as a flux phenomenon, changing or yet to be born. As Rushdie steers away from strict sectarian focus, he ambitiously embraces the multifarious world of the subcontinent, with creeds, conflicts, and contradictions rolled together. This is achieved through an impressive array of interlocking, self-procreating episodes operating on fictional and metafictional levels. As Rushdie’s Saleem Sinai rhetorically wonders, “Is this an Indian disease, this urge to encapsulate the whole of reality? Worse: am I indeed infected, too?” (75). While in *Twilight in Delhi* a “major flaw is the near total absence of irony and humour as operative principles” (Sharkar 80), in all of Rushdie’s oeuvre a playful, parodic mode prevails, “pitting levity against gravity” (*Satanic Verses* 3). However, despite obvious strategic and discursive differences between Ali’s and Rushdie’s novels, the two writers share an acute sense of historical destiny whereby an individual’s fate is

inextricably intertwined with that of the community's: Saleem Sinai declares, "[T]hanks to the occult tyrannies of those blandly saluting clocks I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country. For the next three decades, there was to be no escape" (9).

If Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* has evolved into "both a classic and a legend" (Anderson 440), it has achieved such an impressive status deservedly. Indeed, its significance to the Muslim literary tradition in English is as pioneeringly pivotal as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is to African literature in English. H. H. Anniah Gowda argues in a cogent comparative analysis of the two writers that

both these novelists handle societies whose *milieu* was fast disappearing under the impact of the British rule. . . . *Twilight in Delhi* and *Things Fall Apart* derive their strength from the quality of their authors' perception of the social forces at work in ancient, proud but flexible civilizations and from their admirable knowledge of human psychology shown in the development of their central characters. (53)

Like Achebe's attachment to the Igbo culture of Nigeria, Ali's allegiance to the Muslim civilization of India is committed but never uncritical. His fiction exposes the marginalization of women, condemns the vulgarity of manipulative politicians, and reveals the banality and lethargy of reactionaries who cling to outmoded values of clan, class, or quasi-caste distinction and fail to respond to the challenges of change and social transformation. Ali does not hesitate to show the venality of the parasitic "priestly class" that collaborates with the colonizers and resists progressive evolution. He thus succeeds in merging "the office of psalmist with the function of a national bard, to associate a religious wisdom with an historic vision" (Niven 3). Proud of his Islamic heritage and affiliation, Ali represents Islam not as a set of strict theological dogmas but as a dynamic and legitimate source of his characters' spiritual, emotional, and ethnic identity—an identity that refuses and resists the colonial domination of the "Farangis" over India. In this sense, Ali's "twice born fiction," to use Meenakshi Mukherjee's term for the dual parentage of the Indo-Anglian novel, is at once self-representative and self-critical. It also projects a subversive, revisionary view of history that debunks for the reader in English the official colonial description of events in the empire. (Ironically, the initial apprehension of the British censors concerning the "subversiveness" of *Twilight in Delhi* may thus be justified.) Put in a historical perspective, Ali has broken new ground by launching an altogether fascinating literary tradition of Muslim writing in English, thereby giving the erstwhile inaudible, if not also invisible, subjects a voice to project the other side of the story and to prove that spunky "subalterns" can speak for themselves.