

ZENO

Professor Ahmed Ali and the Progressive Writers' Movement

PROFESSOR AHMED ALI'S DEATH last week spelt the end of a legend—the legend of *Āngārē*, a book of short stories by four friends who together came to be known as the earliest initiators of the Progressive Writers' Movement (PWM) in Urdu literature. The other three writers were Syed Sajjad Zaheer, Mahmuduzzafar, and Rashid Jahan. They had all died many years before Ahmed Ali breathed his last some days ago. While Zaheer, Zafar, and Jahan continued to be associated with the PWM quite unambiguously over the last sixty years, Professor Ahmed Ali's position in it became somewhat confused a few years after its official beginning in 1936. His friends remembered him as one of them because of his participation in the *Āngārē* group, but they also regretted that he had parted company with them after some time.

The opponents of the Progressive Writers (PW) emphasized Ahmed Ali's renunciation, as they called it, from the mainstream of the Movement and regarded it as a sign of its failure and ideological poverty. For many years, they continued to be thrilled at the discomfiture of the Progressives due to Ahmed Ali's "betrayal," until he himself issued a rejection of any such renunciation or "betrayal."

In the Afterword of *The Prison-House*, an English language translation of his short stories (1986), Ahmed Ali gave his version of his relationship with Progressivism, at once different from the versions of the opponents of the PWM as well as its official proponents. Ahmed Ali maintained that he had continued to be a progressive writer throughout his life, ever since his participation in the activities of the *Āngārē* group in

Abrided; courtesy of *Dawn* (February, 1994); originally published as "In Memory of Prof. Ahmed Ali."

1932–33, the original sponsors of the PM. In his own words:

The publication of *Angaray* (*Burning Coals*) in December 1932 was followed by an all-India agitation against the book and its authors [...] by reactionary parochial forces. As a result Sajjad Zaheer disappeared from the scene, and took up residence in London as early as February or March 1933. The book was banned soon after by the government of India. On fifth April 1933 we published our “Defence of *Angaray*” statement announcing the formation of the League of Progressive Authors, which was renamed in 1936 “All India Progressive Writers’ Association.” Our statement was, thus, the first manifesto, as *Angaray* was its first manifestation. (p. 164)

Ahmed Ali was not only one of the signatories of the first manifesto of 5 April 1933, but also one of the most active participants of the All-India Progressive Writers’ Association (AIPWA) in 1936. This was acknowledged by Sajjad Zaheer long afterwards in *Rōshnā’ī*—a semi-official history of Progressive Writers Association (PWA)—in which it has been stated that in 1936 Ahmed Ali’s house in Allahabad became the office of the proposed movement.

He actively participated in the first Progressive Writers Conference in 1936 and also in the second in Calcutta two years later, besides working on the editorial board of *New Indian Literature*, the English language organ of the AIPWA, published in 1939. In the first issue of this magazine, he contributed a translation of Premchand’s famous short story “Kafan” (The Shroud).

This establishes incontrovertibly that not only was Ahmed Ali an initiator of the PM because of his association with the *Angārē* group in 1932–33 but had also continued to be a participant in the activities of the AIPWA at least until 1939. His short stories “Hamārī Galī” (Our Lane) and “Mērā Kamrā” (My Room) were both published in the Association’s official Urdu organ *Nayā Adab* (New Literature) published from Lucknow.

Ahmed Ali’s claim to have been, and to have continued to be, a progressive writer is not proved merely by his organizational and participatory association with the PM in 1932, 1936, 1938 and 1939; it is also proved through the general drift of his writing. For instance, in such stories as “Hamārī Galī” and “Mērā Kamrā,” we find him ideologically and politically identifying himself with the general trend that Progressive

writing assumed in the 1930s and later.

There are two basic characteristics in his writing that establish his identity as a progressive writer. Firstly, in the formal aspect of his fiction, he appears to be a strict realist who is concerned above all with the social reality of his group [*sic* —*Eds.*] Secondly, in terms of content, he comes off as an astute and unremitting satirical critic of the life of his society who passionately upholds the cause of social change. Both these characteristics endure throughout in his writing, indeed till the very end. These twin characteristics of realism and social criticism defined the nature of Urdu progressive writing in its heyday.

In western countries, where realism originated in the nineteenth century, it stood for a kind of literary activity aiming at the faithful depiction of the life of the individual in society as it actually was, not as it ought to be, or as it was imagined to be in romances and allegories.

The emphasis on the role of literature as a mirror of society next led the nineteenth-century European writers to turn it into an instrument of social criticism. Dickens and Thackeray in England; Balzac, Stendhal and Flaubert in France; and Gogol, Pushkin, Turgenev, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky in Russia depicted the reality of their changing societies with all the ugly features of economic, social and political degradation which characterized them.

Urdu prose writers at the beginning of the twentieth century were, by and large, unaware of the changes in literary activity and purpose that were taking place among the European writers. But by the end of the First World War they could be said to have caught up with those changes.

Along with the awareness of a new mode of writing—realism, especially connected with social criticism—the Urdu writer found himself in the midst of a political storm in his society, a storm whipped up by a set of freshly-introduced political ideas. Anti-imperialism, national independence, social revolution—these ideas possessed the consciousness of people everywhere. The end of the First World War found the Muslim people locked into a bitter confrontation with tyranny and imperialist exploitation everywhere. The Russian socialist revolution worked as an explosive ideological force among the younger generation. These criss-crossing patterns of political and social dynamism, and the national revolutionary struggle going on in India itself, awakened the Urdu writer, as they did the writers of other Indian languages, to the new realities of life that ran counter to the traditional views of their forefathers as much as to the preferences of their colonial masters and the latter's followers

among the indigenous people.

It was these social, economic, and political factors, both at home and abroad, that helped forge a new literary consciousness in Urdu, the PWA being its most organized expression throughout the fourth decade of this century. All the same, it was not the first expression of its kind. A close look at the literary corpus of the nineteenth century reveals the traces of a gradual change and its final consolidation with Ghalib. There can be little doubt that a transformation in the form and purpose of Urdu literature sets in after the 1857 débâcle, reaching its completion in the works of two of the most powerful and influential writers of the early twentieth century, Iqbal and Premchand.

Thus the Progressives of the 1930s were not without predecessors and mentors. And strangely, both Iqbal and Premchand shared a set of ideological features—anti-imperialism, anti-feudalism, anti-capitalism, and socialism verging on social revolution—which they bequeathed to the Progressives who, by and large, adopted them.

Iqbal and Premchand and their ideological predilections were not the only influence. The Progressives were affected equally, in a most direct and profound way, by the rapid growth of socialist and communist political parties nationwide. It is for this reason that one sees an unmistakable influence of leftist political parties and their ideals on many of the early Progressives—especially the Communist Party, which was both exceedingly well organized and the most powerful of any political bodies in the country calling for social revolution. This was the party most able to stimulate and organize the working classes—the peasants, the urban proletariat, the lower middle-class.

As in other sections of the politically conscious element of the Indian population, the communists had their allies and followers among the writers. Many of the leading members of the PWA in 1936 were either intrepid and ardent communists themselves or, at any rate, “fellow-travelers” of the communists. And there was a certain doctrinaire layer in the PM which tried to forge an identity between the principles and activities of the PWM and the communist movement. Many of the conflicts—both ideological and organizational—within the PWM were a consequence of the contradiction between the dogmatists like Sajjad Zaheer and Ali Sardar Jafari on the one hand and Maulana Hasrat Mohani, Ismat Chughtai, Saadat Hasan Manto, Akhtar Husain Raipuri, and Ahmed Ali on the other. They were all Progressives, even organizationally much of the time, and continued to claim their association with the movement until the end of their careers, and yet we find them

expressing their conflicts quite loudly, sometime even quite violently.

Ahmed Ali's case represents that of many anti-doctrinaire Progressives who did not "betray" the Movement, although some of the die-hard officials of the PWA criticized and even anathematized them. What had happened was that as time passed the exigencies of the political movement changed the conflicting principles on both sides and impelled the various groups and individuals in the overall PM to fall apart, and rifts and schisms were created.

Ahmed Ali, in the Afterword referred to above, has given expression to such a schismatic ideological position, in contradiction to the officially-proclaimed schismatic ideology. But there is no reason for us to disbelieve him when he claims that he was among the prime movers of the PM and had remained a staunch follower of the original principles on which it was founded.

In his short story "Mērā Kamrā," he has given expression to his life-long social and political ideals. In the dialogue between Lenin and the Devil we find Ahmed Ali making Lenin express the following sentiments:

"But you are an egoist, my friend. You are bitter against the design of Nature for not creating a mate for you. We want to demolish the designs of self-seeking men to perpetuate superstition and ignorance, and overthrow the yoke of ages, and put an end to all forms of exploitation, mental or material. We have no sympathy with Anarchy as you had planned; we stand for Revolution and the Rights of Man. And whereas it was because of this we shall succeed ..." (p. 68)

There is no difference between these principles and the general principles of the Progressive Movement as envisaged by its founders.