

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

AHMED ALI

Born 1910, New Delhi, (British) India
Died 1994, Karachi, Pakistan

Life

Ahmed Ali was one of the leading lights of the Progressive Movement in Urdu literature and a significant Muslim voice in the wider literary culture of pre-Independence India and later of Pakistan. Ali was born to a middle-class Muslim family in New Delhi and grew up during the height of the Indian nationalist movement, the emergence of the Muslim League and the eventual creation of Pakistan. After his father died, he was passed to the care of ultra-conservative relatives, who (it is said) forbade him to read fiction, including *The Arabian Nights*. Ali received his education at Aligarh and Lucknow universities, and in 1932 he began to earn a living by lecturing in English at those institutions. He helped to found the Progressive Writers Association and was active publishing short stories, poetry and essays, mainly in Urdu but also in English. His collection of short stories (*Angaaray, Embers*, 1932) was banned by the British colonial government for its supposedly seditious content.

When World War II broke out, he took his manuscript of *Twilight in Delhi* to the Hogarth Press in London (run by Leonard Woolf). After heated editorial debates, over some of the content considered seditious, the book was finally published when E. M. Forster intervened on Ali's behalf. That novel made Ali's name in the literary world, both in Europe and even more so in India.

From 1942-1946, Ali was Professor of English at Presidency College, Calcutta, and he served as the head of BBC in India from 1942-1945. After the war, he was sent by the British Council to Nanking, China as a professor, which left him in limbo when Pakistan was created in 1947. Ali chose (or some say he was forced) to move to Pakistan, where he lived the rest of his literary and diplomatic life. He was Pakistan's ambassador to China and helped to establish normal diplomatic relations with the country in 1950. That same year, he married Bilqees Jehan Rant, mother of their sons, Eram, Orooj, and Deed and a daughter, Shehana. In 1960, Ali began supporting his family by directing public relations for business and industry. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, he also continued to write literary criticism and lectured at universities in the US and Pakistan.

Achievements

Ahmed Ali was elected a Founding Fellow of the Pakistan Academy of Letters in 1979. The following year, he was given the Star of Excellence (Sitara-i-Imtiaz) Award by the President of Pakistan. In 2005, the Pakistan government issued a commemorative postage stamp in his honour.

Select List of works

Novels

Twilight in Delhi (1940)
Ocean of Night (1964)
Of Rats and Diplomats (1984)

Short Stories

The Prison House (1985)

Poetry

Purple Gold Mountain (1960)
First Voices (1965)
The Golden Tradition: An Anthology of Urdu Poetry (1973)
Selected Poems (1988)

Literary criticism

Mr. Eliot's Penny-World of Dreams (1941)
Failure of an Intellect (1968)
The Problem of Style and Technique in Ghalib (1969)
Ghalib: Two Essays (1969) (with Alessandro Bausani)