

9.

Progressivism, Modernity and Decadence: A Study of Select Works of Ahmed Ali

Olivia Sarkar

Lecturer, TTAADC Polytechnic Institute, Radhapur, Khumulwng, West Tripura

Abstract:

The modernity of the progressive writers has long borne the blame for being indebted to the Western trends of modernist thoughts. This article engages in challenging this notion by tracing the roots of Islamic modernity to the *qasbati* tradition of medieval eastern culture and its residual traces in 18th and 19th century India. The pre-Renaissance Muslim cultures in the Middle East and South Asia during the Caliphate rulers had a high intellectual heritage which propagated to India during the Mughals and concentrated within the *qasbahs*, thus resulting in the formation of a unique literary and cultural tradition. This dissertation shall argue with substantial historical evidence from Muslim literary history since the medieval era, that the modernity of the Progressive writers was not necessarily a Western import in colonial India rather it is rooted in a vibrant intellectual and cultural tradition propagated through generations in the *qasbahs*. In the process, it also aims to understand 'modernity' as a dynamic and all-encompassing state of intellectual understanding. Taking up select works of Ahmed Ali, this article attempts to substantiate the claim that *progressive* modernity is unique and is characterised by an attitude of assertion (of their own social values), interrogation and selective participation (in the new system), as manifested in the life and culture of the *qasbati* tradition.

Keywords: modernity, progressive, qasbahs, culture, interaction

Introduction

The Colonial West has always credited itself to be the harbinger of modernity; indirectly signifying the colonised as traditional or pre-modern or non-modern. Over the years, it seems that the colonised also adopted a similar attitude to label any deliberate transgression from the structured formula as Western deviants. This binary signification refuses the possibility of any intermediate existence

where a global outlook towards adopting a constructive reformation is supported by a strong foundation of the roots. The Progressive Writers fell into this ambit. During the late 19th and early 20th century their inexorable presence, though felt in almost all major languages of India in re-shaping the socio-political and literary consciousness of the age, over time has not only gone out of serious scholarly attention but also from a significant mention in the histories of Indian literature. Moreover, the tendency to view them as mere preachers of Western modernity and left-winged activists denounced their merit. With substantial historical evidence from Muslim literary history since the medieval era, this article attempts to challenge the accepted notion that the Progressive Writers' were mere products of Western modernity in a conservative Islamic society and foreground the uniqueness of the modernist spirit in select literary works of the All India Progressive Writers' Association.

Long before the dawn of European enlightenment, The Golden Age (approximately between 786 – 1258) of the medieval Islamic world richly practised and developed multiple branches of knowledge, especially Astronomy, Mathematics and Medicine. Physics, Zoology, Chemistry, Alchemy, Botany, Agronomy, Geography, Cartography, Ophthalmology, Pharmacology, etc. were also practised and developed to a great extent. Works of mathematicians like Al-Khwarizmi, Avicenna, Jamshid al-Kashi have significant contributions in Algebra, Trigonometry, Geometry and Arabic numerals. Contributions of Al-Biruni in Physics, Mathematics, Astronomy, Medicine and also History and Literature, Ibn Al-Haytham in Physics, Abu Zayd al-Bakhi in Geography, Science and Psychology and many others in a variety of fields have enriched the disciplines of knowledge. Niall Ferguson in his seminal work *Civilization: The Six Killer Apps of Western Power* (2011), observes:

The Abbasid caliphate was at the cutting edge of science. In the *Bayt al-Hikma* (House of Wisdom) founded in the ninth century Baghdad by Caliph Harun al-Rashid, Greek texts by Aristotle and other authors were translated into Arabic. The caliphate also produced what some regard as the first true hospitals, such as the *bimaristan* established at Damascus by Caliph al-Waleed bin Abdel Malek in 707, which was designed to cure rather than merely house the sick. It was home to what some regard as the first true institution of higher education, the University of Al-Karaouine founded in Fez in 859. Building on Greek

and especially Indian foundations, Muslim mathematicians established algebra (from the Arabic *al-jabr*, meaning 'restoration') as a discipline distinct from arithmetic and geometry. (51)

Islamic civilization inherited the influence of Greek, Assyrian, Indian and Persian civilizations. With the broadening of its horizon up to Central Asia through the conquest of Arabia, Egypt, and Mesopotamia during the Caliphate rulers major religious and cultural works from Greece, India, and Assyria were translated into Arabic and Persian. During the 9th to 11th centuries, there was consistent contact between Indian and Perso-Arabic scholarship. Al-Biruni travelled widely in India, learnt Sanskrit and wrote *Tarikh-al-Hind* (The History of India) where he mentions that Brahmagupta's (598 -668) text *Brahmasiddhanta* translated into Arabic by Alfarabi during the rule of Al-Mansur (753 -774) was the first to acquaint the Arabs with the scientific system of Astronomy and Hindu numerals. The English thinker Roger Bacon acknowledged it: 'Philosophy is drawn from the Muslims' (51-52). Ferguson's book investigates the rationale behind the political deceleration of the Muslim world in its successive and consistent "fall" from grace while the West overtook the Muslims to establish its domination in the name of true enlightenment and modernity. But the West had always proclaimed its domination over the East in matters of scientific knowledge. Osman Bakar in his book *Tawhid and Science: Essays on the History and Philosophy of Islamic Science* (1991) observes that this *edge*, which the West proudly enjoyed and professed, is far from the truth.

Thus, it can be proposed that Muslims had already constructed their modernity whose residual reverberations may be found in the rich *qasbati* tradition that flourished in the Indian subcontinent after the decline of the Turkish Sultans of Delhi and the emergence of the Mughals. These waning reverberations of the culture of Muslim modernity may be located in the literature of the All-India Progressive Writers of the twentieth century in the form of radical voices that shared intellectual comradeship with European *avant-garde* modernity.

With the Delhi Sultanate regents (1206 -1526), Islamic dominance started in India which reached its peak during the Mughal Empire (1526 -1857). While there was a sharp decline in the native Sanskrit tradition during this period, distinguished litterateurs and scholars

from Persia, Iraq, Arabia and Central Asia were brought to serve the monarchy who gradually settled in *qasbahs* forming an educated and elite community. Diverse genres of writing thrived and flourished in these pre-Renaissance Muslim societies. M. Raisur Rehman in his book, *Locale, Everyday Islam and Modernity: Qasbah Towns and Muslim Life in Colonial India* (2015) argued that modernity in Muslim literature owes its legacy to the *qasbati* tradition which prospered since the eleventh and twelfth century. The *qasbahs* were intermediate townships or hinterlands largely inhabited by the Muslim service gentry. Some of the renowned North Indian *qasbahs* were Amroha, Badaun, Bilgram, Rudauli, etc. under the kingdom of Awadh and Rohilkhand. Distinct from the political, commercial or bureaucratic culture of the cities and the agrarian nature of villages, the *qasbahs* were rich intellectual hubs which emphatically maintained their exclusive social and individual identities, despite their intercourses with local ways of life. A wide number of scholars, writers, bureaucrats and leaders fostered these *qasbahs* long before the entry of colonial modernity. Abdul Qadir Badauni (1540 – 1615), Mir Abdul Jalil Bilgrami (1661-1725), famous poet Mirza Ghalib (1796-1869), Mir Taqi Mir (1723-1810), Maulavi Daad Ali Abbasi (1824-95), Chaudhury Mohammad Ali Rudaulvi (1882 -1959) are only a few of them. *Qasbahs* also housed highly revered Sufis, saints, mystics, their shrines, successors and followers. Extensive genres of writing such as *shajrah* (genealogies), *zikra* (autobiographies and memoirs), *safarnama* (travelogues), *tarikh* (histories), *tazkhira* (biographical dictionaries), *khutoot* (correspondence), *rasail* (periodicals) and *akhbarat* (newspapers), *shairi* (poetry), *mushairah* (oral transmission of poetry), *malfuzat* (collection of Sufi sayings), having flourished during the period, bear testimony to the uniqueness of Muslim modernity.

These highly culturally potent intellectual and literary traditions were proactively handed over to a posterity that facilitated their proliferation and perpetuation, beyond communities. Almost all *qasbati* artists were keen to compile their family genealogies in organized and well-indexed formats as evidence of their inheritance and identity. Saiyid Faizan Ali Naqvis's *Faizan-e- Sadaat* which constructs the family tree of Saiyid Muslims of Amroha from the 11th century to 2000 CE is one of many such instances. Documentation of local and regional histories was also widely practised. For example,

Tarikh-e-Amroha (1930) records the history of Amroha since its invasion by Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni, also contributing a major section to discuss the various Hindu rulers before him (Rehman 101-106). Their openness to learning and broadening their horizons inspired them to undertake higher education along with the Madrasa in colleges and institutions in both Arabo-Persian curriculum and English even outside the home. The encounter with colonial rule encouraged their interaction with Western modes of knowledge and culture since the late nineteenth century. However, this interaction was not a unidirectional compliance. Before the British rule or even the Muslim reign, the city of Delhi and adjacent regions, being the periphery of the seat of power under the kings were also rich in education and culture. As the city had been conquered and rebuilt several times under different dynasties, it had by then interacted and negotiated with multiple communities and cultures that accepted and adopted British instruments of modernity according to their ways and necessities. The Aligarh Movement and the establishment of Mohammadan Anglo-Oriental College (1875) was the reflection of that distinctive aspect of indigenous modernity which not only promoted modern English education but at the same time earnestly contributed to the maintenance of the high standards of Muslim culture: “The contribution of *qasbahs* to Urdu literature, Islamic didactic writings, education, compilation of genealogies and the Progressive Writers’ movement has been disproportionately large, showing how locales and localities determine mainstream cultures, ideas and identities” (Rehman 4).

This article has taken up select works of Ahmed Ali — two novels, *Twilight in Delhi* and *Ocean of Night* along with a reference to his short stories in *Angaaray* in order to understand *modernity* as a dynamic and all-encompassing state of intellectual understanding as manifested in the life and culture of the *qasbati* tradition. Born in Delhi in 1910, Prof. Ali’s lineage can be traced back to the great Muslim mystic leader, Shaikh Abdul Qadir Jilani of Baghdad. His ancestors came to India under the Mughal patronage to serve as *ulemas* (religious teachers) at the court. Starting his English education at the Wesley Mission High School in Azamgarh, he attended Aligarh Muslim University and later completed his BA and MA with English Honours from Lucknow University. A similar trend can be traced in

the life and lineage of several of Ali's progressive contemporaries. The aspiration for education and intellectual ingenuity of these authors can be traced back to the familial inheritance where their previous generations also grew up and undertook higher education and prestigious services. This can be viewed as a reflection of their modern attitude to openness and progress.

Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi* (1940) and *Ocean of Night* (1964) narrate the life and culture of the Muslims as it was led during that period. These novels describe the history of time as it passed through generations to "depict a phase of national life and the decay of a whole culture, a particular mode of thought and living, values now dead and gone before our eyes." (Ali xxi). The title of the novel in the inner cover is followed by a poem by Bahadur Shah, the last Mughal Emperor:

Delhi was once a paradise
Such peace had abided here
But they have ravished its name and pride
Remain now only ruins and care.

The novel is set in the period after the War of 1857 when the British government usurped the dominion of the country in its hands. Set in Old Delhi, the decaying centre of the lost legacies of Muslim civilization, the plot of the novel is woven around the lives of two generations, the old father Mir Nihal and his son Asghar, which can also be seen metaphorically as the life of the city itself. In a poignant tone, the author narrates the gradual decline of a way of life through minute picturesque details. A middle-class businessman in his sixties, Mir Nihal is a typical feudal gentleman, with aristocratic interests and passion. He belongs to the generation who has not only seen the grandeur of the Mughal period but is also living evidence of British atrocities during the Sepoy Mutiny. Mir Nihal, thus in one sense is a reflection of the author's self who always felt a strong attachment to his roots. Time and again in the novel Mir Nihal gets engrossed in the thoughts and memories of the past, the glories of the Muslim reign and also the cruelties of the Company. His posterity which has just seen the pomp and show of the British rule was not aware of that. He longs for his grandson to fight the British.

Fazlur Rehman delves into the origin of Islamic education which started with *The Quran* at the centre and the variety of responses generated on its encounter with Western modernity in different other fields of education. In his *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (1982), Rehman points out that colonial exploitation and economic imperialism of Europe developed an antipathy among the majority of the Muslim population towards Western modernity. Paradoxically, on the one hand, while European enlightenment brought technological advancements in the material world; on the other, it derailed the socio-political structures, destroyed the cultural diversity and swept away the vast intellectual tradition of the Orient. Ahmed Ali in his Introduction to *Twilight in Delhi* condemns the British policies of education which were solely designed to demolish the age-old cultural values under the name of reformation.

The novel covers the period from 1910-1920 and is divided into four parts. Though written in English, all four sections are introduced with Urdu epigraphs which are suggestive of the misery of the great country under foreign rule. In other words, the use of these poems by famous Urdu writers also reflects the author's strong connection with the indigenous culture and literature. Throughout the novel, he continuously uses his protagonist's memories to connect the past and the present. In that sense, the novel forges a modern version of a *tarikh* (history) or a *tazkhira* (biographical dictionary), two famous genres of writing prevalent in the *qasbati* tradition. The novel represents the transition of a period, both historically and ideologically. It records the confrontation of the old and new, tradition and the trend within a particular culture.

The ending of the novel in the twilight significantly connotes the mystery and uncertainty of the night ahead — overlooking the darkness of life in an uprooted civilization. It ends in a crisis where the old is dead or is made obsolete and the new is thrown into uncertainty and dilemma even before its birth. The author records from the memory of his protagonists the devastation perpetrated by the British on the life and culture of these people. "It was this very mosque (Jama Masjid), Mir Nihal remembered with blood in his eyes which the English had insisted on demolishing or turning into a church during 1857....It was on the fourteenth day of September

1857..." (145). Life, before the advent of British rule, was never outdated and morbid; rather it was rich in art, literature, education and infrastructure. The European rulers forcefully destroyed the richness of the city and threw its long-preserved culture into oblivion. Kings turned beggars and people lost shelter. The objective of this article has been to attempt a close reading of *Twilight in Delhi* as it lifts the veil off the British narrative of its role in shaping Indian modernity. Besides, the novel also exposes the role of the British in facilitating the gradual erasure of *qasbati* modernity through the lure and perpetuation of its models of modern culture.

The terrible heat of Delhi, its epidemic outbreaks, the World War and the atrocious Rowlatt Act, all deliver mortal blows to the disintegrated city and its population. When survival is at stake, the cultivation and propagation of the finer intellectual tastes become secondary preoccupations. Moreover, people from other provinces with different customs and habits are huddled into the city with the establishment of the Company's Capital.

New ways and ideas had come into being. A hybrid culture which had nothing in it of the past was forcing itself upon Hindustan, a hodge-podge of Indian and Western ways that he failed to understand... The old had gone, the new was feeble and effete. At least it had nothing in common with his ideals and scheme of things... The richness of life had been looted and despoiled by the foreigners and vulgarity and cheapness had taken its place... What had happened to the great poets of Hindustan? Where were Mir, Ghalib and Insha? Gone they were and gone with them was the wealth of poetry. Only a poverty of thought had come to stay, reflected Mir Nihal, and in place of emotion and sentiments a vulgar sentimentality. Time has reversed the order of things, and life had been replaced by a death-in-life. No beauty seemed to remain anywhere and ugliness had blackened the face of Hindustan..." (240-41)

While *Twilight in Delhi* is the nostalgic chronicle of cultural disintegration in the wake of foreign encroachment, *Ocean of Night* probes into the psychology of declining feudalism (or feudal atrophy) and examines the cultural rift in the face of socioeconomic depression. It narrates the tragic love story of a beautiful courtesan, Huma in search of love and fulfilment. But within the story, the author gives an aesthetic account of the music and poetry of Lucknow which were patronised and enriched by the aristocrats and

courtesans. Huma has grown up to be an expert singer and dancer under the strict vigilance of her mother, Azizan Jan. She is the mistress of Nawab Chhakan, a patron of taste and much prospect who has provided economic security to the mother and daughter. But later, his affections shift to another courtesan Kesari Bai and he gradually reduces the frequency of his visits to Huma's. Her own bitter experiences of life in this profession make Azizan anxious about Huma's future because only a prosperous patron could single-handedly shield her daughter from the maelstrom of brothel-life. On one occasion, she regrets:

Life had become disjointed and too fast to allow any leisure for the cultivation of the fine arts of conversation and dancing that centred around the courtesan... Music had died; dancing had become just a painted mask with only ready emotions to show. The fineness of expression which the courtesan had practised found no buyers in the marketplace. Who cared for the animation of words by gestures of the hands, the eyes, the eyebrows and the muscles of the body? Who cared for the chastity of the Urdu tongue? The correct idiom had fallen into disuse. (65-66)

She worries that the Nawabs and Rajas now go in search of perverted emotions or exotic European beauties (66). The richness of the arts which her generation used to practise is now getting diluted and debased with the infusion of cheap foreign elements.

The novel was written almost twenty years before its publication in a crucial period of political volatility. Though there is no apparent mention of this, the story records the strains of the period, the entry of Western modernity into a feudal society. It tries to explore the extinction of the refined elements in an old structure with the upsurge of coarse mechanical modernity where "(M)achines had taken away the beauty of hand-made things." (65). Within the broader narrative matrix of a declining feudal culture, the author blends multiple elements of the political and economic, the mystical and intellectual, and the traditional and recent trends in Muslim culture of the period.

From a completely different point of view, both novels can also be seen as depicting the decline of a generation which has succumbed to idleness and stagnation. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution and material progress life has become fast and disjointed.

When the global economic transformation set in, one day or other its reverberation would certainly shake the very foundation of the old society based on agriculture and landed property. The refusal to accept the changes particular to certain classes and communities has made society stagnant. Turning a blind eye to the rapid disintegration, the whole society was fashionably busy in idle pursuits like kite flying, pigeon flying or maintaining clandestine relationships with courtesans or dancing girls. Both Mir Nihal and Asghar went to the house of courtesans leaving their wives at home, Nawab Chhakan drained all his wealth in maintaining the pomp and show of aristocracy, on drinks and pimps. Even the last of the Mughal emperors who was more a poet than a king failed to prove his worth as a protector of his race. Mir Nihal representing the first generation of the family has a deep-seated aversion for the British government but he failed to direct his son to lead a better life. Mir Nihal became stagnant in his thoughts and Asghar ended up in confusion and bewilderment in the new situation.

Ahmed Ali along with a group of budding writers was deeply influenced by Western social and literary currents, the Russian Revolution, the consequent popularity of the socialist thought abroad, and the rising nationalist spirit and anti-imperialist sentiments at home. They call themselves *Progressives* who sought to unveil the hypocrisies and bigotries of the existing social, political, and religious institutions thus drawing attention to grave social issues like oppression of women, religious dogmatism, social conservatism and political impositions. Their primary aim had been to manufacture a climate of thought, and mould it suitably, to make it acceptable to the Muslim fraternity. Filled with the dream of freedom and independence, four of these writers made an audacious attempt to publish a collection of Urdu short stories titled *Angaaray* (1932) to mirror the truth of society. However the book received a hostile response from readers, and the government proscribed the book on charges of obscenity.

Ali, in *Angaaray*, contributed two short stories, 'The Clouds Aren't Coming' (Badal Nahin Aate) and 'A Night of Winter Rains' (Mahavaton ki Ek Raat). Both narratives have been composed as interior monologues of two ordinary Muslim women, voicing their worldview from the interiors of their households. A close reading of

both stories confirms Ali's indebtedness to the Western *avant-garde* technique of the interior monologue. However, one may find in them echoes of lost *qasbati* genres like *zikr* (autobiography) and *khutoot* (correspondence). Both stories are private effusions of women confined to their domestic spaces. It is interesting to explore the writings of the Progressives literary blends of Western modernity and the rich *qasbati* traditions consciously or unconsciously bequeathed to them by their predecessors.

Conclusion

It would be an oversimplification to infer that the literature produced by the Progressive writers are mere by-products of Western modernity because modernity emerges out of a necessity to analyse and understand the present reality in a certain temporality and space. It involves conflict, contestation, interrogation, rejection and finally negotiation. Though the colonial power claims to be the pioneers of Enlightenment, it is only a half-truth. It cannot be denied that the advancement in technology took place during the British rule. But there is ample evidence that the branches of philosophy, logic, education, science, art and culture flourished in the country thousands of years before the British Empire. The British colony was set up in India for its wealth and resources. According to Shashi Tharoor:

By the end of the nineteenth century, India was Britain's biggest source of revenue, the world's biggest purchaser of British exports and the source of highly paid employment for British civil servants and soldiers all at India's own expense. (*An Era of Darkness* 24)

The exploitation and denunciation were a part of the Company's policy. The age-old heritage was gradually demolished and on the ruins of destruction, the British government established its structures and framed its self-catering autocratic policies and modes of governance. The Orient was misinterpreted and the colonial policies were framed based on those misinterpretations. As a result, the colonised "did not swallow them whole or frame their responses in predictable ways to predictable circumstances." (Rehman 209). To explain the possibility of a socially engaged habitus in a colonial situation, Priyamvada Gopal suggests,

...it was to be negotiated and developed through exigencies of daily existence at the intersections of the colonial, the modern, the feudal, the industrial, the familial, the public, the traditional, the private, the communitarian and the national. (Gopal 63-64)

Modernity is marked by a faith in inevitable social and technological progress, industrialisation, rationalization and professionalization along with the development of a nation-state. It may be mentioned here that the social and literary movements associated with the modernity of the West were marked by revolts against socio-political restrictions and impositions. As a result, a sense of pessimism prevailed around the creative expressions of Western modernity. The Progressive writers' understanding of the social realities though shaped and reshaped by their interactions with Western currents of thought, is never pessimistic. They launched their attack with a professed mission of representing the contemporary world along with the exposure of its darker areas at times suggesting the ways to come out of it. They used the Western tools of modernity to confront the problems created by the West. Their modernity thus, combines a sense of hope underneath the apparent tirades. This uniqueness of their modernity, perhaps, resulted out of a faithful assertion to the roots of their cultural identity, their own indigenous *qasbati* modernity. Rahman observes:

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, *qasbati* Muslims learned about Western culture through growing interactions and parallel networks with the British. (T)he perspectives on modernity that emerged from *qasbahs* were selective, highly interactive, and negotiated with greater ease than elsewhere owing to their traditional pluralism. Moreover, the encounter with modernity intensified the emergence of new Muslim self-definitions." (208)

In a country of diversity, where multiple cultures work together in a conducive environment without compromising each other's individuality, it is impossible to understand modernity from the aspect of one particular centre. Modernity here is an all-embracing faculty, an attitude which encourages progress and development. Although the Progressive writers milked their inspiration from the West, their modernity has resulted from their interactions with their present based on the foundations of their previous knowledge and experience.

Works Cited

- Ali, Ahmed. *Twilight in Delhi*. Rupa Publications India Pvt. Ltd., 2007.
- ., *Ocean of Night*. Hind Pocket Books, 1964.
- Das, Sisir Kumar. *A History of Indian Literature 1911-1956: Struggle for Freedom: Triumph and Tragedy*. Sahitya Akademi, 1995.
- Ferguson, Neil. *Civilization: The Six Killer Apps of Western Power*. Penguin Books, 2012.
- Gopal, Priyambada. *Literary Radicalism in India: Gender, Nation and the Transition to Independence*. Routledge, 2005.
- Rahaman, Fazlur. *Islam & Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*. The University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- Rehman, M. Raisur. *Locale, Everyday Islam and Modernity: Qasbah Towns and Muslim Life in Colonial India*. Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Tharoor, Sashi. *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India*. Aleph Book Company, 2016.
- Zaheer, Sajjad, et al. *Angaaray*. Translated by Snehal Shingavi, Penguin Books, 2014.