

## **Ahmed Ali: The Critic.**

By Dr. Muhammad Kamran  
(Translated into English by: Mrs Zareena Saeed)

Professor Ahmed Ali [1910----1994] was a well-known short story writer, novelist, critic, translator, poet, dramatist, historian, educationist, commentator and an ambassador.[1]

He is considered to be one of the leading figures in the realm of modern short story writing.

From the years 1930---1945 Ahmed Ali wrote primarily in the Urdu language, it was later that he adopted the English language solely as a medium of expression. Initially he established his name as the co-writer of ‘**Angarey**’,(Embers)-a collection of nine short stories and a one act play, however he is probably best known for his English language novel, “Twilight in Delhi”(first published in 1940)and his contemporary translation of Holy Quran(1984). In fact he is an internationally celebrated scholar.

Professor Ahmed Ali’s body of critical work reflects not only a keen perceptive mind but also proves beyond doubt the link between critical consciousness and creativity.

After disassociating from the Progressive Writer’s Movement he dedicated himself entirely to the art of writing. This break away generated a negative response from the progressive writers who as a result acknowledged his fictional writing but ignored his critical prose and hence did not accord him the recognition that he deserved. Even today references are made to his art of short story writing but his affiliation with other literary genres is generally ignored.

Ahmed Ali's literary criticism can be categorized into three distinct areas. These are briefly enumerated below and then explained in detail:

- **Lectures in English:** The focus is primarily on English literature, for example: **Eliot's Penny World of Dreams.**
- Literary criticism on Classical Urdu poets with special reference to Ghalib's Art and literary consciousness. These are in fact translations of selected Urdu classical poetry. A. Ali took great care that the personal history along with the literary consciousness of the poet should not change in essence during the conversion from Urdu language to English. These aspects have been specially highlighted for the foreign readers so that they can get to know the background and temperament of classical Urdu poetry.
- Ahmad Ali's literary criticism on "Progressive Literary Movement" and a fondness for "progressive thought" form the third section.

### **Lectures in English:**

A. Ali read the poetry of T.S. Eliot as an under graduate student and was deeply influenced by it:

"The imagery and metaphors of Eliot stimulated me deeply. He opened out a new and wonderful world before me." (6)

Ali's critique of **Eliot's Penny World of Dreams** is divided into six chapters.

- The first chapter The Twentieth Century in Review is introductory in nature.
- The second chapter deals with conscious thought and poetic philosophy, where as the remaining four chapters deal with Eliot's world renowned poems and dramatic technique.

In fact this series of Lectures in English is a comparative study of contemporary poetic influences, with special references to Eliot's **"The Wasteland"** (8) which he felt reflected Eliot's universal consciousness. The creative thought within this poem, has as its backdrop, varied and diverse influences, which include bourgeois philosophy, the influence of aesthetic movements, and elements of semi-Buddhist and semi-Christian metaphysical consciousness juxtaposed in a way that artistic perfection takes precedence. In fact, Eliot in **The Wasteland**, has shown elements of 'distortion' in the form of cultural degradation. Commenting on this Ahmad Ali wrote:

‘ **The Wasteland**, full of ‘heaps of broken images’, and ‘stony rubbish’ is a dry desert in which we hear cries ‘murmur of maternal lamentation’ cracks and bursts and sterile thunder. There are only corpses, falling towers, dry grass and rocks. There is neither light nor hope, only misery and annihilation. In this arid desert the shadows and crowds peep amongst towers that are falling or upside down and the wind howls and the thunder roars. There is the chaos and turbulence of a storm, a dry wind storm. The leaves have fallen from the trees, the rivers have sunk, and a scorching fire is ablaze, and human beings rave and cry, or at best live in a long dead and forgotten past. There is only weeping, lamentation and suffering. The towers of a once Celestial city, and the Celestial city itself, have now become the Wasteland” (9).

Eliot's attempt to create a religious utopia has been severely criticized by Ahmed Ali's progressive conscience as he writes:

“Its a great pity that he [Eliot] has given up poetry for religious drama. By doing this, he has, perhaps, fulfilled his mission as a religious teacher, but he has lost poetry. I hope he finally comes back to it and leaves drama to others.” (10)

Ahmad Ali's regret holds weight but leaves room for argument, because Eliot's criticism, poetry and drama can be seen as three sides of a triangle. It is at times felt that Eliot's critical philosophy is being transformed into poetry, dialogue and the characters, all mediums through which he explores new ways of expression. As far as Eliot's preoccupation with imparting a religious feel to his subject is concerned, there is no dearth of critics who do not consider this a hindrance to his poetic perfection. F.B. Pinion, a critic on Eliot writes in this regard:

"His [Eliot] greatness cannot be disassociated from the high value he placed on Christian principles in the redemption, preservation, and promotion of civilized democracy.'" (11)

Further A. Ali believed that a study of dreams is essential to understand Eliot's:

"In order to understand Eliot's technique, and to find out the source of the method of symbolism, we have to go to another psychic phenomenon, namely, dreams for the technique of Eliot's poetry, and the method of symbolism, or dream technique and dream method, inexplicable in any other way...the whole atmosphere, in fact is that of dreams and we can neither ignore it nor explain it any other way.'

In the last chapter an overview of the various stages of Eliot's literary development has been carried out with special reference to **"A Murder in the Cathedral"**.

In the West, many poets have been compared to Eliot as far as their thoughts and works are concerned, but Ahmad Ali is most probably the only critic who has traced the similarity in thought processes or consciousness between Allama Iqbal and Eliot, and gives the following arguments:

"Eliot, like Iqbal, afraid for his faith emphasizes religion, just as Iqbal wants to revive the atmosphere and the state of medieval Islam, so does Eliot wish to revive an atmosphere of medieval Christianity. Iqbal dreams of a Pan Islamic state, Eliot of an Anglo – Catholic

world. And both frightened by the rising tide of scientific and dialectical materialism, exhort the people to accept their faiths wholeheartedly and thus strengthen themselves against the growing force of Communism. To both, religion is the dying man's hope of the last straw at which they clutch with all their might. Both are storm tossed on the rising tide of the coming world revolution. Both are drowning without any hope of retrieving their lost ideals.

If there could be any difference between the two, it is one of temperament. Iqbal, the oriental, has realized that Islam has lost its glory and that the people have drifted far away from it. With this in view he coaxes them to come back to it by singing of the glorious past. He can only look back to give them any hope for the future. Eliot the occidental, on the other hand, does not sing so much of the past as he emphasizes the present. From this disrupting present he says, only Anglo-Catholicism can save us.” (13).

In the West many commentaries and essays have been penned about Eliot's philosophy and works, but the above commentary is significant, because in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a writer from the sub-continent had made claims to understanding the greatness of Eliot's literary consciousness and analyzed the problems in this regard. Thus making it easier to comprehend a literary complexity like Eliot's.

**The second part of Ahmad Ali's literary criticism** includes an introduction to classical Urdu poets and presents an over all view of their literary as well as emotive techniques. In this field his most important work is **The Golden Tradition**. The opening section of this anthology deals with classical poetic tradition, and focuses primarily on the art of ghazal writing. Ahmad Ali's main objective is to develop in the foreign readers a taste and temperament for the classical Urdu ghazal and other forms of poetry:

“The most common subjects of the Ghazal are the poet's love for the loved one; the indifference of the beloved; the sad state of the lover's heart; the cruelty of fate; the sorrows of parting and joys of the nights of

love now gone; the instability of human glory, the fleetingness of life. “(14).

In this Anthology a comprehensive and detailed introduction to the poetry of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century with special emphasis on the various literary dimensions in the poetry of Mir and Ghalib, bears witness to the critical faculty of Ahmad Ali. For instance, the emotive sense of Mir’s poetry in which the combination of love and pathos breeds a philosophy that is spell-binding and owing to this Ahmad Ali wrote:

“He was primarily a poet of love, a theme that had been impressed upon him even in childhood. In his attitude to love, Mir goes beyond the physical and enlightens the nature of reality...it is in the verse on the heart, however, of which he is the greatest poet, that Mir’s real mind can be studied, and through which he expresses a whole philosophy of love and life.” (15)

Ahmad Ali was fascinated by the complexity and diversity of meaning in the works of Ghalib. As a result he wrote and researched extensively on him:

“The dialect of Ghalib’s poetry is double edged. He uses current imagery, but makes new use of it, and shows its hollowness as it has become empty of thought and is inadequate to reflect the reality...Ghalib’s poetry reflects the movement of thought. It is the product of a civilization standing on the brink of change and conscious of it...only a mind like his could feel and express like him, hammer out plastic images from a piece of steel on the anvil still red hot.” (16)

A. Ali felt that familiarity with the style and technique of Ghalib’s thought processes was possible only if their underlying metaphysical aspects were also kept in view. Ghalib was not metaphysical in the sense in which Rumi was, but more in the realm of the English metaphysical poet, John Donne, who stressed practical realism

combined with different dimensions of reality to formulate a cohesive whole. Thought and emotion are enforced to create a new dimension of lyricism in which the spirit finds a new and rightful place between the so called opposing forces of matter and metaphysical reality:

“Ghalib’s poetry pleases for the same reason as it intrigues, and he remains a living poet. For the thoughtful reader, the search for the meaning becomes a stimulating mental exercise and the casual reader derives enough aesthetic satisfaction from the surface. Even when inscrutable, his expression is so architectonic that he remains like the sphinx delightful in its mystery”. (18)

**The third topic** of Ahmad Ali’s literary writing is the progressive movement in literature and a zeal for progressive thought. In this regard A.Ali rose above other critics of the progressive movement, as he unlike them, did not question their creativity within the contentions of the Marxist ideology but in a much broader perspective. As a matter of fact, when the writers associated with the progressive movement adopted the ideology of Marxism, he disassociated himself completely from them claiming:

“They have announced that progressive writing is undoubtedly about labourers and the life of farmers ... I have objected fiercely as regards to this announcement, my viewpoint was that the progressive spirit prevails upon all aspects of life hence literature.”(19)

Ahmad Ali in his essay **“Art, Politics and Life”** gave the following view point regarding progressive literature and wrote:

“Progressive Movement in its literature, shows the most superficial aspects of life. Although the authors of the progressive movement have accomplished praiseworthy goals, yet their writing does not rise to the level of creativity.” (20)

A. Ali wanted to see literature break free from the clutches of “moralistic values” and rise to a universal level, so he rejected severely all kinds of limitations imposed upon it, therefore seeing the progressive movement in a broader perspective. He believed that:

“Life cannot be seen in its diversity and completeness from the view point of a particular school of thought, just as the entire universe can not be viewed by fixing one gaze upon a particular star or galaxy”. (21)

A. Ali shed light on the background, creation, and the reasoning behind the progressive writer’s movement, and also on the implicit ‘distortions’ that plagued its formulation in the following words:

“In spite of what has been written so far, **The Progressive Writer’s Movement** was essentially an intellectual revolt against the outmoded past, vitiated tendencies in contemporary thought and literature, the indifference of people to their human conditions, against acquiescence to foreign rule, enslavement to practices and beliefs... both social and religious... based on ignorance, against the problems of poverty and exploitation, the ideological interpretation was superimposed on the movement after the first formal conference on an all India basis in Luck now in 1936 by the political section, which subsequently remained in control but was not part of the movement when it was originally started in 1932”. (22)

The main body of Ahmad Ali’s literary criticism is in English. The fact that many of the topics he chooses to write on pertain to Urdu literature and **The Progressive Writer’s Movement**, make them significant not only for international readers but also for those interested in Urdu literature, as well.



**Notes:-**

**For: Ahmed Ali : The Man and His Works refer to:**

1. a. Dr. Muhammad Kamran  
“Ahmad Ali – Life and Literary Achievements” Research Paper for Ph.D. Punjab University Lahore 1999.
- b. International Authors and Writers Who’s Who: Men of Achievement. Cambridge: 1973.
- c. Journal of Indian writing in English; India: Gulbarga University, Vol:23, Jan—July 1995.
2. Farman Fateh Puri. Urdu Afsaana aur Afsaana Nigaar. (Urdu Short Story and Urdu Short Story Writers) (1<sup>st</sup> Edition) Urdu Academy Sindh, Karachi 1989.
3. Aslub Ahmad Ansari “Harf-e-Chand” (article) quarterly Naqad-e-Nazar. Aligarh volume 16 Edition 1994.
4. Ahmad Ali dedicated the above mentioned article to R.R. Saresta and Khawaja Manzoor Hussain acknowledging that Khawaja Manzoor was the one who introduced T.S. Eliot to him.
5. Ahmed Ali: Eliot’s Penny world of Dreams: Lucknow Univesity, 1942, pg—ix.

**For T.S. Eliot’s Biography and complete works see:**

6.
  - i. The Oxford Companion to T.S.Eliot, England: Oxford University Press. 1967.
  - ii. The Cambridge Companion to T.S.Eliot> England: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
  - iii. Behr, Caroline. T.S.Eliot: A Chronology of his life and works, London: Macmillan, 1983.

- iv. Gray,Piers. T.S.Eliot's Intellectual and Poetic Development[1901---1922] England: Harvester Press,1982.
- v. Gallup,Donald. T.S.Eliot A Bibliography, London: Faber & Faber Ltd.1969.
- vi. Pinion,F.B. A T.S.Eliot Companion: Life and Works.Macmillan,1986.
- 7. Eliot,T.S. The Wasteland, edited by Cx.B.Cox and Arnold P.Hinchliffe. London: Macmillan, 1975.
- 8. Ahmed Ali: Eliots Penny World of Dreams, pg 81—82.
- 9. Ibid. p. ix.
- 10. Pinion. F. B: A T. S. Eliot Companion. Pg 284.
- 11. Ahmed Ali: Eliot's Penny World of Dreams. Pg38.
- 12. Ibid.Pg123—124.
- 13. Ahmed Ali: The Golden Tradition. New York: Columbia University Press, 1973. pg8.
- 14. Ibid.pg136.
- 15. Ahmed Ali: Ghalib: Selected Poems. Roma: Istituto Italiano Per ik Mediko Ed Estremo Oriente,1969.
- 16. Ahmad Ali."Ghalib-Aik Maabaadut-tabiyaat Shair( Ghalib A Metaphysical Poet)included in theTanqeed-eGhalib Kay Sao Saal( critique 'Ghalib's Hundred Year's )Lahore: Punjab University 1969.
- 17. Ahmed Ali: The Problem of Style and Technique in Ghalib.Karachi;Akrash Press.1969.pg 23.

18. Ahmad Ali”Baqalam Khud” (From his own pen) Magazine Jamiya, Delhi :May to July 1994.
19. Ahmad Ali.”Pas-e-Lafz” (Only Words) included in “Maut se Pehley [Before Death]” Delhi. Insha Press 1945.
20. Ibid pg.29.
21. Ahmed Ali: The Progressive Writers Movement and Creative Writers in Urdu. Pg 42.