

## How Progressive? Modernity at Stake in Ahmed Ali's *Twilight in Delhi*

**Satish C. Aikant**

In the 1930s several interacting forces worked in the Indian society such as the national struggle for independence from the British rule, the drive for social transformation within India and the effects of the growing international polarisation between democracy and fascism. By the end of the First World War the freedom loving people were locked into a bitter confrontation with tyranny and imperialist exploitation everywhere. The new trends and ideas in the form of anti-imperialism, national independence and social revolution, which almost became obsessions in the popular consciousness of people, gave rise to an awareness of a new mode of writing – realism. The Russian socialist revolution which simultaneously inspired socialist realism became a model for engaging with the struggles of the dispossessed for their emancipation and worked as an explosive ideological force among the younger generation.

Realism designates a creative attention to the visible rather than the invisible, an unabating interest in the shapes and relations of the real world, and the systems that operate in the socio-economic space. It shares a common belief in the power of literature to bring about radical changes in society by portraying the structures of social reality, and focussing on the repressions and frustrations of the individual and collective aspirations (Namboodari 1986: 5). ‘Social realism’<sup>1</sup> predicated on the belief in the indispensable role of a writer in social engagement was initially inspired in various ways by the Russian

revolution, Soviet communism and international Marxism. It was the firm view of the protagonists of social realist school that realist literature does not only seek to depict reality, it also seeks to revolutionize society.

The simultaneity of the national and international forces that operated in the early decades of the twentieth century, when colonialism had made inroads into several parts of the world, awakened the Indian writers to the new realities that ran counter to the traditional views inherited from their forefathers as much as to the preferences of their colonial masters and the latter's followers among the subject people. The combinations of social, economic, and political factors, both at home and abroad helped forge a new literary consciousness in India.

In November 1934 in London, a group of Indian students and writers, led by Mulk Raj Anand and Sajjad Zahir, moved by the anti-fascist protestations of European writers, organized the Indian Progressive Writers' Association. Later, Sajjad Zahir and Ahmed Ali established the All India Progressive Writers' Association, which held its first meeting in Lucknow in April 1936. The meeting was presided over by Permchand. The two manifestoes, one issued in London in 1935 and the other in Lucknow in 1936 crucially underlined literature as a revitalizing force that could be deployed for social regeneration and transformation to suit a revolutionary agenda. The Lucknow manifesto stated: 'We want the new literature of India to make its subject the fundamental problems of our lives. These are the problems of hunger, poverty, social backwardness and slavery' (Daruwala 2004: 57) All these social and existential problems were to be reflected in the new writing by the progressive writers. An Urdu journal *Naya Adab* (April 1939) in its first issue defined progressive literature as follows: 'In our opinion progressive literature is that

literature which looks at the realities of life, reflects them, investigates them and leads the way toward a new and better life...’ (Ibid.)

Another significant literary event that was to have a deep impact on the writers in India was the publication in December 1932 in Lucknow, of *Angarey*, a collection of ten short stories contributed by Sajjad Zahir, Ahmed Ali, Mahmuduzzafar and Rashid Jahan, which proved to be a major turning point in the literary history of India. The book which came as an act of defiance against all traditional norms, initiated a major change in the form and content of Indian literature, Urdu literature in particular. As Aziz Ahmed remarked, *Angarey* was ‘the first ferocious attack on society in modern literature. it was a declaration of war by the youth of the middle class against the prevailing social, political and religious institutions (Mahmud 1996:447). The stories were consciously bold and revolutionary in their content and intent, openly ridiculed several religious practices and orthodoxies and, above all, attacked the oppressiveness of traditional social institutions, especially those which victimised women and lower classes. *Angarey* marked a watershed in the Movement for social reform and to undermine discriminations of class and gender. Many women writers, prominent among them Rashid Jahan and Ismat Chughtai, took an active part in the Movement and their writings deal with all types of issues including sex and communal violence, considered to be the provenance of some audacious writers like Manto. .

The writers of *Angarey* influenced by the general critical climate in the world of ideas that swept across Europe and India, helped found a movement known as the Progressive Writers’ Movement. It was this movement which led to the formation of Progressive Writers’ Association. Mulk Raj Anand, then a member of the Bloomsbury circle in London and who felt that the Indian writers had to play a political and activist role to fight

off the depredations caused by imperialism , drafted the Manifesto of the Association which declared:

Radical changes are taking place in Indian society. The spirit of reaction, however, though moribund and doomed to ultimate decay, is still operative and is making desperate efforts to prolong itself. Indian literature, since the breakdown of classical culture, has had the fatal tendency to escape from the actualities of life. It has tried to find a refuge from reality in baseless spiritualism and ideality. The result is that it has become anaemic in body and mind and had adopted a rigid formalism and a banal and perverse ideology.<sup>2</sup>

All that drags us down to passivity, inaction and un-reason we reject as reactionary. All that arouses in us the critical spirit, which examines institutions and customs in the light of reason, which helps us to act, to organise ourselves, to transform, we accept as progressive (Namboodari 1986 : 5).

The movement was by no means transitory; nor was its impact only immediate. It had far reaching consequences for setting agenda for literary as well as social transformation, aesthetic concerns of readers and writers and the issues regarding canon formation. It raised and invigorated debates on colonialism and imperialism and colonial modernity as it impacted the colonised societies.

The first meeting of the All-India Progressive Writers' Association presided over by Premchand was held in Lucknow on 9-10 April 1936. In his inaugural address Premchand said:

Our literary taste is undergoing a rapid transformation. It is coming more and more in touch with the realities of life; it interests itself with society or man as a social unit. It is not satisfied now with the singing of frustrated love, or with writing to satisfy only our sense of wonder; it concerns itself with the problems of our life and such themes as have a social value. The literature which does not arouse in us a critical spirit, or satisfy our spiritual needs, which is not 'force-giving' and dynamic, which does not awaken our sense of beauty, which does not make us face the grim realities of life in a spirit of determination, has no use for us today. It cannot even be termed as literature. (Ibid.)

Premchand was in effect rejecting the theory of art for art's sake<sup>2</sup> saying that 'the artist must rebel against the outmoded mores of society, devoting all of his energy to economic and political freedom since it was the writer's duty to help all those who are downtrodden, oppressed and exploited-individuals or groups-and to advocate their cause' (ibid.).

Aware of the oppressive conditions under colonialism Premchand passionately held the belief that no writer in a subject country could afford the luxury of writing without a social purpose. India, so long as she was 'under the yoke of alien subjection,' could not scale the highest peaks of art.' In Premchand's view realism could not be subordinated social philosophy to an aesthetic creed. The writers in India had the responsibility to educate people about their social and political conditions and suggest ways to resist injustice perpetrated not only by the colonial rulers but also through the native structures of power. Premchand had the insight to see the identity between the demands of society and the demands of literature. And precisely because he could perceive this identity, he succeeded increasingly in creating works that combined social purpose and artistic excellence (Chandra 2002: 83).

Premchand's last prose piece 'Mahajani Sabhyata,' published in September 1936, one month before his death, is a powerful indictment of the culture of capitalism which depicts the violence it has done to human life and the distortions in human values it has engendered. He was, however, hopeful of a new egalitarian spirit that would eventually dawn.

The Hindi version of the All- India Progressive Writers Association (IPWA) manifesto was published in Premchand's journal *Hans* in October 1935. This manifesto became the first basic document which provided the direction to the development of social realism in India, as well as the goals of the AIPWA. It gives the definition of 'Progressive literature' in the following words:

It is our belief that the new literature of India must respect the basic realities of our present-day life, and these are the questions of our bread, plight, our social degradation and political slavery. Only then will we be able to understand these problems and the revolutionary spirit will be born in us. All those things which take us toward confusion, dissension, and blind imitation is [*sic*] conservative; also, all that which engenders in us a critical capacity, which induces us to test our dear traditions on the touchstone of our reason and perception, which makes us healthy and produces among us the strength of unity and integration, that is what we call Progressive (Coppola 1974: 8).

And in the words of Ahmed Ali:

[The Progressive Writers'] Movement was essentially an intellectual revolt against the outmoded past, the vitiated tendencies in contemporary thought and literature, the indifference of people to their human condition, against acquiescence to foreign rule, enslavement to practices and beliefs, both social and religious, based on ignorance, against the problems of poverty and exploitation, and complete inanity to progress and life (Coppola 37)

Ahmed Ali had contributed two short stories, viz., 'Baadal nahin aatey' and 'Mahawataun ki ek raat,' to *Angarey* which fell in line with the progressive spirit of the work. However, reading his novel *Twilight in Delhi* (1940), which is his best known work, belies that commitment. Delhi is the centre of the novel, and it is the Delhi of a certain class of people, representing feudal values and attitudes, which is believed to be the fountainhead of cultural values. The subject of Ahmed Ali's novel is this cultural order and its gradual disintegration. The author could not conceal the fact that he loved these dying values and

was sorry for their decay. He finds it difficult to get away from this conservative perspective. When asked about this reactionary position, Ahmed Ali responded that, though in the course of writing he has shown sympathy for this culture, and that in so doing this sympathy shows itself as a personal catharsis, his emphasis in the book is on something larger—life itself which, in spite of the decay of an order, goes on unmindful of social changes, continues and never dies (Askari 1994: 32). The imperatives of social change that would embody the spirit of progressivism or modernity do not concern Ahmed Ali in *Twilight*.

The decline of the city of Delhi, symbolized by the crumbling structures of the old city taking its toll on a whole communal way of life that the old city sustained and nurtured, parallels its aggressive take-over by the British, to build a new city under the supervision of Lutyens to make way for the imperial habitation. As the metamorphosis takes place the communal way of life is disrupted and is being edged out by modern individualism. As the old and the new are locked in a bitter confrontation the change is resisted by the native population:

The residents of Delhi resented all this, for their city, in which they had been born and grew up, the city of their dreams and reality, which had seen them die and live was going to be changed beyond recognition. They passed bitter remarks and denounced all the Firangis (*Twilight* 143).

Mir Nihal's subjective world recounts the decline from the zenith of Mughal splendour, to the disintegration of the Muslim culture and the way of life. But this overlooks the fact that the decline of old Delhi was also marked by the stirrings of an emergent nationhood in all its fervour, and which heralded the advent of modernity itself. On the

other hand Nihal's subjective consciousness is marked by a regress to the point of no return. There is hardly any optimism in him. Twilight for him doesn't bring any promise of dawn.

Mir Nihal is the protagonist of the novel, and the author seems to endorse his perspective. Asghar, Nihal's young son, can be seen as the emblem of modernity. Though what is presented through him is a warped face of modernity, revealed superficially in his dress, wearing English shoes etc. In fact, the advent of modernity is announced in the novel in the forms of objects; the leather shoes, the English items of furniture, silk dressing gown and the new hair style, labelled contemptuously as 'firangi' by Nihal.

Nihal and his wife take pride in the fact that they belong to a noble ancestry, being the Saiyyeds of Arab stock, direct descendents of the Prophet. Their blood cannot be sullied by a commoner of questionable ancestry. It's only the high born who can uphold the values of Islam. As Begum Nihal declares: 'the good-blooded never fail, but the low-blooded are faithless.' (*Twilight* 43)

Mir Nihal is reluctant to give up the patriarchal and feudal values when it comes to the marriage of his son Asghar: 'How can my son marry Mirza Shahbaz Beg's daughter? You don't want to bring a low-born into the family? There are such things as the family honour and name. I won't have the marriage' (*Twilight* 48). One notices that throughout the narrative there is hardly any indication of a self-critique to which a class or a community would subject itself, on which the Progressives' movement was premised and which envisaged the larger goals of social change and reform. Whereas *Angarey* had underlined the valences of self-criticism within Muslim community, *Twilight* fails to register these concerns.



Such is Mir Nihal's adherence to his old world values that he fails to read the signs of the times, and when he does begin to recognize his world disintegrating, his reaction is not to accommodate to it, or adjust to it, but to seek withdrawal and retreat.

The disappearance of tradition in the novel is also seen in terms of the decline of poetry, which has now almost been banished from day to day life. Gone are the long evenings spent in poetic symposia when poetry was heard with rapt attention and its subtle nuances were discussed. What a fall from those heady days, when, as Nihal encounters a beggar on the street, who is forced to sing to earn money, and who turns out to be a descendant of the deposed ruler Bahadur Shah Zafar.

Nihal woefully ruminates:

The richness of life had been looted and despoiled by the foreigners, and vulgarity and cheapness had taken its place. The relation that existed between a society and its poets and members was destroyed. Perhaps the environment had changed. Society had moved forward, and the people had been left behind in the race of life. New modes had forced themselves upon India. Perhaps that is why that unity of experience and form, which existed in Mir Nihals's youth, had vanished (*Twilight* 176).

In Nihal's worldview the traditional and the modern cannot co-exist, and the modern must be forced out to the fringes of experience to enable the memory of the past to survive. Thus, Asghar and Bilqueece, the emblems of modernity, are literally displaced and have to live in a separate house, to avoid their intrusion into Nihal's world of memories. All medieval practices, hakims, alchemy, fakirs, gain entry into his house to fight off the disease of cancer which was slowly corroding the life of his elder son. Instead of getting a modern treatment for the disease, he is subjected to dubious practices which, unfortunately fail to keep him alive. Distrust of modernity, thus, deals a fatal blow to the family.

Nihal's constructions of memory are marked by nostalgia for the past, untouched by the stirrings of modernity. That nostalgia is rooted in the cultural memory of a pre-colonial past that rejects the values of an evolving modernity. It is an anti-realist stance since realism entails engaging critically with the complexities of the real world using imagination and reason to negotiate the present moment. It is important that one becomes the subject rather than the object of one's historical moment. One cannot therefore look back nostalgically to a past howsoever rosy.

If we take an account of Mir Nihal's character we find that it had been formed even before the book begins; and thereafter there is hardly any change or development in it. His character is passive and static. He has only two interests in life: his pigeons and his mistress, Babban Jan. When Babban Jan dies, he gives up flying pigeons and even gives up his job and gathers around himself old people like himself and starts taking shelter behind alchemy and mysticism. His intention is to escape the rapid changes that are taking place in the life outside, and to withdraw from the world, assuming the position of an observer. He becomes so apathetic that he cannot even feebly intervene when Asghar marries against his wishes; or when his daughter marries into an unworthy household. His character, thus, is marked by regression and lack of agency.

Ironically the final blow comes to Nihal, when physically paralyzed, even the solace of nostalgia deserts him:

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 hodgepodge of Indian and Western ways which he failed to understand. The English had been beaten by the Turks at Gallipoli. Even this had not affected his heart. He had been feelingless and was not interested whether the caravan stayed or moved on. The old had gone, and the new was feeble and effete.

At least it had nothing in common with his ideas or his scheme of things.  
(*Twilight* 175)

The new 'hybrid' culture has nothing in common with his past, or his cherished values enshrined in his tradition. He is by no means a part of the 'New.'

It is not just that Nihal cannot connect with the new, he perhaps fails to recognize even the strands of modernity 'within the tradition' and so nowhere in the novel is there any celebration of the composite culture. It is rather surprising as it is ironical that one hardly comes across a Hindu or a Sikh character in the novel, even though it is located in Delhi during the times it was the hub of composite culture. One should perhaps bear in mind that a specifically Muslim cultural domain is not necessarily the only, or the primary basis for achieving selfhood in the Indian social context. Such a domain has to be defined as intersected by discourses and practices of a secular modernity. Ali fails to inscribe secularism<sup>4</sup> as a sign of modernity, in his narrative, wherein being citizen should have taken precedence over a host of other poles of identity, such as family, class, gender, even religion.

The novel fails to register the liberating force of shedding restrictive prescriptions of gender and class and accept new possibilities of selfhood, in the modern world, nor does it suggest possibilities of empowering women. Unlike Ali's stories in *Angarey* which questioned the stereotypes of women and their forms of piety, *Twilight* fails to do so. On the other hand women in this novel seem to resist the inroads of a reformist modernity. It could perhaps be argued that middle-class women, of various communities, of course had a complicated relationship with the project of modernization<sup>3</sup> and that the women, in particular the Muslim women, faced the contradictory social and political imperatives. But it

was the writer's task to call attention to gender issues as gender, subsequently became a key site of contestation in the construction of both nationalism and modernity<sup>5</sup> in India. Ali does not seem to pay much attention to the ways in which women themselves not only negotiated a 'fractured modernity' but also *participated* in its construction, in both the domestic spheres (Gopal 2005: 67).

Modernity in India is connected to colonialism since our contact with the modern West was through colonialism. But it also has components which resist the alien. As such it should draw upon the dynamic of culture itself, a dynamic that engages constantly with old and new, inside and outside, to create regenerative cultural forms. Both historical memory, in the form of cultural traditions of justice and progress, and utopian vision, which includes learning from other contexts, are integral to the architectural project of reconstruction (Gopal 81).

What Ali fails to achieve in his novel is to grasp the teleology of modernity as a radical humanist project, and its power to broaden and enlighten consciousness. It is a historical actuality that must be engaged with, and the writer's task is to 'think with modernity *against* modernity' (Lazarus 1999 :6). In *Twilight* Nihal has been turned into a symbol of ossified tradition which tends to disengage from the modern without even a tenuous engagement with or understanding of it. Even though the futility of a decadent culture is all too palpably evident toward the close of the novel, there is hardly any suggestion that one can really work for social change within the alternative vision of modernity.<sup>6</sup>

In *Twilight* modernity does not figure as an enabling cultural practice, even though the dominant intellectual view that was prevalent in the early decades of the twentieth century was to reject imperialism but embrace western civilization as the modernising force through colonial instrumentality in which English education too played a major role. Both intellectuals and leaders like Tagore, Nehru and Gandhi continued to draw a distinction between western civilization, which they admired, and imperial domination that they rejected. They could distinguish between colonial ideology, the view that British Rule was in India's best interests, from colonial modernity. It was, therefore, the writer's task to deal with the singular challenge confronting the colonial subject: How to be modern without rejecting tradition, how to accept ideas coming from the West without losing one's identity? Some of the progressive writers pursued a dogmatic leftist approach to prove their 'progressive' credentials which was resented by a writer like Ismat Chughtai who did not agree with a rigid categorisation of progressive literature: '[If] Progressive literature is only that which is written about the peasants and the labourer, I disagreed. I cannot know and empathize with the peasant class as closely as I can feel the pain of the middle and lower class. And I have never written on hearsay, never according to set rules, and never have I followed the orders of any party or the Anjuman (Association). Independent thinking has always been my nature and still is' (Gopal 69). A 'progressive' writer as mandated by the PWA would write in a 'critical spirit' and whose role could be conceptualized as that of social transformation.

Ali of course maintained that his take on 'progressivism' was not a hardened doctrinal view and that when an open attempt was made in 1938-39 to give the Movement a direct Communist turn, the creative section moved away from it. Ali defended his position

as he said: ‘ Progress to us had not meant identification with the worker and the peasant alone, nor the acceptance of a particular ideology or set of political beliefs. Accepting one set of dogmas and sticking to it is the very negation of progress, and that is not what many of us had asked for or believed in, although that was what the custodians of the Movement persist in reiterating’ (Coppola 37). Ali charged the members of the All-India Progressive Writers’ Association that they were ‘carried away by the panorama of passing things’ (Askari 32).

In 1985 he wrote:

[...] I am still a progressive, and try to face the actualities of life, and look at it with unclouded eyes, untrammelled with baseless conservatism or ideality, or the shibboleths of our own making, the tin gods who sit in judgment over our freedom of thought and expression, and restrain us from growth and progress and emancipation from the shackles of blind orthodoxy that hold us back from marching towards the goal of higher perception and purpose of life, the intense realisation of man’s destiny for which he was ordained from the beginning of creation (Hashmi 1994: 47-48)

Whether *Twilight in Delhi* meets his own criterion of ‘progressivism’ is debatable.

## Notes

1. In its earlier formulation ‘Social Realism’ was identified with Socialist Realism, meaning that the social reality be depicted not as it is but as it should be idealized, as adopted by the Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934. Approved by Joseph Stalin, Nickolai Bukharin, Maxim Gorky and Andrey Zhdanov, Socialist Realism demanded that all art must depict some aspect of man's struggle toward socialist progress for a better life. It stressed the need for the creative artist to serve the proletariat by being realistic, optimistic and heroic.
2. The doctrine that the artist is socially responsible – responsible to society- for what he does is very ancient. Plato was the first to raise this issue. All art has a purpose beyond itself: to tell the truth, to instruct, to please, to heal, to transfigure men; or to serve God by embellishing his universe and by moving men’s minds and hearts to fulfil his (or nature’s ) purposes. See Isaiah Berlin (1997: 196).

3. Anthony Giddens has suggested that the processes of modernization affect domestic sphere and emotional life even if in less visible ways than they do the public domain, (Giddens,: 2-3).
4. Secularism, Talat Asad argues, is the ‘enactment by which a political medium (representative of citizenship) redefines and transcends particular and differentiating practices of the self that are articulated through class, gender and religion’ ( Asad 2003:5).
5. There is no single, agreed idea of modernity, but there is space which provides opportunities to interpret ‘imaginary significations of modernity’ in multiple ways, and this space is culture, or language or history, whose importance is no less than that of power or rationality. The term ‘imaginary signification of modernity’ is borrowed from Castoriadis (1997).
6. The study of Indian modernity sometimes is too often reduced to claims about ‘derivative discourse’ as simply and inevitably modelled on Western precedents. ‘In actuality, the middle-class construction of modernity in India *as elsewhere* was a *fractured* process, i.e. it drew on older resources of power and privilege as well as new ideas about the organization of social and political resources.’ See Sanjay Joshi (2001: 3)

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