

SHORT STORY

The Spirits of Shah Alam Camp

ASGHAR WAJAHAT (Translated by R. Jalil)

The days pass somehow in Shah Alam Camp, but the nights are an endless nightmare. God alone can save a person from that hellish torment. And what a terrible, terrible cacophony! You can barely hear your own voice. Such shouting and screaming, raving and ranting, moaning and groaning, sighing and sobbing ...

The spirits come to meet with their children late at night. They caress their orphans, stroking their heads and gazing into their lifeless eyes with their own vacant, wasted eyes as if trying to convey something. Then they clasp their children to their breasts and the air is rent with the same gut-wrenching screams that escaped from them when they were being burnt alive like so much kindling wood. The children remain wide-awake when the rest of the camp goes to sleep. They're waiting to see their mothers ... to have dinner with their fathers.

"How are you, Siraj," the mother's spirit asks, fondling his hair and caressing him.

"How are you, Amma?"

The mother looks visibly happy. She says, "I am a spirit now, Siraj ... no one can burn me alive anymore."

"Amma, can I become like you?"

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One night a woman's nervous, agitated spirit reaches Shah Alam Camp well past midnight. She is looking for her son who's nowhere to be found--neither in the other world, nor here. The mother's heart is close to breaking with grief and terror. Other women help her look for her son. They look all over the camp and then they go to the mother's old neighborhood. The whole street is in flames; houses are burning like stacks of firewood. Since they are spirits now and able to come and go as they please, they enter these raging infernos with complete ease. They search every nook and smoke-filled cranny but they cannot find the mother's little boy.

In despair the spirits go to the homes of the rioters. The lumpens are sitting there making petrol bombs, cleaning their guns and polishing their arms. When the mother asks them about her missing son, they laugh and say, "You mad woman, when scores upon scores of people are being burnt alive, who can keep track of one little boy? He must be lying buried under some mound of ash and rubble."

The mother says, "No, no, I have looked all over ... I can't find him anywhere!"

Then one of the rioters remembers, "Hey, is she the mother of that boy we left dangling from the *trishu*?"

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The spirits come to Shah Alam Camp after midnight. They bring food, water, clothes and medicines from heaven. That's why you will not find any sick, naked, hungry or thirsty children in Shah Alam Camp. And that's also why Shah Alam Camp has become so famous. Its fame has spread far and wide among the dead. A certain dignitary from New Delhi who had come to inspect the camp was so pleased with what he saw that he announced: "This is a very fine place ... all the Muslim children from all over India should be brought here."

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artwork by aloke

The spirits come to visit Shah Alam Camp after midnight. All night long they stay with their children, gazing at them with love and longing, worrying about them, fretting over their future, talking to them ... "Siraj, you should go home now," a mother's spirit says to her son.

"Home?" Siraj whispers with dread and his eyes glaze over with terror. "Yes, home. After all, how long can you stay here? I promise, I'll come to see you every night."

"I won't go home, never, never, never." Smoke. Fire. Screams. Noise. "Amma, I'll live with you and Abba."

"Darling Sikkhu, how can you live with us ..."

"But Bhaijaan and Aapa live with you."

"That's because they were also burnt alive along with us."

"Then I'll return home, Amma."

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A child's spirit comes to Shah Alam Camp after midnight. The child looks like a firefly flickering brightly in the dark night. He flits and flies and skips and scampers all over the camp playing little mischievous tricks on everyone. But he doesn't hiss; he speaks clearly. He runs and hides in his mother's clothes. He traipses along holding his father's finger. Unlike all the other children in Shah Alam Camp, this child looks amazingly happy.

Someone asks, "Why are you so happy?"

"Don't you know ... I thought everyone knew."

"Know what?"

"That I am The Proof."

"Proof? Proof of what?"

"I am The Proof of Bravery."

"Whose bravery are you proof of?"

"Of those who ripped open my mother's womb, tore me out and hacked me in two."

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The spirits come to Shah Alam Camp after midnight. A mother's spirit comes to meet her son. The son is amazed at the sight of his mother.

"Mommy, why do you look so happy today?"

"Siraj, I met your grandfather in heaven today. He introduced me to his father, who took me to meet his father, even his grandfather and great-grandfather. Imagine, Siraj, I met your great-great-great-grandfather!"

The mother speaks in a voice lit with happiness. "Siraj, your great-great-great-grandfather was a Hindu ... a Hindu, do you understand? Siraj, be sure to tell everyone about this."

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The spirits come to Shah Alam Camp after midnight. A sister's spirit comes one night. She's looking for her brother. She looks everywhere till she finally spots him sitting on a staircase. The sister is delighted and runs to meet him.

"Bhaiyya," she cries out.

The brother hears but pretends that he doesn't. He just sits there, mute and unmoving like a stone statue.

The sister speaks again, "Bhaiyya, listen to me."

Again, the brother gives no sign of hearing her, nor does he look towards her.

"Why won't you listen to me, Bhaiyya?" the sister speaks loudly. This time the brother's face flares up like a fire. His eyes shoot sparks. He rises in a fury and begins beating his sister mercilessly. A crowd gathers and someone asks the girl what she has said to so enraged her brother.

The sister says, "I only called out to him, Bhaiyya."

An old man speaks up, "No, Salima, that was very wrong of you."

Why did you say that? That was absolutely the wrong thing to say."

And the old man starts crying like a baby.

The brother starts beating his head against a wall.

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The spirits come to Shah Alam Camp after midnight. One night an old man's spirit comes along with all the other spirits. The old man's body is naked save for a skimpy loincloth. He wears chappals on his feet and holds a wooden staff in his hand. An old-fashioned fob watch peeps out from the folds of his loincloth.

Someone asks the old man, "Are you too looking for a relative here in

this camp?"

The old man replies, "Yes, and no."

The others leave him alone, taking him for a senile old man. The old man walks round and round the camp.

Someone again asks the old man, "Baba, whom are you looking for?"

The old man says, "I am looking for someone who can kill me."

"Why?"

"I was killed fifty years ago by a bullet. Now I want the rioters to burn me alive."

"But, why do you want that, Baba?"

"Simply to tell the world, that I was not killed by their bullet, nor will I die if they burn me alive."

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A political leader asks a spirit who has come to visit Shah Alam Camp, "Do you have a father and mother?"

"No, they were both killed."

"What about brothers and sisters?"

"No."

"Any other living relatives?"

"No, all are dead."

"Are you comfortable here?"

"Yes, I am."

"Do you get enough to eat?"

"Yes, I do."

"Do you have clothes on your back?"

"I do."

"Do you need anything else?"

"No, nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing."

The leader is pleased. He says to himself, "The lad is bright. Not like other Muslims."

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The spirits come to Shah Alam Camp after midnight. One night the Devil's spirit comes along with all the others. He looks around and is filled with extreme embarrassment, even shame, at what he sees. He can barely hold his head up to look the others in the eye. Sheepishly, he averts his gaze, ducks his head, and furtively looks for an escape route where it would be unlikely that he would meet another soul. Intrigued by this strange creature, people take hold of him by the scruff of his neck and shake him. Wilting with shame, he bleats, "I have no hand in all this ... all this that has happened, truly I don't ... I swear by Allah, I have nothing to do with any of it."

People say, "Yes, yes, we know. You couldn't have done this. You have your own standards to think of."

The Devil sighs with relief and says, "You can't imagine what a weight has been lifted from my heart! So, you good people know the truth."

They say, "Allah Mian came a few days ago and He was saying the same thing."

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On Ahmed Ali and his *Twilight In Delhi*: the death of Delhi Muslim culture and the progressive movement in Urdu literature

KAHDEMUL ISLAM

Muslim rule in India began to derail with the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, and finally went off the tracks in the aftermath of the Sepoy Revolt in 1857. While Muslims generally all over India felt the wrath of maddened Englishmen, Delhi, then still the symbolic center of Mughal power, got it the worst. The sons and grandsons of the last emperor, the sorrowful Bahadur Shah Zafar, who had taken refuge in Humayun's tomb, were shot dead in front of him. An estimated 30,000 people died in the reprisals.

Muslim nobles and commoners alike fled the city. Accounts of the time, and subsequent Urdu poetry, chronicle a bloody time. Mirza Ghalib in his *Dastambu* wrote that 'at the naked spectacle of vengeful wrath and malevolent hatred the colour fled from men's faces, and a vast confluence of men and women, past all computing, owning much or owning nothing, took to precipitate flight...' The Jama Masjid was used as a barrack for Sikh soldiers. The Zeenat Masjid, the 'Ornament of Mosques' became a bakery. All houses, mosques, bazaars--including the legendary Khas Bazar and Urdu Bazar--within 448 yards of the Red Fort were demolished. Mughal Delhi was wiped out, while its culture, a high-flown Indo-Persian affair nurtured over centuries amidst the mansions, mohallas, lanes, houses and square miles clustered around the old court, barely limped on. With its ghazals and pigeon-flying, its courtyards and its languorous afternoons, its sky over Jama Masjid and tales of a glorious past, resentfully peering rheumy-eyed at the smart, spanking-new Delhi of the British Raj with its wide boulevards and European army uniforms, symbolic of a new order, being laid out beyond the confines of the ancient walled city.

It is the decline and eventual death of this Delhi Muslim culture in the wake of the collapse of the Mughals, its death pangs, that Ahmed Ali's celebrated book *Twilight in Delhi* documents. Its opening sentences set the tone: 'Night envelops the city, covering it like a blanket. In the dim starlight

roofs and houses and by-lanes lie asleep, wrapped in a restless slumber, breathing heavily as the heat becomes oppressive or shoots through the body like pain. In the courtyards, on the roofs, in the by-lanes, on the roads, men sleep on bare beds, half naked, tired after the sore day's labour. A few still walk on the otherwise deserted roads, hand in hand, talking; and some have jasmine garlands in their hands. The smell from the flowers escapes, scents a few yards of air around them and dies smothered by the heat. Dogs go about sniffing the gutters in search of offal; and cats slink out of the narrow by-lanes, from under the planks jutting out of shops, and lick the earthen cups out from which men had drunk milk and thrown away.'

This is Muslim Delhi in 1910, where the aristocratic Mir Nihal stays with his extended household in the old quarter of the city, amid a network of lanes, in a house with a central courtyard at whose center lies not a silvery fountain, but a scraggly old date palm, with a henna tree at its foot and sparrows in its branches. The story follows the Nihal family over the next nine years, till 1919, through the love swoons and arranged marriage of his son Asghar, the Coronation Durbar of George V in 1911 (when 'motor cars which had hardly ever been seen before came into Delhi and raced on the roads...') through a series of extinctions: his prize pigeons (whom the Delhi Muslim aristocracy were fond of flying) eaten by a cat, his young mistress Babban Jan dies, the influenza epidemic of 1918 ravages entire neighbourhoods, and finally, comes the death of another of Mir Nihal's son, Habibuddin, which leaves the old patriarch 'on his bed more dead than alive, too broken to think even of the past. The sky was overcast with a cloud of dust, and one grey pigeon, strayed from its flock, plied its lonely way across the unending vastness of the sky...'.

Death in the old quarter, paralleling the dying culture and society all around it, overwhelms everything else in the book. The short story, paralleling the dying culture and society all around it, overwhelms everything else in the book.

Due to our bitter experience as East Pakistan, a large number of us associate Urdu with reactionary politics, quite naturally react badly to it as a language that was to be the chosen instrument for the suppression of our language and culture. It is linked in our minds with Muslim League, Jinnah, and genocide, its very tones reminiscent of blood and bayonet. Therefore it may come as a liberating surprise to quite a few of us, especially in a present-day Bangladesh where religious bigotry is attempting to suffocate freedom of expression and speech, to know that Urdu writers during the 1930s and '40s fought against these very same ideas and attitudes, expressed revolutionary ideals. That Ahmed Ali counted as one of the leading Urdu literary firebrands of the time.

He was born in Delhi in 1910 into a cultured, traditional, urban Muslim family, which had lived in Delhi for generations. His first act of civil disobedience was at school, when he and a group of boys refused to wear medals distributed on the occasion of The Prince of Wales' visit and instead tied them to their shoes, for which they were caned soundly by their English principal. In 1932, after being educated at Aligarh (where his classmate was Raja Rao, another famous Indian writer in English) and Lucknow University, he started writing short stories in Urdu. In the same year, after teaming up with Sajjad Zaheer and Mahmuduzzafar, both of whom were Marxists freshly returned from Oxford, as well as Rashan Jahan, a doctor, the group brought out *Angaray* (burning Coals), a highly controversial anthology of short stories. It is considered by most critics as the first example of progressive writing in Urdu.

Angaray, with its openness to Western knowledge and literary forms, its intertwining of religious and sexual themes angered the mullahs and social conservatives. The story that gave the most offense was Sajjad Zaheer's *Jannat ka Basarat* ("Vision of Heaven"). The story is about Maulana Daud, who, at forty-nine, has taken a wife twenty years his junior. He devotes himself scrupulously to the observance of all Islamic rituals

and, one night in the month of Ramzan, goes to his sleeping wife, whom he generally ignores, to find out where she has put his matchbox. Awakening but misreading his intentions, she grasps him about the neck and implores him not to leave, but to spend the night with her. Either because of fear of impotence or fear of God, Maulana Daud extricates himself from her embrace and returns to his prayers. During his prostrations, he falls asleep over the Koran and has a vision of heaven in which he sees himself about to engage in sexual intercourse with a houri. He is awakened at the moment of climax by his wife's loud laughter, only to find himself alone on his prayer rug, prostrated over the Koran.

Differences, however, cropped up between the creative writers and some of the more doctrinaire members in the organization over what constituted 'progressive' literature and the wholesale adoption of the Soviet literary school of 'socialist realism.' Ahmed Ali refused to subscribe to such ideas. Finally, matters came to a head, and Ahmed Ali broke away from the Progressive Writers Association. It was then that he wrote *Twilight in Delhi*, which developed out of his celebrated Urdu short story 'Hamari Gali' set in Delhi.

Thereafter Ahmed Ali served as professor and Head of the English Department, Presidency College, Calcutta. After Partition in 1947, he went to Pakistan and joined the foreign service, from which he was retired in the early '60s by Ayub Khan's government. He remained a prolific writer, producing essays, short stories, novels and poems, translations (his poetic translation of the Koran into English was widely praised), and lecturing at American universities till his death in Karachi in 1994.

Which brings us to the question: why did Ahmed Ali write the novel in English?

The short answer is that he wanted to reach a different, wider Anglophone audience. And because he wanted to challenge the dominant imperial narrative on its own terms by telling a tale of a society to British readers largely ignorant of it, even though they had aided considerably in its downfall. It took persistence and courage on Ahmed Ali's part, for when he arrived in London in 1939 with the manuscript in his hands, he was

refused permission to publish it on grounds of that age-old bogey: sedition. He then took it to E. M. Forster and Virginia Woolf, who lobbied for its publication, and finally it was brought out by Hogarth Press in 1940. Forster said of it: 'It is beautifully written and very moving. The detail was almost