

AHMED ALI

A Night of Winter Rains*

[TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: When it was published in 1932 in Lucknow, *Aṅgārē* created an immediate sensation. Only a few hundred copies of the volume of ten Urdu short stories, of which three are translated here, had been printed before the British censors proscribed the volume under substantial pressure from India's leading Muslim voices. All but five copies were destroyed by the authorities. The authors of the stories, all Muslims—Sajjad Zaheer, Rashida Jahan, Ahmed Ali, and Mahmuduzzafar—came under fierce attack for their criticisms of Muslim orthodoxy, traditional social and sexual mores, and prevailing attitudes towards women and the poor. The Urdu and Muslim press excoriated the book at length, while Muslim organizations rallied against the perceived attack on Islam. The Central Standing Committee of the All India Conference, Lucknow, for example, passed a resolution that “strongly condemns the heart rending and filthy pamphlet called *Angare* ... which has wounded the feelings of the entire Muslim community by ridiculing God and his Prophets and which is extremely objectionable from the standpoints both of religion and morality.”¹

It was, in many ways, this controversy that made the collection important. The attack on the freedom of speech and expression as well as on the right of authors to critique religious ideas was opposed by leading literary and artistic figures throughout India, and the movement to defend the writers and their volume slowly brought together a group of people who would form the All India Progressive Writers' Association. The book became a cause célèbre as a symbol of the destruction of culture under the weight of imperialism and tradition, and it signaled the presence of a whole generation of writers in the 1930s who were challenging orthodoxy, flirting with

*“Mahāvatoṅh kī ēk Rāt” originally appeared in *Aṅgārē* (Lucknow: Niẓāmī Press, 1932). Translation from 1995 edition (Delhi: Taqsimkār, Ejukeshnal Publishing Hā'us), 154–62.

¹Quoted in Shabana Mahmud, “*Angare* and the Founding of the Progressive Writers' Association,” *Modern Asian Studies* 30(2):448.

socialism, and involved in the heady movement for national independence. It marked also a willingness to revolutionize the forms of Urdu letters, mixing more conventional patterns with British modernist techniques, borrowed from Joyce, Lawrence and Woolf.

Most critics of the collection, though, have noted that the book suffers from all the problems of early, polemical writing. Many of the stories are poorly conceived and the writing is a thin veneer for an angry, though important, political critique. At times the critiques against Islam suffer from a misunderstanding of the Qurʾān and instead merely translate inherited English rationalist critiques of Christianity into an Urdu or Islamic idiom. And, because of the early proscription of the text, it was never really allowed to proliferate in a way that might have allowed the forms and ideas in the collection to make a more long-standing intervention in Urdu letters. Still, there is something exciting in the rebellion of this collection as it declared war on conservatism and empire and hoped to pave the way for a genuinely progressive literary idiom that could permanently alter both the artistic world and the political future of a nation still in chains.]

Rum-um-um-ble ... dear God. The heavens look like they're about to collapse. The roof isn't falling, is it? Rum-um-ble!

And with that sound, the cracks in the broken door glowed with a throbbing light. A strong gust of wind shook the whole building. It's soooo cold! Ice and snow seep into every part of the body and it's shivering so hard it feels as if it will be torn apart.

A small house—twenty-four by twenty-four feet, more than half of it taken up by a narrow porch and, behind that, a sliver of a room, low and dark. There's not even a proper carpet. Some old, tattered sacks and canvas line the floor, leaving it sticky with dampness and dirt. Trunks are heaped up in the corners. There's a lone, broken wooden chest with some earthenware pots on top, blackened from years of use, missing bits and pieces and falling apart. There's a copper kettle too—the edges are chipped, it hasn't been polished for years and it's so worn the bottom is about to give out.

Nothing of the roof remains—just the rafters and now the rains, dear God—these winter rains. It's coming down fiercely, as if it was never going to rain again. Stop it now. Where can I go? What should I do? Death would be better than this. God, why did you have to create the poor? It would have been better if you had never shown us better days. It's so bad now there's not even a place to lie down. The roof is leaking like a sieve. We've tried huddling in every corner like kittens, but where can a person

find peace? It doesn't matter that I have nothing, but the children suffer like the condemned. Who knows how they got to sleep. It's so cold, oof! Every bit of my flesh is quivering. And to make matters worse, there are four people and only one quilt. Dear God, show a little mercy! There was a time when there were palaces, servants, carpets and beds. And if you could have seen my room! A four-post bed, sparkling with golden curtains, velveteen sheets, and chenille pillows. There was a mattress so soft you could just lie down and fall asleep. And the quilts? Oh! The silkiness of the chintz, and a hem of real gold lace. The maids and the servants stood around: "Mistress, shall I rub your forehead? Mistress, shall I rub your feet?" One rubs oil, another gives a gentle massage. Soft, comforting bedcovers, and on top of all this pampering, it's sleep that stands before me clad in celestial clothes.... Green panes of glass with blue and red and orange reflections, entire pieces of large multi-faceted jewels sparkling endlessly.... The tablecloth had silver plates set on it, a flicker of light, korma, pilau, biryani, *mutanjan*, *bāqarkhāniyāñ*, and sweetmeats.... A garden surrounded by trees with verdant leaves that caught the sparkle of the stars in drops of dew, creating even more stars. Good heavens, what beautiful fruits. Mangoes, all sorts of exotic varieties. What gorgeous apples. Red and pink and green ones hanging from the branches of the dark trees. Just look at the berries: fat and grape-colored, just like the ones from Sheikhpur. A canal, like a silvery blanket draped over the dark night—perhaps it's of milk. This isn't Paradise, is it? A small boat, drifting very gently with the grace of a swan. Hurry up, sit down quickly, let us take you on a tour of Paradise. What ladies: pure, noble, clear as crystal! Sparkling white clothes and graceful like the wind. Drifting like a floating candle, the boat floats away on the water. Open fields on both sides, covered with green grass. And in between, colorful flowerbeds and trees laden with fruit could be seen. Birds calling out, making a ruckus. So, is this Paradise? Are we in Heaven? Yes, Heaven, the place of God's good and beloved subjects. The boat, like a small seashell with a round dome, moved on, passing in front of a few gleaming houses. What beauty and what brilliance. The boat doesn't even stop long enough for the gaze to settle. They don't leak, do they? Will I find a room in one of them? They've been reserved for God's good and true subjects, for his pure subjects. There's a clawing in my stomach, something pulling at my heart, my insides are in knots. It felt as if someone put something in my lap. It was a large fruit like an apple, white as a pearl, with two bright, green leaves still on its stem looking as if it had just been plucked from a branch. Ah, what flavor. If only there were more. My lap was full. The

boat was passing between two mountains. There was a bend. After the boat had passed through the bend, suddenly, from a tall, distant mountain, a column of light, more powerful than lightning, rising up like fire, began to appear. My eyes closed, blinded by the flash. It was pitch black. A commotion was heard, louder than thunder. The Doomsday trumpet sounded, so deafening that I couldn't even hear. The ladies from the boat were running in every direction. Suddenly, another flash of light appeared. The sun was falling. Nearby, another sound was suddenly heard, as if a volcano had exploded. An earthquake struck. The boat was destroyed and everyone was drowning in the river.

Rum-um-um-ble! Drip-drip, the sound was coming from every direction. "Amma, Amma!" There was still a ringing in my ears. My heart was racing. "What is it, son? What's wrong?" "I'm scared. What's that noise?" "It's nothing, son. Just the thunder." All three children were huddled together in a corner, curled up in little balls. The rainwater had soaked their quilt. The part next to Maryam was quite soaked. The poor thing got up and moved the children farther away. Now they were pressed right up against the wall. Dear God, if it keeps raining like this, we'll all be drenched. "Amma, it's cold." Siddiqa was lying next to her. She hugged her close and made her lie down next to her. There was no cotton, so company would have to do. And over there, the two boys held each other close, entwined, like a snake around a tree.

Dear God, have mercy. God is supposed to be with the poor, to help them, to hear their cries of pain. Am I not poor? Why doesn't God hear me? Does God exist or not? And what is God, after all? Whatever He is, He's very cruel and extremely unjust. Why is anyone rich? Why is anyone poor? It's His wisdom, a benevolent wisdom. Someone writhes in the wintry cold, without a bed to sleep on, with no clothes to wear, weathering the chill, suffering the rains, starving—and the relief of death still doesn't come. Some have lakhs, they have everything in the world, no worries at all. If they were to give us just a little, what would it cost them? The poor would be able to survive. But why should they care? Why would anyone feed a goat he didn't own? Who made us? God? Why doesn't He care about us? Why did He make us? To suffer through sorrows and withstand troubles? What kind of justice is this! Why are they rich and we're poor? This will all be recompensed in the afterlife. That's what the maulvi always says. Whose afterlife? To hell with afterlives. My troubles are here and now, my needs are here and now. The fever is raging today and the medicine is supposed to be delivered in ten years? Better to stay the hell away from such afterlives. It would be just as good to

suffer the consequences later and have some relief now. God? ... it's just an excuse, a con. A patronizing consolation for remaining poor, a futile hope in desperate times, a means for remaining content in times of trouble. God? Just a smokescreen. And then there's religion, it teaches the same thing, the same thing, and on top of that they say it's a mine of knowledge and a justification for poverty. It's a fool's wisdom. It takes the ones who are advancing, who are climbing higher, and pulls them back. It's a roadblock on the path of progress. Stay poor, you can only find God in poverty. I haven't seen Him. Why doesn't He get the rich to pay us? What would we do with wealth? I only need enough to survive. What do the rich do with their wealth, after all? It rusts in their basements. And it's not spent wisely either—what is spent is spent willy-nilly and wasted. Why doesn't the government do something? If nothing else, it could distribute the wealth evenly ... and if not that, then we should at least get half of our share. Why should the government trouble itself? Its coffers are full. It finds money without effort. What does it matter to the government? We're the ones who are going to die. Only the ones who suffer know—when a camel is laden with the weight of a mountain it groans in pain. But now ...

“Amma”

“Yes. What is it?”

“Amma, I'm hungry.”

Hunger. A quiver ran through Maryam's body. Dear God, what can I do! Poor children ... “Mian, is this any time to be hungry. Hunger must have gone mad to come at this hour. Go to sleep. Eat in the morning.”

“No, Amma, I want to eat now. I'm so hungry.”

“No, son, this isn't the time, lie down. Look there, lightning.” Poor child, the sound of the thunder scared him and he went back to bed. Where can I get work? What can I do? Because of the rain, I couldn't even go out to someone's house to get a little of whatever I could find and bring it home to sew it together. I couldn't even go to see poor Fayaz Begum. The poor woman is the only one who saves whatever she can and always gives me what she has left. And if I can't find work anywhere tomorrow either, then what? How long can I go on begging? People get tired of giving over and over.

“Amma, I'm hungry. Look, my stomach's empty. I haven't eaten anything since yesterday. I can't sleep. I can't stand it.” The poor woman eventually got up. Feeling her way in the dim light of the small lamp, she went to the chest so that, if she found anything, she could give it to the child. After all, he's only five years old. If only I had never given birth to

these children. I could have suffered it all and survived by myself, but now I have the burden of these children. She found a dry piece of bread in the breadbox, soaked it in some water and put it in front of the children. The stomach is a terrible affliction. The poor boy pounced on it like a dog. After eating a little, he said, “Amma, give me a little raw sugar if there is any.”

Maryam got up again, thinking that she might find a piece of raw sugar. Luckily, she found a small piece. The boy ate what he could. There were a few mouthfuls left, and Maryam, unable to stop herself, ate them a little at a time ...

The lightning and thunder had stopped. The rain had slowed too. She went and hugged Siddiqa to her, then went to lie down, alone.

If only he were still here. If he were here. Him, him, him. When he would come home at night, he always brought something with him. “What did you bring?” “It’s Sohan-halva.” “It’ll be that blasted *paprī* stuff again. You know I like Habshi-halva.” And there you go yelling again, you could have looked first. Oh, those quarrels and reconciliations, the romances of the rainy season. Those were the days, now they’re just a dream. And those moonlit nights when we strolled past the flower-sellers. Ah, those flower trellises, the fragrance was enough to make your head spin, and now, there aren’t even stale flowers, or even withered flowers. If only he were here. Those legs, a green, lush tree made of flesh and bones and marrow. The sap was warmer than blood and the bark was softer than flesh. The trunk was light and strong, with two branches and ... one trunk grafted onto another, clinging to each other, one’s spirit in the other, conjoined, entangled in each other’s lives. And in both of them, the hope of a third life, the treasure of a full life, the riches of the moment—but the potential for existence in non-existence. Ah! Those legs, two serpents entwined, drenched in dew, lying drunk on the grass. Thread through the eye of a needle, two fingers moving quickly, flying, embroidering flowers on soft, downy velvet. Standing in place, a spider spins its web, moving up and down, unaware that a fly has been caught in the web, its saliva goes on creating thread, continues weaving a web. A bucket sunk in the depths of a well, touching the bottom, feeling the heat of the smooth sand.

The small ripples that were steadily growing on the surface of the water spread everywhere. They began to reflect off the walls. Then they started returning to the center, filling the water with joy and warmth. A pair of trees, a peepal and a mango, grown from the same root, born from the same trunk. They shared the same life because they were growing

together. They were each other's support, each other's solace, breathing the same air, drinking the water of the same stream. Ah, that body. But now the lightning had burned the peepal down, crushed it to its roots! But the mango, because of fate, remains standing. If only lightning had struck it down ... leafless, alone, withered, the life of a horsefly, still here to suffer the torments of life. If only he were here....

Movement in the quilt, Siddiqa rolled over.

Time cannot be cajoled or conned by anyone. And I'm all alone, I'm all alone. It would have been better if I'd never had any joy in my life, then I wouldn't have to feel this loneliness now. There wouldn't be an empty space in my heart, love's space. Hope is nothing but being rocked into a deceptive slumber. Sometimes it comes close, sometimes it abandons you.

But hope for what? Despair has now spread everywhere, like the clouds, swelling. That cotton rope, that swing, and four girlfriends, companions, two on each end of the plank. The swinging made the tree shake, reaching the dark, gathering rain clouds. Who pushed the swing, Ammorya? Anwari and Kishwar, is that as high as you can swing? Watch how high Kubra and I can go. Don't stop until you get dizzy ... and then the roar of laughter, the outburst of cackling ... and now life's a monster. The Garden of Paradise and the flirting houris, garlands of flowers and a strand of dew. No branches with berries. Where is my nest? Then a sun-baked cliff, barren, hard, and from its side—life. Then a new existence, a new way, the enjoyment of manna and quail. Bathing in canals of sweet milk, and playing in them too. Then the days were Eid and the nights were deliverance from sin. But alas, in an instant ... Satan and the apple and expulsion, utter loneliness, a mountain lying in ruins—if only he were here ... Adam! ... Then no pain, no trouble, no problems, blame, or woes. Then that same joy and celebration. A doomsday is upon us. It's the time of "My soul, my soul," the trumpet of the Angel of Resurrection, and the Anti-Christ trying to seduce everyone. I'll just go to him. There is at least hope. Oh, this loneliness. No one to even care for me. No solace, no reassurance, no comfort. Utter loneliness. A dark, terrible night. Yes, someone bring me a jungle ... a jungle ... to me... a bazaar ... a ba... bazaar. Me-e-e, night. □

—Translated by Snehal Shingavi