

1 Introduction

Writers on Trial

Bol ke lab āzād haiñ tere
Bol zubāñ ab tak terī hai
Terā sūtvāñ jism hai terā
Bol ke jāñ ab tak terī hai

Speak, for your lips are free
 Speak, for your tongue is still your own
 This upright body still is yours –
 Speak, your soul is still your own.

Faiz Ahmed Faiz

Introduction

“The intellectual,” Edward Said once wrote, is “someone whose whole being is staked on a critical sense, a sense of being unwilling to accept easy formulas or . . . the smooth, ever-so-accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say, and what they do. Not just passively unwillingly, but actively willing to say so in public.”¹ Half a century before Said, in the decades immediately preceding and following Indian independence and the creation of Pakistan, a group of South Asian literary intellectuals dedicated themselves to a craft of writing that aimed to disturb the status quo. They demanded liberation, “from the maligning imperialist archaeology on the one side, and from its misuse by reactionary elements in our society, whether they are the narrow nationalist revivalists, the priest-craft, or orthodoxy.”² Influenced by international trends in social realism as well as leftist movements in India, and writing predominantly in Urdu – a widely shared North Indian vernacular language increasingly tied to Indo-Muslim identity – these literary intellectuals called themselves progressive writers.³ This book is

¹ Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), pp. 23.

² Sajjad Zaheer, “A Note on the Progressive Writers Association,” in Sudhi Pradhan, *Marxist Cultural Documents* (Calcutta: Santi Pradhan Distributors, National Book Agency, 1979), p. 1.

³ The Progressive Writers Association began with Urdu writers but quickly became a pan-Indian phenomenon. Progressive writers of Hindi, Bengali, Punjabi, and other Indian

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about how progressive and what I refer to as “Urduphone” intellectuals, largely made up of Indian and Pakistani Muslims involved in leftist politics, articulated their struggles for freedom in the face of intense political suppression.⁴

Following the censorship of their first anthology of short stories, Urduphone intellectuals of Muslim backgrounds established an all-Indian organization in 1936 known as the Progressive Writers Association (PWA). This group of literary intellectuals immediately began to debate amongst themselves what precisely was meant by the term “progressive.” After Partition in 1947, shaken by unprecedented mass atrocities, displacement, and exile as their Urdu literary community fractured across new borders, progressive intellectuals in Pakistan continued their trenchant critiques of state and socially manufactured violence in a range of writing, from novels, poetry, and memoirs, to speeches, essays, and journalism. This book is devoted to crossing the India–Pakistan divide by exploring episodes both before and after 1947 in which prominent progressive Urduphone literary intellectuals confronted the limits of permissible and impermissible speech, and how they conceived of their roles as ethical interlocutors amidst colonial and postcolonial censorship regimes.

In the chapters to follow, I tell the stories of how progressive Urduphone intellectuals battled legal trials and literary controversies around blasphemy, obscenity, and sedition in late colonial India and in Pakistan, from the 1930s through the 1960s. By focusing upon the historical conditions and specific sites of censorship, this book is about the multi-faceted struggles of progressive Urduphone literary intellectuals for freedom against the demands of colonial as well as nationalist structures of oppression. This book is neither a legal history of censorship nor is it a linear narrative about the birth and death of a literary movement; it is not a summation of where progressive literature fits into left-party politics and organization as cultural fronts in late colonial India, nor does it provide a neatly ordered chronicle of the trajectories of progressive movements, press, and literature in India and Pakistan, even as it touches upon all of these matters. Rather, this book is an intervention in the

languages published short stories, novels, plays, and many other works of fiction and poetry from the 1940s through the 1960s. However, I focus on the Urdu progressive writers because they were the first and amongst the most formative class of writers who influenced this organization and because Urduphone intellectuals also played a significant role in the demand for Pakistan.

⁴ I use the term “Urduphone” to denote a shared linguistic and literary arena largely present in urban North India, but with centers in such places as the southern Indian city of Hyderabad. The term “Urduphone” has never been used to describe this arena, and I will describe it in more detail later in this introduction.

scholarship on censorship in South Asia, by way of examining Muslim belonging, ethics, and left politics from a historical perspective. It seeks to understand how literary intellectuals with progressive ideals shaped their sense of ethics, selfhood, communities, and traditions of thought during moments of great crisis. Progressive Urduophone intellectuals articulated their critiques of state and society during the years characterized by nationalist Indian freedom struggles that sought to end centuries of British rule. However, nationalist pathways to independence were themselves contested and at times, silenced. I closely read literary texts and lives during such moments of crisis, exploring how progressive Urduophone intellectuals turned to modes of ethical engagement, creative inquiry, and self-expression drawn from Islamic, Indo-Muslim, and Persianate traditions, which pushed against and were constituted through the political limitations and possibilities of anti-colonial national liberation.

The nation-states of India and Pakistan were brought into being through the consolidation of numerous oppositional social and political forces, including the establishment of various political parties, increasing trade union activism, rising peasant agitation, and the proliferation of women's organizations. Even as such activities were impacted by the contest between British imperialism and Indian nationalism, their promulgation indicated that a wide range of projects were embarked upon as the shift from colony to nation took shape. The All-India Progressive Writers Association (AIPWA) was one such transformative project: it was a utopian endeavor upon which Urduophone intellectuals of Muslim backgrounds had the most and disproportionate, influence. The anti-colonial era, from the 1930s through the early 1950s, was marked by attempts by the Left, made up of a diverse range of Communists, Marxists, and Socialists, to acquire hegemony over the nationalist movement.⁵ It was this context that made it possible to imagine a broad scope of historical tasks – that it would be possible, essential even, to take up the types of radical ventures that the AIPWA placed at the very heart of its agenda.⁶ Sajjad Zaheer, the first General Secretary of the AIPWA, claimed that “it was the duty of our writers to . . . struggle against reaction and ignorance in whatever form they manifest themselves in society.”⁷ The utopian project of the anti-colonial progressive intelligentsia was

⁵ Shashi Joshi, *Struggle for Hegemony in India: The Colonial State, the Left and the Nationalist Movement*, Vols. 1–3 (Delhi: Sage Publications, 1992).

⁶ Priyamvada Gopal, “Decolonization and the Progressive Writers Association,” in Harish Trivedi and Meenakshi Mukherjee (eds.), *The Nation across the World: Postcolonial Literary Representations* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁷ Zaheer, “A Note on the Progressive Writers Association.”

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framed by the task they set before the writer: social realism – an explicitly mirrored reflection of society and its injustices. This involved objectives that went well beyond nationalism defined solely in terms of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. It included struggles against a wide range of social and political forces: religious extremism, fascism, and the conservative sexual politics of one's own society. Thus, as Urduphone progressives articulated anti-colonial nationalism with left internationalism, they assertively confronted Islamic conservatism in their own communities, drawing inspiration from Muslim cultural traditions, even as Hindu majoritarianism made demands to exclude Muslim communities from the life of the emergent Indian nation.

The Urduphone progressive writers considered in this book are difficult to classify. They are *not* the “organic intellectuals” the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci had envisioned when he was writing notebooks in Mussolini's prisons during the 1930s – namely, thinkers who either were functionaries (technocrats, administrators) for the new industrial bourgeoisie and their ideas, or alternately, for the left, individuals who emerged from working class conditions and a shared experience of economic hardship out of which they organized a joint intellectual and social struggle into action.⁸ Nor were progressive Urduphone writers “traditional intellectuals” who held positions in the old feudal class structure and worked to enforce those coercive political structures. Progressive Urduphone literati, while privileged, tended to be of urban, educated, and middle to upper-class backgrounds, but were also *déclassé* men and women who organized communist attempts to win political hegemony over national liberation movements. Even though not all of them were inclined toward the ideological promises of communist organizing, they nonetheless saw writing as a politically purposeful, revolutionary, and socially transformative act.

This prominent group of “comrades” and *ham-safars* (“fellow travelers”) as they referred to themselves, developed friendships with one another and numbered in the hundreds. Together, they had an enormous impact not only upon South Asian literary and leftist traditions but also upon popular and political cultures for decades to come. Moreover, progressive Urduphone intellectuals belonged to a shared social world which cut across religious communities – Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh – ranging from short-story writers and novelists such as Munshi Premchand (1880–1936), Sajjad Zaheer (1899–1973), Krishan Chander (1914–77), Ahmed Ali (1910–94), Rashid Jahan (1905–52),

⁸ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Ed. and trans., Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: International Publishers, 1971).

Rajinder Singh Bedi (1915–84), Ismat Chughtai (1915–91), Sa’adat Hasan Manto (1912–55), and Ahmad Nadeem Qasmi (1916–2006), to poets such as Faiz Ahmad Faiz (1911–84), Hasrat Mohani (1875–1951), Sahir Ludhianvi (1921–80), Firaq Gorakhpuri (1896–1982), Josh Malihabadi (1898–82), Ali Sardar Jaffri (1913–2000), Jan Nisar Akhtar (1914–76), and Asrar ul Haq Majaz (1911–55), to popular news columnists such as Khwaja Ahmad Abbas (1914–87) and Marxist theorists such as Sibte Hasan (1916–86). The AIPWA, with its beginnings in the Urdu literary world, quickly became a pan-Indian phenomenon that included writers of several languages, publishing in Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali, and in English, such as Mulk Raj Anand (1905–2004), Yashpal (1903–76), Upendranath Ashk (1910–96), and Amrita Pritam (1919–2005). It is outside the scope of this book to address them all. Instead, I focus upon debates and controversies about permissible and impermissible speech that emerged specifically from prominent mid-twentieth-century Urdu literary texts, writers, intellectual lifeworlds, and recorded memories of South Asian leftists, especially those who migrated to Pakistan. These cases represent trends within the larger literary movement as well as the conjunctures between Muslim, Indian, Pakistani, and leftist notions of belonging.

Even as Urdu was a shared language of North India that cut across religious communities, Urduphone intellectuals of Muslim backgrounds were at the forefront of the PWA early on in the 1930s and were disproportionately overrepresented in progressive literature and the cultural politics of the left. I begin by asking, first, how and why did a minority group in late colonial India, defined ostensibly around “religious” identity, become such vociferous campaigners for literary projects based upon “secular” aims? Second, what was the role of Islamic ideas of ethics, morality, and literary traditions among progressive Urduphone intellectuals as they debated terms like *taraqqī-pasand* (lit. progress-liking) while simultaneously confronting state and social stifling of their creative expression during movements for Indian national liberation? Third, as many progressive Urduphone intellectuals supported the demand for Pakistan and others migrated to the new nation-state, how did they shape political and social imaginations beyond the scope of narrowly defined territorial and moral allegiances as well as intensifying authoritarian curtailment of their expression there?

With questions of religion, secularity, and ethics in mind, the project of twentieth-century Urduphone intellectuals who faced censorship is not comprehensible without first turning to *their* sense of the past, its literature, and how they interpreted “tradition” in relation to “progress.” Their interpretations could be on the one hand, forward-looking, even radical

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and revolutionary, and on the other, nostalgically yearning for a precolonial Mughal past, while using a language of longing quite particular to the Urdu literary tradition. What a close examination of their combats against censorship reveals is that the articulation of twentieth-century Urduphone intellectuals' anti-colonial nationalist politics – shaped so much by leftist, feminist, anti-fascist, anti-communal, and anti-casteist ideas and forces – was also deeply embedded within historically Persianate and Indo-Muslim literary traditions. “Religious” and “cultural” norms of comportment (*adab*), genres, and modes of thought and being had long enabled, and were even premised upon, critiques of power and an ethics of broad-mindedness. Progressive Urduphone intellectuals were responding to the extreme oppression endemic to, and characteristic of, twentieth-century colonialist and nationalist modernity – and to modernization itself, a historical process and phenomena in India whose brutalities had narrowed the field of ethical action. And yet, since the longstanding Urdu literary world had not been fully colonized and nationalized, it offered alternate precolonial visions and knowledges from which to shape political projects.

Progressive Urduphone intellectuals consciously drew from this well of knowledge, in the recuperative sense, and developed a utopian project of rediscovering a tradition of ethics that would liberate them from the historical conditions of colonialism. As Ahmed Ali, one of the founders of the PWA, who also translated the Qur'an into English, once put it, “the damage done by colonial powers to the heritage of conquered peoples is irreversible; yet racial memory is a collective storehouse that time and history cannot eradicate.”⁹ Twentieth-century progressive Urduphone literary intellectuals very often turned to and even rewrote, the literary knowledge produced by Indo-Muslim and Persianate worlds that had existed both before and during British imperialism in India.

Crucial to progressive Urduphone intellectuals' understanding of the past is the fact of their own consciousness of history. After all, the Urdu literary world initially flourished during an earlier time of great transition in South Asia: the fracturing of the Mughal Empire in the eighteenth century. Arguably, one of the most enduring features of Urdu poetry – that of the individual inciting an ethical critique of state and society at risk to their own reputation – initially emerged during a period of perceived

⁹ Ahmed Ali, *Twilight in Delhi* (New Directions Publishing, 1994), p. xi. See also, Ahmed Ali, *Twilight in Delhi* (London: Hogarth Press, 1940). For more on Ahmed Ali's translation of the Quran into English, see Ahmed H. al-Rahim, “Translation as Contemporary Quranic Exegesis: Ahmed Ali and Muslim Modernism in India,” in Mehr Afshan Farooqui (ed.), *The Two Sided Canvas: Perspectives on Ahmed Ali* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013).

political and social decay, the twilight of the Mughal imperium. The ethical critiques embedded within the Urdu language and its literary tradition were deeply intertwined with its aesthetics and emerged during the context of eighteenth-century political turbulence as well as the decline of centralized political authority. Such a long view better equips us to appreciate the poetry of figures such as Mir Taqi Mir (1725–1810) and Mirza Muhammad Rafiz Sauda (1713–81), and their relevance to a twentieth-century Urduophone progressivist discourse. By the nineteenth century, India produced the preeminent Urdu and Persian-language poet Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1797–1869), master of the romantic-mystical lyric poetry known as the *ghazal*, and who embodied, “a mode of existence in which difference is not only accommodated or tolerated, but also cherished and fostered.”¹⁰ Ghalib – who once retorted to a British official’s constraining question “Are you a Muslim?” by stating that he was half a Muslim because he drank wine but avoided pork – today belongs both to transnational South Asian, as well as global Muslim imaginaries. The most revered poet of the Urdu classical tradition, Ghalib’s oeuvre is characterized as much by Islamic mysticism as it by a critique of doctrinal dictates and rituals. Mocking the conventionally pious, he once wrote:

To put it briefly, my heart too inclines to piety – but then,
 I saw the way the “good” behaved and fell in with the infidels.¹¹

Ghalib’s life spanned the revolt of 1857 when Indians first rose up collectively against the East India Company but were met with defeat by British colonizers and the formal end of Mughal rule. For Muslim elites of North India, this also meant a humiliating loss of sovereignty as well as being disproportionately blamed by the British for engineering the revolt.¹² What followed as the British Raj quelled the revolt was overt colonial violence of dismemberment, beheadings, and mass lynching of Indians, as well as exile, such as the disenfranchisement of a courtly poetic community.

At the same time, Urdu poetry and the wells of Indo-Persian culture from which it had sprung were repurposed for new contexts. In her translations of his rich *divān* (collection) of poetry, Francis Pritchett notes that Ghalib’s “genius has shown forth with an authority that has

¹⁰ Syed Akbar Hyder, “Ghalib and His Interlocutors,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 26 no. 3 (2006): 463.

¹¹ Ralph Russell, *The Oxford India Ghalib: Life, Letters, and Ghazals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹² W. W. Hunter, *The Indian Musalmans: Are They Bound in Conscience to Rebel against the Queen?* (London: Trubner and Company, 1871).

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been, if anything, increasing.”¹³ Ayesha Jalal, who cautiously distinguishes between the categories of “religion” and “culture,” sees in Ghalib an individual who was both quintessentially Indian as well as Muslim, “whose irreverence towards established religious norms did not vitiate [his] sense of belonging to the community of Muslims [and] nor did being a Muslim inhibit [him] from interacting with members of other communities.”¹⁴ Shahab Ahmed, on the other hand, claims that, “as evidenced by their very language,” poets such as Ghalib and Hafiz, amongst many others, were “not making statements that were cultural rather than Islamic, or that were cultural expressions of alterity rather than Islamic expressions of alterity: they were making statements that cannot be understood as meaningful other than *in terms of Islam*.”¹⁵ One of the arguments that this book makes is that the twentieth-century progressive Urduophone intellectuals too were “Islamic,” even as they ranged from the godless to the godly in so far as the ethical knowledge they inherited was formulated from long-standing connections between literary, cultural, and philosophical domains of a historically constituted Indo-Muslim ethos. Progressive writers of Sikh, Hindu, as well as Muslim backgrounds wrote in Urdu, and it behoves us to consider Shahab Ahmed’s reflections about how, “something may meaningfully be Islamic and meaningfully be something else at the same time.”¹⁶

Twentieth-century progressive Urduophone intellectuals were amongst the first to translate Urdu and Persian poets, such as Ghalib, into English. Ahmed Ali, who helped draft the Progressive Writers manifesto in 1935, but was criticized by his comrades for refusing to join the Communist Party, translated Ghalib into English and wrote of him: “Ghalib is both a representative of a culture and in revolt against it.”¹⁷ Nor was Ahmed Ali alone. Several progressive Urduophone intellectuals engaged vigorously with Urdu literary history while rebelling against a whole body of modern Indo-Muslim reformist writing in Urdu produced by upper-class men such as Nazir Ahmed, Syed Ahmed Khan, and Altaf Husain Hali, who had emerged in the late nineteenth century as the standard bearers and articulators of the newly formulated “Indian Muslim” collectivity.

¹³ Francis Pritchett, *A Desertful of Roses: The Urdu Ghazals of Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib*, overview, www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ghalib/about/about_project.html.

¹⁴ Ayesha Jalal, *Self and Sovereignty: Individual and Community in South Asian Islam since 1850* (London: Routledge Press, 2001), p. 2.

¹⁵ Shahab Ahmed, *What Is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 237.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 538.

¹⁷ Ahmed Ali, *Ghalib: Selected Poems*, translated with an introduction (Rome: Is. M.E.O., 1969).

Akhtar Hussain Raipuri (1912–92) wrote the first Marxist literary history of Urdu, condemning feudal elites and their mindsets, arguing that their cultural world needed to end in order for true liberation to be possible for the people, and in particular, the oppressed. *Adab aur Inqilāb* (*Literature and Revolution*), published in 1935, drew heavily from the ideas and works of Russian authors, heralding social realist literature as the *farz* (duty) of the new Urdu literary vanguard with extensive essays on Soviet theater and the short-story translations of Maxim Gorky. Quoting Tolstoy, among others, Raipuri put the ideas of Russian writers to work in the service of concepts such as *jihād* (struggle), arguing that the role of the writer was to be one who delivers a *paighām* (message) to the people, claiming that the *adīb* (writer/litterateur) has a *farz* (duty) to write literature that not only reflects, but also liberates, the lives of the oppressed.¹⁸

Combining both Islamic and Marxist notions of decline and liberation, in Raipuri's view the *adīb* (writer) is assigned a moral duty; those who shun this duty in order to produce “art for art's sake” have gone astray, failing to achieve revolutionary goals. The telos of Raipuri's nationalist and orientalist Indo-Muslim narrative is all too familiar: rampant Mughal decadence led to decline and enervated Hindustan, making it susceptible to British conquest and subsequent industrialization, resulting in a capitalist present. Raipuri rehearsed a familiar Marxist refrain: the past was feudal, characterized by Oriental Despotism, its ornamented poetry funded by the royal elite (*tabqa-e amīr*). The present is capitalist and its literature is meant to satisfy the bourgeoisie's appetite, bereft of any larger political or moral commitment. Raipuri then asserts that the future must be egalitarian, and hence the literary intelligentsia must revolutionize literature and write “with a purpose”: that of political and social liberation.

This view of history in which there is a transition from decline to redemption, only if *adab* (literature and literary ethics) is put in the service of revolution, fit neatly, as Geeta Patel has noted, with the language of modernization.¹⁹ It also fit within existing notions of decline within orientalist, Indian nationalist, and Marxist narratives. The book became a standard account of literary history in the AIPWA. Besides its Marxist underpinnings, the anti-colonial vocabulary within *Adab aur Inqilāb* also fit within an existing discourse about ethical struggle (*jihād*). That Raipuri and many others used the term freely in the context of revolution and liberation, without having to justify its use, demonstrates that *jihād* could

¹⁸ Akhtar Husain Raipuri, *Adab Aur Inqilāb* (Hyderabad: Anjuman-e Taraqqī -e-Urdu, 1935), pp. 3–7.

¹⁹ Geeta Patel, *Lyrical Movements, Historical Hauntings: On Gender, Colonialism, and Desire in Miraji's Urdu Poetry* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002).

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loosely refer to anti-colonial nationalist struggle. The term *jihād*, certainly did not have the overtly politicized meaning it does today, nor was it used exclusively by the *‘ulema*, the Islamic religious scholars, whose own institutions were being thoroughly transformed by colonial modernity and revivalism. Raipuri’s writing underscored how anti-colonial Indian nationalist thought was shaped alongside anti-colonial Islamic movements.

Progressive Urduphone intellectuals also drew upon an earlier idea of ethical selfhood, informed by a corpus of Indo-Persian cultural idioms. They consciously posited themselves as agents of change and liberation, especially as censorship was imposed upon them both by colonial authoritarianism and from the colonized Indian middle classes. Take for instance, the feminist short-story writer Ismat Chughtai, who was summoned to Lahore in 1942 on charges of obscenity lodged against her for the homoerotic tale, “*Lihāf*” (The Quilt). She titled her autobiography *Kāghazī Hai Pairahan* a phrase derived from one of Ghalib’s verses: “*naqsh faryādi hai kis kī shokhī-e tehrīr kā, kaghazī hai pairahan har paīkar-e tasvīr kā*” (“The drawing (or picture) is a plaintiff – about whose mischievousness of writing? Of paper is the robe of every figure in (or of) the picture.”) The verse has also been translated as, “Who has, through his artisanship displayed so much mischievousness in the image of every creature, that each individual is unable to endure that mischievousness, and can be seen to make a complaint?”²⁰ This was an opening verse of one of Ghalib’s *ghazals* and was the subject of numerous commentaries and controversies in Ghalib’s own time as well as afterward for its purported meaninglessness. However, the verse itself invokes the imagery of the legal courts, as the plaintiff (being a poet or writer) speaks sarcastically for “the figures in a picture may look as though they inhabit a luxurious world, but of course they cannot even move around in it and they haven’t been ‘set at liberty’ in any sense at all, despite their ‘liberation’ they remain helpless like prisoners,” the implicit suggestion being that they are just like other humans in ostensibly “free” lives.²¹ Moreover, since Ghalib placed this first verse as the opening one within his *divān* (collection), departing from the custom followed by classical poets who typically began their first verse in praise of God, Ghalib’s question becomes ever more playful. That the verse was adopted by writers from Chughtai and Manto to Faiz to assert the idea of the writer as one who

²⁰ Ghalib, Ghazal 1, Verse 1 in Pritchett, *A Desertful of Roses*, www.columbia.edu/itc/mea/lac/pritchett/00ghalib/001/1_01.html#fwp. Accessed April 25, 2019.

²¹ Ibid. This couplet by Ghalib’s has also been beautifully explained by the progressive and Marxist Urduphone poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, www.youtube.com/watch?v=mMGyS00cp08. Accessed April 30, 2019.