BOOK REVIEWS

REVIEW ARTICLES


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1870s is a decade of exceptional importance in the history of the Indian subcontinent. During this decade a brilliant generation of Muslims arose which was to leave its indelible mark on history. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Muhammad Ali Jauhar, Muhammad Iqbal, Shaikh Abdul Qadir and Fazl-i Husain were all born during this decade, as was a boy in Surat, a textile town in Gujrat, Western India. His parents belonged to the Bohra community which traces its Muslim ancestry to the efforts of preachers sent by the Fatimid Caliphs in Cairo. Yusufali Allahbukhsh, father of this newly born, was an official in Surat's police force. The boy came to be known as Abdullah Yusuf Ali. He was to be a remarkable man of "extraordinary industry and deep emotion", as his biographer, M. A. Sherif, writes in this most appropriately titled biography, Searching for Solace.

Searching for Solace is a unique combination of Western research methodology, industry, honesty and a spiritual detachment which does not take away any of the human dimensions of the subject. The work is a labour of love in the true sense of the phrase. Sherif, himself a computer scientist, spent several years in researching, authenticating and discovering a vast corpus of material belonging to a life rich in turmoil and triumphs. He was lucky to find an important primary source in the

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debris in the library room of London's Regent's Lodge — the old building of London's Islamic Culture Centre. In 1974, the site was being cleared for the construction of the new mosque and numerous old books and files were being discarded. One day, the author was about to leave the Centre after attending one of the last meetings of the London Islamic Circle (which used to be held in the library) when he spotted the scrapbook. This had belonged to a man who had died on December 10, 1953, in enigmatic circumstances, and whose biography he was to publish twenty years after this discovery. Meticulously compiled, "with a handwritten index in pencil, with 385 numbered entries, for the period 1936-1943", the scrapbook of Abdullah Yusuf Ali was a find every biographer dreams about. But this was not enough; Sherif had to dig out many other sources including the Register of the Proceedings of the General Council of the Anjuman-i Ḥimāyat-i Islam, Lahore, documents and collections in the India Office Library and Records, London, files of various papers and journals and numerous secondary sources for the compilation of his biography which makes a compelling reading about a life devoted to passionate existence in turbulent times.

Sherif's biography is rich in condensed formulations: "Yusuf Ali was one of those children who are born as adults". The author is deeply involved with his subject but still detached enough to provide a balanced account of the life of a man who embarked upon a remarkable personal journey when he was sent to Bombay to attend the new school established by the Anjuman-i Ḥimāyat-i Islam when he was hardly eight or nine. But Abdullah Yusuf Ali's father did not leave his son at the Anjuman's school for long. In 1882, when he was barely ten, he was sent to the school of the Free Church of Scotland. This Scots-run institution had a very formal setting and bore the "stamp of its founder, the eponymous Rev. John Wilson, a noteworthy linguist, specialist in the antiquities of Western India and translator of the Bible into Marathi". Yusuf Ali matriculated from this school at the age of 15 and joined its senior section, Wilson College, which was affiliated with the University of Bombay.

Yusuf Ali had a brilliant academic career. He finished his high school at the age of fourteen, top of his year for Bombay, obtained first-class B.A. from Bombay University in January 1891. He was one of the nine students from India who were awarded a Bombay Government scholarship for further studies in Britain — an allowance of £200 per annum for a period of three years. The same year his father died in July and with few ties remaining in India, Yusuf Ali arrived in England in September at the age of nineteen. He studied law at St. John's from the Michaelmas term of 1891 and was awarded a Tripos with a good Second in 1895.
Following the trend of his times Yusuf Ali, like Muhammad Ali Jauhar and other talented young Indians, had decided to join the prized Indian Civil Service (ICS). While still at Cambridge, he had applied to be a candidate in the ICS open competition examination to be held in August 1894. Yusuf Ali obtained top marks in English composition and excelled in Roman and English Law. However, he still had to take a final examination in September of the following year. Yusuf Ali spent the probationary year preparing for the Part II law tripos at Cambridge and in pursuing studies at University College, London, and working for his admission to the Bar.

In September 1895, Yusuf Ali sat for the Code of Civil Procedure and Indian Contract Act, Arabic and horsemanship and came top of the list, obtaining 385 marks in Urdu and 340 in Arabic out of a total of 400. Just before the end of the year, young Yusuf Ali left for England, arrived at the Adriatic Port of Brindisi in Italy overland and from there took an ocean liner to Bombay. Later, he was to remember his four year sojourn in England as the period which "was to make me a student in the real sense, awakening in me an insatiable urge to acquire knowledge and a love of study".

"Entanglements", the second chapter of Searching for Solace, describes Yusuf Ali's life between 1896 and the outbreak of the First World War. Captivating in detail and well-researched for its social and political content, this chapter lays the foundation of the spiritual and psychological traumas which were to accompany Abdullah Yusuf Ali for the rest of his life. Appointed as Assistant Magistrate and Collector in Saharanpur in the United Provinces, Yusuf Ali started his career in ICS at the bottom tier of the complex administrative structure which the British regime had invented to control India. Two years later, he was transferred to Bareilly which was not far from Aligarh where Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College (MAO) was located. Yusuf Ali had the "honour of knowing Sir Sayyid in the later years of his life". However, Sir Sayyid died in March 1898 and Yusuf Ali's association with him remained brief.

At the turn of the century, twenty-eight-year-old Yusuf Ali published his first literary work: A Monograph on Silk Fabrics Produced in the North Western Provinces and Oudh. In spite of its pedantic title, the work contained cultural, technical and industrial information, including a section on Ahādīth sub-divided into those derived from Sunnī and Shi‘ī sources.

An important turning point in Yusuf Ali's life came in 1900 when he went to England and married Teresa Mary Shalders on September 18 in Bournemouth, following the Church of England rites; Teresa was twenty-seven. The marriage was solemnized by Canon Henry Slater in St. Peter's
Church — a place which was considered famous because Shelley's heart was buried in its cemetery. Teresa came to UP where their first child, Edris, was born in November 1901. A second child, Asghar Bloy, was born in October of the following year.

Teresa and the boys soon left India and settled in a house on Lemsford Road, St. Albans where another son, Alban Hyder, was born in September 1904. Yusuf Ali joined his family in 1905, at the beginning of his first furlough; by then he was already a Deputy Commissioner, well placed in the élite circles of Indians reaching high office in the ICS. Soon after arriving in England, Yusuf Ali belatedly recorded his call to the Bar at Lincoln's Inn.

1905 was an important year for the small circle of Indian Muslims in England. It was the year in which Muhammad Iqbal first arrived in Britain on a Government scholarship and sought admission in Lincoln's Inn. Abdul Qadir was studying for the Bar, Justice Ameer Ali, who had recently retired with his English wife to a country house in Berkshire, regularly came to London, and Badruddin Tayebji was also there for medical treatment. It was in this small circle of family friends that Iqbal met Atiya Fyzee of the Tayebji clan and where Yusuf Ali first experienced the exhilarating taste of literary companionship. Dawn of a new century, companionship with a group of exceptionally gifted fellow Indians, and the burning desire to do something for the cause of Muslims of India all conspired to provide young and poetic Yusuf Ali that mental and intellectual freedom which makes one believe that everything is possible. He was brimming with ideas. His speeches and writings of this period are full of optimism. During his stay in England, he gave six lectures at the Passmore Edwards Institute, London. Later he published a book, *Life and Labour of the People of India* (London: John Murray, 1907), based on these lectures. He met Lord Morley, the Secretary of State for India, on several occasions to discuss issues of political reform. His ideas on India and the reforms needed were much appreciated and he was a sought after speaker. He was invited into a select circle of royalty and had connections in many high places. But his furlough was about to finish and he was to return to India where, once again, he would fit into the "administrator-cum-scholar" image of the ICS officers. Before he left England, a daughter, Leila Teresa, was born in December 1906.

Yusuf Ali arrived back in India, without his wife and children, and by March 1907 he had resumed his duties as Deputy Commissioner of Sultanpur. But the short-lived period of joyous family and social life was almost over. In February 1908, Yusuf Ali took nine months of medical leave and rushed to England after hearing news about his wife's infidelity. The hurt caused by Teresa's affair with an Englishman, Obed Thorne, was
the first deep scar which was to haunt Yusuf Ali for the rest of his life. However, Yusuf Ali did not file for a divorce until 1910 when Teresa gave birth to the son of her lover in September. The divorce petition was heard at the High Court's Family Division in June and made a decree absolute in January 1912. Yusuf Ali gained custody of all his children whose ages ranged from five to ten years. He, however, left them in the care of an English governess and departed for India. (Later, he was to disclaim all of them in the will he drew up in 1940.) Teresa married again, but not to Mr Obed Thorne but to a Mr Astell.

In 1912, Yusuf Ali was Magistrate and Collector for the district of Fatehpur in UP, and James Meston had become Lieutenant-Governor of the Province. UP was then in the grip of political turmoil and in 1913, the situation came to a head in Kanpur, a small town fifty miles from Fatehpur. The Kanpur Mosque incident raised a deep feelings against the British all over India, and Yusuf Ali found himself torn between his religious and official affiliations. In February 1914, Yusuf Ali decided to leave ICS. But according to the rules, he required twenty years of service before a proportionate pension could be permitted. He sought Meston's help who wrote a very supportive letter. But Yusuf Ali did not wait for the official word on his application and left India for Britain to look after his children. On August 4, 1914, Britain declared war on Germany. Yusuf Ali was then in Seenoaks, Kent. Four days later, he wrote to the India Office: "I am prepared and shall be pleased to volunteer for temporary service, in any capacity in which I can be useful on account of the War".

The well-researched and perceptive third chapter of Sherif's *Searching for Solace*, "In the Service of the Crown", covers Abdullah Yusuf Ali's life between 1914 and 1920 in the backdrop of momentous events which resulted in a humiliating defeat for Turkey and an equally embarrassing end of the Khilâfat Movement in India.

In this complex situation, Yusuf Ali appears as an Indian who, in spite of his Muslim background, is extremely loyal to the British Empire. His "unabashed declaration of loyalty" in a speech at Caxton Hall, on 23 November, 1914 provides an insight into his sense of pride and loyalty to the British Raj:

"... we are indeed Indians, but also Britishers. But most heart-stirring of all is the appeal of one who knows intimately every part of his Empire as no Sovereign before him knew it — one whose chahra-e mubarak [auspicious face] was seen with pride and glory by millions of men in Bombay, Delhi and Calcutta less than three years ago... the King-Emperor calls. India salutes and falls in, ready to die for country, Padisha, flag and Empire."
This passionate speech was reported in *Aisatic Review*, (1915, 6: 26–33). And so was reported the episode following this speech in which Yusuf Ali actually undertook a journey to Scandinavia on behalf of the British Foreign Office to counter anti-British propaganda by an assortment of Irish, Egyptian and Indian groups. It pitched Yusuf Ali against a strong group of anti-British Indian nationalists. By the time War ended, Yusuf Ali was patently a Britisher who was used by the Raj to pacify anti-Raj sentiments. The so-called Peace Conferences at which the fate of the now vanquished Central Powers was determined also redrew the map of the Muslim world. The Secretary of State for India and official leader of the Indian delegation at the Conference, Edwin Montagu, made use of the services of "three prominent Indian Muslims: His Highness the Aga Khan, Sahibzada Aftab Ahmad Khan and Mr. Yusuf Ali" to pacify the outrage felt over the agreement. In a poignant paragraph, Sherif has summed up Yusuf Ali's role at this historic conference:

[Yusuf Ali's] selection for the Paris Peace Conference would be the high point of a glittering career in the service of the crown. It was a brilliant success for one not born into the aristocracy of India to reach the cockpit of world affairs, in the splendour of the Palace of Versailles with its mirrored halls and ante-rooms and elaborate gardens in spring foliage. It was no mean feat for the son of a police inspector. He rubbed shoulders with the great and famous, possibly even forming an acquaintanceship with Prince Faisal, son of Sherif Hussein and leader of the Arab delegation (p. 58).

After marrying another English lady, Gertrude Anne Mawbey, the daughter of Thomas Mawbey, a Derby magistrate and printer, Yusuf Ali returned to India. His children from Teresa, especially Bloy, who was now almost twenty, had started to criticize him openly and Yusuf Ali might have wanted to save his second marriage from the shadows of the first. In any case, Yusuf Ali arrived in India with his young wife, to whom he gave the Muslim name of Ma'sūmah, the innocent — perhaps in an unconscious effort to prevent the repeat of first marriage experience — to a life of much greater personal contentment and over two decades of creative literary activity.

At the time of Yusuf Ali's arrival in India, the Kingdom of Deccan, being ruled by the young prince Mir Osman Ali Khan, had become the focus of Muslim intelligentsia loyal to the Raj. He served briefly as a counsel in the Nizam's Šarf-i khāš, a body which administered the 'crown' lands, and later in 1921, became Revenue Member of the Executive Council of the State. But in 1922, he resigned abruptly from his post
perhaps due to court intrigues. During his stay in Hyderabad, a son, Rashid, was born in August 1922.

From Hyderabad, Yusuf Ali went to the United Provinces' Lucknow Bar to practice and to write. This independence and a growing sense of responsibility led Yusuf Ali to a re-evaluation of his preferences. In March 1923, he presented a paper on Babar based on the King's diary at a meeting of the United Provinces Historical society which shows his changing attitude toward the Muslim past. Ten years previously, he had praised George V and his chahra-e-mubark, now it was Babar who had cropped up in his imagination as a hero whose many qualities he was to sum up in a poignant paragraph:

Thus lived and died a brave and generous man. His hardy life filled in with his love of nature. His adventures, failures and successes never dried up the milk of human kindness in him. The sincerity of his soul, in strength and weariness, shines from every page of his self-revealing record (p. 72).

Yusuf Ali now devoted time to his two books on India, The Making of India and India and Europe. He briefly went to England in 1923 and then returned to Lahore in 1924, in time for the fortieth anniversary of Anjuman-i Himayat-i Islam. He was offered the principalship of the Anjuman's Islamic College at the beginning of the next academic session which he accepted. Yusuf Ali returned to England and spent a joyful summer with Ma`s`umah and Rashid. He moved to a new house in Chiswick and organized a publication programme with Luzac in London for a series entitled "Progressive Islam Pamphlets". The first of these, "Greatest Need of the Age", was published in August 1925 and the second, based on his lecture, "Islam as a World Force", presented on the occasion of the Anjuman's anniversary in Lahore. He also contributed to the Encyclopaedia of Islam on the term Khodja and the nineteenth-century Shaikh, Karamat Ali Jawnpuri. These writings marked his debut as an Islamic scholar.

Yusuf Ali's life between his arrival in Lahore to take up the principalship of Islamia College in 1928 was filled with many personal, ideological and political battles. In Lahore, he was a well-known personality with rather strong views and a characteristically pro-Raj stance. He left Islamia College in 1928 and in the spring of that year, he left India for Baghdad and visited Karbla, using the old boat bridge at al-Musib to cross the Euphrates. By now, fifty-seven-year-old Yusuf Ali had half a dozen books to his name, over a dozen learned articles, six pamphlets and two entries in the Encyclopaedia of Islam. In Lahore, his life had been rich and busy with the presidency of numerous Indian
cultural and educational conferences and membership in several learned bodies. His vision of a progressive Islam was an integral part of his loyalty to the Empire but the political and social scene was rapidly changing around him.

"On 18 August, 1928, Yusuf Ali received a letter at his home, 34 Woodside, Wimbledon, in South London, from Lord Birkenhead, the Secretary of State for India". Thus starts the fifth chapter of Sherif's book, "From Geneva to Lahore", describing Yusuf Ali’s most productive period. He was selected as a representative of India to the forthcoming assembly of the League of Nations in Geneva the following month, along with Earl of Lytton, a former Governor of Bengal, the Nawab of Palanpur and Sir Kurma Reddi, a former minister of the Madras government. Apart from this assignment, Abdullah Yusuf Ali was widely recognized by the British as well as Indian circles as the foremost representative of Islam, especially after the death of Syed Ameer Ali in August 1928. Time had come for him to embark on his most ambitious project: translation of the Qurʾān.

In 1929, Yusuf Ali was sponsored on a tour through America, Hawaiian Islands, Japan, China, Philippines, Stratiss Settlements, Ceylon and India. Sherif sums up this period in remarkably condensed style: [During these travels, he] "would work by day extolling the British Empire and pore over his labour of love at night". In the preface of The Holy Qurʾān — Text, Translation and Commentary there is a comment on the manuscript being "carried about, thousands of miles, to all sorts of countries and among all sorts of people" (p. 91).

Yusuf Ali was not a major player during the Round Table Conferences in London. In fact, he was touring Canada when the concluding conference was held. He returned to Lahore in September 1932 in connection with various public duties. It was also in Lahore, in early 1934, that he was ready to bring out parts of his commentary and translation of the Qurʾān. Preface to the first edition was dated April 4, 1934, his sixty-second birthday. By March 1935, four installments had appeared, Yusuf Ali had performed Hajj and was back in Lahore. The installments of about forty pages each became an instant success. In April, Yusuf Ali was re-appointed as the Principal of Islamia College on the suggestion of Allama Muhammad Iqbal but his second sojourn at the College was not entirely peaceful as he stood at the opposite side of the political divide — with the Unionists. By the end of 1937, having finished his commentary and translation, Yusuf Ali prepared to leave Lahore. He made his final round of calls, left the index for the complete translation of the Qurʾān with Muhammad Ashraf, the publisher, met Iqbal for the last time and left Lahore in February 1938 for UP. He visited Aligarh, met
Congress President Jawaharlal Nehru and in April returned to London by air.

Details about the final years of Yusuf Ali's life, presented in a chapter called "Unquiet Spirit" are rather sketchy. Sherif has not tried to analyze, apart from brief comments, reasons for Yusuf Ali's estrangement from Ma'sūmah, his increasing isolation and his declining physical, emotional and spiritual resources. Quoting the "remarkably well informed obituary in the Times", which appeared upon Yusuf Ali's death, Sherif sums up his chronicle of a rich and intense life in these words:

In advancing age he seemed to have a sense of frustration to find that so much of what he had done was vanity and vexation of spirit... Unhappily Yusuf Ali's last years were clouded by mental aberration. He entirely neglected his family duties and avoided financial responsibilities for his nominal home. In addition to his proportionate ICS pension he had private means; but he sank to a level of apparent poverty and lack of cleanliness which brought concern to old friends. He wandered about at the end, an unquiet spirit with no fixed abode.

On December 9, 1953, police found him sitting on the steps of a house in Westminster. He was taken to Westminster Hospital where he spent the night. The next day the casualty officer discharged him and a police constable left Yusuf Ali in a nearby London County Council, an institution for the elderly in Dovehouse Street, Chelsea. The next day he suffered a heart attack and was rushed to St. Stephen's Hospital in Fulham where he died three hours later.

The chapter closes with the following factual details about the finale of a memorable life:

An inquest was conducted by the Coroner of the County of London on 14 and 16 December 'in fairness to the widow and the hospitals'. The Coroner concluded that he was perfectly satisfied that everything that could be done for Yusuf Ali had been done. A death certificate was issued noting 'senile myocardial degeneration' as cause of death. Staff at the Pakistan High Commission arranged the funeral and he lies buried in Brookwood Cemetery, Surrey, not far from the Woking Mosque. The grave is near that of Marmaduke Pickthall, another distinguished scholar of the Qur'ān.

Yusuf Ali had appointed as the trustees and executors of his will, prepared in 1940, Lloyds Bank, his son Rashīd and his solicitor, Harold Symes. Acting on its terms, Lloyds Bank duly notified London University of the bequest that had been left to them for a fund for the benefit of Indian students. Yusuf Ali had specifically asked that it should be 'called after my name'. However a meeting of the Court in
1954 deemed it part of the Vice-Chancellor's Discretionary Fund for Indian Students. Yusuf Ali also left instructions for his diaries: 'I bequeath to the Muslim University of Aligarh [sic] (United Provinces, India) free of duty all my diaries (now kept in a black steel box locked), and I direct that such diaries shall be deposited by the University in its Library and shall not be opened until the expiration of 30 years from my death'. These were never sent to Aligarh and their fate is perhaps one of the secrets which Masuma carried to her grave in 1962.

This rather abrupt ending of the life story of a man whose translation of the Glorious Qur'an was to gain wide recognition and popularity in the years to come, leaves one with a sense of awe and compassion. The missing details of his personal life during the last decade as well as the absence of a detailed account of the circumstances leading to his state just before his death, notwithstanding Searching for Solace, is a captivating tale told with remarkable economy of words and with a plenty of insight.

The last three chapters of the book, "Educational Causes", "A Well Ordered World" and "Qur'an as Guide" explore various facets of the intellectual pursuits of a man who somehow was destined to remain at the margins of his times. Using the momentous historic events which shaped the history of British India as backdrop, Yusuf Ali's relationships with leading actors of his times are investigated and his contributions to various causes are examined. The most significant of these three chapters is the last one in which an attempt has been made to link the main thread of Yusuf Ali's magnum opus, the translation of the Discerning Qur'an, with his life. In a perceptive analytical paragraph on the subject, Sherif writes:

The commentary took the form of over six thousand footnotes to the translation, numerous appendices and a running interpretation written in the style of blank verse. It was a monumental effort that records the encounter of an intelligent and contemplative mind with the majesty of the Qur'an. Its hallmark is its emphasis on the spiritual dimension of Islam and message of moral revival. The origins for this orientation can be traced back to Yusuf Ali's life experiences, aspirations and ideological commitments. A troubled domestic life, early academic specialisation and employment as a college principal were experiences which intertwined with his vision of the meaning of the Qur'an (p. 173).

Elsewhere, Sherif has given specific examples of correlation between Yusuf Ali's life and his commentary (p. 174-75). He relates Yusuf Ali's fascination with the Hellenic heroes to his commentary on Dhu'l-Qarnayn. Sherif has also pointed out the shortcomings of the Commentary which
was written within the framework of a peculiar worldview which sought in the Qurʾān a philosophy of other worldliness, significance of an inner world and pursuit of moral excellence, and which tried to lessen the spirit of *Jihād* and other political aspects. Yusuf Ali's loyalty to the Empire, his uncritical appreciation of the British civilization which, according to him presented "an object lesson of incalculable value to the Muslims", played a decisive role in shaping the ideas which have been expressed in his *Commentary of the Qurʾān*. The last one hundred pages of *Searching for Solace* contain valuable documents, photographs, a selection of Yusuf Ali's and a comprehensive bibliography.

Yusuf Ali's worldview was totally out of place with the current of history. He lived with his ideals of an apolitical Islam and imagined a world in which a grand reconciliation could be achieved between people of different faiths. His involvement with the World Congress of Faiths and his emphasis on spiritual fellowship with others in a non-political manner gradually isolated him from the main historical events of his times, and the demise of the Empire further enhanced this isolation.

Sherif ends his book with a quotable summary of his subject's life:

Yusuf Ali's life began with promise, swung between moments of darkness and summits of achievement and ended in tragedy. In a sense it was like the history of British India.