

1:1 Summary biography²

Khwaja Altaf Husain, afterwards known by his pen-name or *takhallus* of Hali, was born into an impoverished family living in Panipat in south-east Punjab. His father died while he was a boy, and his mother was insane, so Hali was brought up by his elder brother and sister in Panipat, where he received an orthodox Muslim education. In 1854 he left for Delhi to pursue his studies further, but soon returned. In 1856 he got a minor job in the Collector's office in near-by Hissar, but again returned home because of the troubles of 1857. From 1863 to 1869 Hali was closely associated with the poet Navab Mustafa Khan Shefta (1806-69), whose son he tutored. Hali came to know the poet Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1797-1869) well in the latter's last years through their mutual acquaintance with Shefta.

In 1871 Hali went to Lahore, where he found employment in the Government Book Depot; his task there was to correct Urdu translations made from English. In this way he became acquainted with a wide range of English literature, although he himself did not know English. While in Lahore he took part in the *mushā'iras* on serious Victorian themes organized by Colonel W.R.M. Holtroyd, the then Director of Public Education.

In 1874 or 1875 Hali left to teach at the Anglo-Arabic College in Delhi, where he remained until 1887. During these years he became closely associated with the great Muslim leader, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-98), upon whose recommendation he was granted an allowance by the government of Hyderabad State to enable him to devote his time to literary work. To this end he retired to Panipat, where he died in 1914, having been given the title of 'Shams al-'Ulema' in 1904 by the Government of India in recognition of his achievements.

Hali's output was considerable, both in prose and verse. His best-known prose works are his biographies of Ghalib, *Yādgār-e Ghālib* (1897), and of Sir Sayyid, *Hayāt-e Jāved* (1901). In verse his greatest achievement is the *Musaddas* (1879, 1886), which is discussed at length in the following sections of this introduction. When Hali published his *Divān* in 1890, he prefixed to it a long prose introduction, known as the *Muqaddama shi'r-o shā'iri* or 'Introduction: on verse and poetry'; this was published as a book in its own right in 1893. In the *Muqaddama*, he set out his views on the proper role of poetry, and in particular what he considered to be the way in which Urdu poetry should develop.

¹ This account draws on Saksena 1927, Bailey 1932, Abdul Qadir 1932, Hali 1964, Abdul Haq 1976, Steele 1981, Sadiq 1984, Minault 1986, Pritchett 1994.

² This section is taken virtually verbatim from Matthews and Shackle 1972:205-6.

1:2 Hali's poetic persona and his mentors

Hali could be described as the poet of the Aligarh movement. His cultural background was the *sharif* milieu of the service gentry, whose position and aspirations in post-Mutiny colonial India were defended and articulated by the Aligarh movement (Lelyveld 1978:35-101). As noted above, Hali's father died when he was young, and because of his mother's insanity, he was raised by his older brother and sister (Hali 1964:282, Minault 1986:5). In this lack of a straightforward parental upbringing, Hali was also typical of those who were later to be closely involved in the Aligarh movement. David Lelyveld has emphasized that among both the older generation of the movement who grew up in the first half of the nineteenth century, and the first generation of Aligarh students in the second half of the century, there are relatively few cases of children brought up by their parents (Lelyveld 1978:39, 42)—and Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan was himself raised in the house of his maternal grandfather (cf. Shackle 1972). It is possible that this upbringing in unusual circumstances predisposed Hali and other leading figures of the movement to innovation.

In Hali's case, though, the lack of parental rearing may also have been of some relevance to his later relationships with his mentors. There are three contenders for the position of Hali's mentor. One was the great poet of the classical tradition, Ghalib, with whom Hali had significant contact during his second sojourn in the Delhi area from 1861 onwards. It was during this period that Hali sent his poetic efforts to the poet for his corrections and criticisms. Hali relates how he would also question Ghalib about the poet's difficult Persian and Urdu verses (Hali 1964:283). However, Hali's relationship with the great poet was mediated through the aristocratic patron-connoisseur and lesser poet, Navab Mustafa Khan Shefta, with whom he was closely associated for about eight years as tutor to his son. Shefta's influence on the younger poet has been discussed by scholars; Hali himself testified to being influenced not just by Shefta's taste for classical verse, but also by his dislike of hyperbole and his attempt at a simplicity of style based on the depiction of events (Hali 1964:284). The third significant figure was the thinker and leader of the Aligarh movement, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), to whom Hali attributed the inspiration for the *Musaddas* (Hali 1964:284). Sir Sayyid's letter to Hali of 10 June 1879 on the poem (cf. p. 35 below) is a clear expression of what might be called the Aligarh ideology of art (Ahmad Khan 1924:166-7). In brief, this consisted of a distrust of hyperbole, and a preference for 'natural' poetry, that is poetry which embodied an aesthetic of realism, whether in its depiction of history or the external world. Sayyid Ahmad Khan is a significant presence in the First Introduction to the *Musaddas*, and it is worth remembering that in his letter he promised to publish the *Musaddas* in the Aligarh movement's journal, *Tahzīb ul akhlāq*.

One of the themes of Hali's First Introduction is the poet's search for an appropriate mentor, through whose nurturing and disciplining presence the poem might be mediated and offered to the reading public. The tensions in Hali's work can be illuminated—in part at least—in terms of how he filtered his

artistic persona through his poetic and intellectual mentors. For the two most significant of these figures, Ghalib and Sir Sayyid, he was to write the two important biographies noted above. The latter, the famous *Hayāt-e Jāved*, has been described as 'the most important single book that has been written on the Aligarh movement' (Lelyveld 1978:xiii).³ Hali's journey from Ghalib through Shefta to Sayyid Ahmad Khan can be seen in terms of a linear progression. On the face of it, his thinking seems to move from the classical poetic world of self-referential tropes, to a more muted poetry, and finally to a view of poetry as an instrument for moral and social uplift which rejected the classical poetic world. To a certain extent, this rejection of classical poetic praxis is developed in his *Muqaddama shi'r-o shā'iri* of 1893. It is for this reason that the *Muqaddama* is often cited as one of the first modern works of Urdu criticism (e.g. Minault 1986:13, Steele 1981:22); Schimmel goes so far as to describe Hali as the 'founder of literary criticism in Urdu' (Schimmel 1975:226).

It is probably closer to the truth, though, to view all three mentalities as simultaneously present (though in varying degrees) in Hali's work. Rather than seeing Sir Sayyid as displacing Ghalib in Hali's poetic affections, it is more useful to see both figures as representing the opposites of Hali's own dual poetic sensibility, with its roots both in the classical poetic world of pre-Mutiny Delhi, and in the progressive, forward-looking world of Muslim Aligarh in its British imperial setting (as suggested by Abdul Haq 1976:112, Steele 1981:16, and most fully by Pritchett 1994:43). As we shall see later on, something of these narrative structures of Hali's own life, a linear progression through stages, and a cyclical movement between polar opposites, was to be reproduced in the presentation of History itself in the *Musaddas*.

However, as so often with Hali's work, such oppositions can sometimes be more apparent than real. In this context, it is worth mentioning the poet's switch after the 1857 Rebellion from his earlier *takhallus* of Khasta 'the exhausted, the distressed, the heartbroken' to Hali 'the contemporary, the man of the present' (Steele 1981:7, Minault 1986:6). But this switch need not be seen in terms of a linear narrative alone. The First Introduction to the *Musaddas*, and the poem itself, abound in images of sickness, exhaustion, and heartbreak. These images reflect Hali's own bouts of illness which also serve as metaphors for the poor state of the Indian Muslim community's health. In fact, there are traces of both of Hali's artistic personas in the First Introduction and in the poem. It might be best to see both pen-names as having an equal purchase on his overall artistic persona, even after he had replaced the *takhallus* of 'Khasta' by that of 'Hali'. These apparent oppositions, far from remaining poles apart, blend into each other—and as we shall see later, this is another significant feature of his *Musaddas*.

³ C.W. Troll has described this work as 'the outstanding biography of Sayyid Ahmad Khan' (Troll 1978/79:3).

1:3 Distances and the negotiation of cultural worlds

Hali's upbringing without direct parental guidance is thus partly reflected in his search for a poetic persona through his mentors. Equally important is the way in which he negotiated different historical epochs and cultural worlds in his work, from the brilliant world of Ghalib's Delhi in pre-1857 India, to colonial Aligarh's ideals of dutiful service to the Muslim community. Whilst Hali's early education was an orthodox Muslim training in Persian and Arabic, he himself described how he never got the chance for a 'regular and continuing education'.⁴ This dissatisfaction led to him running away from his family home and his young wife—to whom he was married at the age of seventeen—to Delhi in 1854, then still an influential seat of Muslim learning and culture. This travelling between the provincial town of Panipat and the city of Delhi brings to the fore Hali's sense of his own provincial roots. Something of the provincial boy's sharp awareness of distant centres of political and cultural power comes across in the *Musaddas* itself, in which so many of the proper nouns signify place names resonant with historical power and glory. Equally revealing are Hali's own notes explaining the references to such place names in the poem. The very existence and style of these notes are evocative of a mentality unaccustomed to such power and glory, hence the need to explain and locate significant names. This might also be indicative of Hali's own position vis-à-vis the Aligarh group. Although in some ways he was typical of this small and exceptional group, in other ways he was not. His knowledge of English was limited, and his social antecedents could not compete with the impeccable genealogies of the likes of Sir Sayyid. Whilst this in turn enabled him to appeal to a wider audience (Smith 1985:37-8), it might also have prolonged a lingering feeling of his provincial status.

Hali's sense of his distance from centres of cultural and political power must have been considerably sharpened by the traumatic events of the 1857 uprising, which forced him to leave Delhi after his brief period of study there.⁵ It was as though he witnessed Delhi becoming a historical place name evocative of past glories in his own lifetime, a place name to join other equally inaccessible centres of the past which were to be evoked in the *Musaddas* as signifying the decline of Islamic civilization in the world (Abdul Haq 1976:108). However, Hali's willingness to travel from Panipat to Delhi for the sake of learning—which he did twice, returning to Delhi in the early 1860s after the Mutiny—apparently contrasted with his fellow Muslims' reluctance to undertake journeys. Given the role of migration and pilgrimage as among the affirming moments of Islamic faith, the unwillingness of Indian Muslims to travel was seen by Hali as a sign of the decline of the Muslim community in India. As we shall

⁴ Cited by Pritchett 1994:13. For a more general account, see Steele 1981:2-3, and for Hali's own account, see Hali 1964:282.

⁵ The fullest account in this context of 1857 and its aftermath is to be found in Pritchett 1994:16-30.

see below, the theme of migration and travel was to form one of the strands of the *Musaddas*.

A similar sense of distance from sources of cultural power can be found on another level in Hali's education, particularly in his attitudes to the Arab and Persian strands of classical Islamic culture. It seems that in matters of Arabic Hali was something of an autodidact. He describes how, during the period at Panipat after his first sojourn in Delhi, he wrote pieces of Arabic poetry and prose without the benefit of anyone's guidance (Hali 1964:283). From 1875 to 1887 he was to teach at the Anglo-Arabic College in Delhi, and in 1914, the last year of his life, an edition of his Arabic prose and verse appeared. The cultural significance of Arabic looms large in Hali's work. In the First Introduction to the *Musaddas*, he writes of how poetry was bequeathed to Muslims as part of the legacy of Arabs, for the purpose of awakening the community. This might be taken as indicative of Hali's shift away from the Persianate strands of Indian Islam, towards an Arab legacy increasingly defined as central. Such a shift was in keeping with the wider changes of perception occurring in the Indian Muslim community (Smith 1985:78).

However, as an '*ajami*', a 'barbarian' unable to speak Arabic as a native speaker, Hali was necessarily at one remove from the sacred language of Islam, and his proficiency in the language is anyway difficult to gauge. Furthermore, Hali's interest in Persian literature remained strong. This is evident not just from his *Muqaddama* of 1893, but also from his biography of the famous Persian poet Sadi, the *Hayat-e Sa'di* (1886). Both these works display a concern to return to models of classical Persian literature. Hali's attitude to Persianate Islamic culture was thus not one of rejection; rather, he drew on Persian to redefine appropriate models for Urdu literature to emulate. So Hali's negotiation of the Persianate and Arab strands of Indian Islam is only partly about the relationship between polar opposites. More accurately, his aim was to regenerate Urdu literature through contact with classical models drawn from both Arabic and Persian.

Nonetheless, one is still left with the distinct impression of Hali living at one remove from sources of influence. This sense of being at one remove is neatly encapsulated in Hali's translation of a book of geology from Arabic into Urdu, which had itself been originally translated from French.⁶ The case here of the translation of an already translated work on the relatively new Western science of geology—this amplifies Hali's description in 1964:285—is suggestive in relation to the *Musaddas*, where images of mining are used to illustrate the fulfilment of historical potential.⁷ The use of geological and industrial imagery, combined with the role of translation in mediating distant textual nodes of power, helps to give us a glimpse into the complexity of Hali's poetic sensibility and the strategic concerns of his work.

⁶ Cf. Hali 1964:285, also Saksena 1927:279. Neither give a date for this publication, although the former mentions that it was published by Punjab University 'during the time of Dr Leitner'.

⁷ These images are elucidated in detail below, in 3:2 and following.

The importance of translation, particularly of the texts of culturally or politically powerful languages, became especially evident during Hali's years at Lahore. The whole question of translation as involving processes of cultural negotiation, transference, and appropriation is a subject in its own right, which it would be difficult to deal with fully in this introduction.⁸ It is, however, important to point out here that while Hali could read and write Arabic and Persian, he knew little English, and so his relationship with it was more distant. During his time at the Government Book Depot in Lahore from 1870 to 1874, Hali's task in the department was to edit and amend textbooks which had been translated from English into Urdu. As a result, he became acquainted with a variety of work on English literature and criticism and European philosophy and science. Hali described how through this he developed a relationship with English literature, and how the prestige of Eastern literature, and especially Persian literature, declined 'in my heart' (Hali 1964:284). This relationship, at one remove and in a translated milieu, forms an important feature of the *Muqaddama*, where an attempt is made to re-present and reform Urdu literature partly in the light of critical formulations gleaned from English works. The question of Hali's references to English sources in the *Muqaddama* has been fully discussed elsewhere (Steele 1981, Pritchett 1994:145-54), and the style and nature of these references in the text is certainly a fascinating part of Hali's text on poetics. Elsewhere Hali mentioned how translations from English into Urdu, especially under the aegis of the Aligarh Scientific Institute and *Tahzib ul akhlāq*, transformed literary taste, with the result the status of Persian literature fell considerably, and 'the spirit of Western imaginings' was blown into Urdu literature (Hali 1890:2). However, it is important to note that Hali did not actually directly translate any works from English into Urdu; rather, as was mentioned above, he amended translations that had been made by others. English literature did not displace Persian and Arabic models in his poetics and his work generally. On the contrary, Hali's reformist poetics for Urdu literature drew on all three of the powerful linguistic presences in his life.⁹

1:4 Progress, morality and ruin

It was at Lahore during this four-year period that Hali participated in the famous *mushā'iras* or 'poetry gatherings' organized by Colonel Holroyd (Pritchett 1994:34-9). According to Hali, the purpose of these gatherings was to broaden the scope of 'Asiatic' poetry, by weaning it away from its preoccupation with love and turning it towards 'facts' and 'events' (Hali 1890:1). He wrote four masnavis for these gatherings—*Barkhārut* 'The rainy season',

Nishāt-e ummīd 'The delight of Hope', *Hubb-e vatan* 'Patriotism', and *Munāzara-e rahm-o insāf* 'Dialogue between Mercy and Justice'. The titles of these poems reflect the twin shibboleths of Hali's poetics, namely 'nature' and morality. It was also during his Lahore period that Hali wrote a work of moral fiction, *Majālis un nisā* 'Assemblies of women' (1874), which has been described as a 'reformist tract' that made 'an eloquent and engaging plea for women's education' (Minault 1986:12). The work was adopted as a textbook for girls' schools in the Punjab and United Provinces for decades (Minault 1986:12). The *Musaddas* was also adopted in the schools of the area, as recorded in Hali's Second Introduction to the poem. Indeed, Hali's poems for the new style *mushā'iras* prefigure the *Musaddas*, with its imagery drawn from natural cycles such as the ebb and flow of tides, and its high moral polemic. As Hali himself put it in his 1890 preface to a collection of his verse, 'I have laid the half-finished and impermanent foundations of a new style' (Hali 1890:4).

Hali's residence at Lahore was thus a crucial phase in his intellectual development. His close contact with the colonial state, and his participation in Holroyd's gatherings, may have deepened his preoccupation with progress and decline in world history. Hali's birthplace of Panipat was the location of three battles which determined the rise and fall of Muslim power in India, and thus accorded well with the central theme of the *Musaddas* itself, namely the rise and fall of Islamic civilization in world history. The poet's sense of the plenitude of the past may have been reinforced by his own family history, since his ancestors had served the Sultans of Delhi and then the Mughals, who had granted them modest properties in the town and its environs (Hali 1964:281-2, Minault 1986:4-5). Far from being abstract notions, decline and progress were of personal relevance to Hali's life. The contrast between the fallen state of the Indian Muslim community, and the increasingly confident and aggressive British colonial state of the second half of the nineteenth century, were concrete and immediate cases of decline and progress for the poet.

It is difficult to predict how Hali would have responded to the First World War, had he lived to see it through to the end. He died in December 1914, after having spent the last period of his life living on the stipend granted to him by the Nizam of Hyderabad in 1887. Hali did not live to see a Europe racked by bloody war and revolution, nor the increasing challenges to the British colonial state in post-War India. But it is unlikely that this would have altered the presentation of progress—i.e. European progress—in his work. As we shall discuss below, the notion of progress in the *Musaddas* is highly ambivalent. The aim of our introduction is to explore such ambivalences, thereby doing justice to the complexity of a literary text whose significance has remained relatively neglected. But—prior to a further elucidation of the themes of the poem—its complexity needs to be grasped in relation to the literary form of the *Musaddas*, and it is to this that we now turn our attention.

⁸ But see Steiner 1992, Gentzler 1993, and Bassnett 1993:92-159.

⁹ In some way, Hali's mediation of these three languages in his work reflects the larger processes surrounding the emergence of Urdu as a language in its own right in nineteenth century colonial India. For a discussion of these changing relationships between Urdu, Persian and English in this context, see Majeed 1995.