

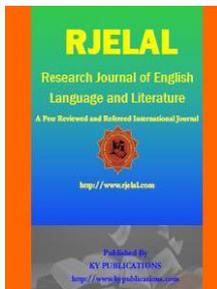


EXPERIMENTS IN FORM AND CONTENT: APPROXIMATING INDIAN PROGRESSIVE WRITING IN CONTEMPORARY LITERARY DISCOURSE

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ABSTRACT

Given the unprecedented intellectual and critical activity in the field of literary and cultural studies, theorists, creative writers and public intellectuals have grown conscious of the arbitrariness and fluidity of the ideological and epistemological structures at work in the theory industry. The form as well content of modern literary texts come under the influence of these structures or thought processes in one way or the other. In these literary and theoretical complexities, there is a possibility of exploring and re-reading the great oeuvre of Progressive Writings. This paper will study, how certain literary and ideological experiments employed by various Progressive writers are still as relevant as they were in late 1930's and early 1940's, when the movement was at its peak. Progressive writers' departure from the ponderous romantic and imaginative ebullience and formal and lexical intricacies of the nineteenth and early twentieth century poets and fiction writers and embracing a new pattern of both form and content are still very relevant and authentic issues in the field of literary studies. Though this writers' association disintegrated and finally demised after the Independence, the writers of this association had already invested an unparalleled effort to turn literature into a vehicle of social realism.

Keywords: Progressive Writing, Literature, Movement, Ideology, Criticism, Condition, Form and Content.

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INTRODUCTION

In his presidential address to the Progressive Writers' Movement's (PWM) first congress held in 1936, Munshi Premchand defined the objectives and the whole enterprise of the Movement as an omnium gatherum of intellectual efforts set to produce an oeuvre of literature, the high point of which would be the common man, the suppressed, or those who have been rendered voiceless by the harsh disciplinary mechanism of the imperial regime. Premchand maintained that the

literature will meet our demand which has thought, passion for freedom, beauty, a constructive spirit, the light of life's realities; that moves, creates a turmoil and turbulence, makes us restless, does not put us to sleep since it would be akin to death if we sleep more (Anwar). The objectives of the Movement, though the political turbulence of the time and the gathering storm of public discontent against the imperial rule intermittently occluded the Movement's march forward, were creatively devised to establish a powerful literary canon that

would not only check the hide-bound literary conventions that isolated literature from the actual lived condition of a human society, but also break free from these conventions to formulate a new discourse where human life in its varied forms in various situations should be the centrifugal force of the whole intellectual activity. The seeds of PWM were sown with the publication of *Angare* (Burning Embers), a collection of ten short stories by Sajjad Zahir, Rashid Jahan, Ahmed Ali and Mahmuduzzafar. Published in Lucknow in December 1932, the book was the “first ferocious attack on the society in modern literature. It was a declaration of war by the youth of the middle class against the prevailing social, political and religious institutions” (Mahmud). The stories of Sajjad Zahir and Ahmed Ali criticized the enslavement to bogus social and religious practices, the economic disparities and the shameful acquiescence in the imperial rule. Mahmuduzzafar and Rashid Jahan boldly talked about the powerlessness of the women folk in the social hierarchy and the religious dogmas that enslaved them to the demands of the male folk. Though the inflammatory and outrageous content of the book had to suffer rejections and denunciations everywhere, it still helped the formation of a group of authors, who later established an association in 1936 known as the All India Progressive Writer’s Association (AIPWA). The Association started evolving when the juggernaut of nationalism had charged the imagination of the masses and elites alike. Slowly and gradually the same imagination flowed into the realm of literature where it was taken up by Progressive Writers with a more intense, elaborate and realistic approach. Progressive writings, according to a famous communist and Urdu scholar Ralph Russell reflected empathy for the poor and the questioning of exiting customs as well as desire for liberation from foreign rule and indigenous elites (Russell 70). The movement did not begin as a violent departure from the tradition or a long cherished history of literary conventions, but aimed at removing certain outmoded and obscurantist trends that had distanced realism from these conventions. Since its inception, the Movement had unflinchingly worked

for the ‘reiteration of the values getting lost in modern commercial age, or distorted under the weight of the decaying social systems’ (Jafri). During 1930’s the major problems that degenerated, and in a way disintegrated Indian society included political subjection, extreme social backwardness, hunger, illiteracy and poverty.

It is not that the movement was created by a band of young hot-headed intellectuals who shared any specific ideology, but it was a spectrum of different shades of literary and political perspectives. On one side the movement’s iconic and prolific writer Premchand followed Gandhism staunchly, and on the other equally formidable voice of the Movement, Sajjad Zahir, profoundly supported the Marxist interpretations of history and human civilization. In between these two writers emerged various other shades including non-conformists like Hasrat Mohani, Abdul Haq, Sarojini Naidu, and Dr. Abid Hussain, but all of them collectively and positively worked for a single cause of the freedom of our nation and the glory of literature. Some of the prominent writers who passionately and zealously worked for the Progressive Writer’s Movement include Sajjad Zahir, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Sayyid Mutalabbi Faridabadi, Premchand, Saadat Hasan Manto, Ismat Chughtai, Ali Sardar Jafri, Ahmed Naseem Qasmi, Krishan Chander and Rajender Singh Bedi. Seemingly there was nothing wrong with the constitution and objectives of the Movement, but its reception among the social as well as political circles was not initially all that good. It had to face the public outrage for being radically experimental with both style and semantics as well the denunciations from the British government for generating a strong nationalist narrative. Though the Movement declined and disintegrated slowly after the Independence in 1947, its different experiments with form and content in literature continue to be apposite and stimulating with contemporary writers. Progressive writers, being well in touch with the recent developments in literary criticism and theory and cultural studies, experimented many new techniques in both fiction and poetry. The thematics of wine, beloved, landscape and extravagant aesthetics gave way to some broiling and sensitive political and

social issues of the time. Let's first focus on how progressive writers brought in several innovative changes in poetic form and content and how the same continues to be relevant today.

Poetry and Progressive Writer's Movement

It is a fact that the genre of poetry is not subject to any system where both form and content are permanently fixed for the same. Poetry is a language in which the poet can explore any aspect of the universe, of human existence, of corporeal, of celestial, of spiritual or any other aspect. It is in the words of Ali Sardar Jafri "an autonomous Republic of Letters within the sovereign State of Human Civilization, but not a law unto itself" (Jafri). Before the dawn of PWM on the literary scene, the bromidic and extravagant romantic and imaginative verse encased in a ponderous and ornate but esoteric language had already taken a heavy toll on the genre of poetry. Excluding some of the great poems of Allama Iqbal and Mirza Galib and some sporadic verses, much of the poetry in Urdu and other Indian languages was fantastic and implausible. With the emergence of the burgeoning verse of the Progressive poets like Faiz Ahmad Faiz (1911-1984), Asrar-ul-Haq Majaz (1911-1955), Majrooh Sultanpuri (1919-2000), and Moin Ahsan Jazbi (1912-2005), both the technique and expression in poetry underwent a massive change. The poetic form was disimprisoned from the earlier technical intricacies and the fetters of consistent patterns of meter and rhyme which was sometimes violently forced on verse only to make it look more artificial. This departure from tradition does not mean Progressive poetry lacked formal charm. It has its own flow and aesthetic value. Following the Ezra Pound dictum 'make it new', the Progressive poets boldly experimented in 'free verse' and 'dramatic poetry'. Similarly, the imaginative and fanciful affluence wasted on clichéd and irrelevant issues like the tresses of beloved, the separation from beloved, the imaginative glasses of wine etc., were overturned by many relevant socio- political and cultural issues. Ali Sardar Jafri writes in this connection:

The Progressive Movement widened the horizon of poetry; liberated it from the classical cliché, and added fresh modern

imagery structure to the poem; used the rhyme scheme with fresh vigour and introduced and developed new forms like free verse, dramatic and allegorical poems, with experiments in meters; gave it an ideological content and used it as a weapon in the freedom struggle of India; denounced decadence and cynicism, yet discovered in this attitude also an element of protest against existing conditions; enriched the treasury of poetic diction by using ordinary and common words which the older classical poets had banished from the realm of poetry, and thus came closer to the people. (Jafri)

With radical experiments in poetic form, progressive poets also modified the content aspect of poetry. The ecstasy and disillusionment born out of the socio-political turmoil became the kernel of poetry. Poets altered the connotations of old terms and allusions and loaded them with fresh content according to the temper of the times. The progressive poet Makhdoom Mohiuddin's (1908-1969) following two lines highlight this shift:

Kohe-e-gam aur giran aur giran aur giran
Gamzado teshe ko chamkao ke kuch raat
kate.

(The mountain of sorrow becomes heavier
and heavier O comrades of sorrow, take
up your shining axes to cut the rocks of the
night) (Jafri)

In old classical poetry the term 'teshe' (axe) stood for an instrument of suicide and now it was the symbol of the triumphant working class.

In the overall oeuvre of progressive poetry, the contribution of Faiz Ahmed Faiz stands at the top. Faiz wrote in both prose and verse to "denounce obstruction at home and to champion progressive causes abroad" (Kiernan 24). His poems, couched in pure literary idiom were coloured by "socialist feeling, for socialism was the new revelation that young idealists could invoke to exorcise communal rancours" (23). In his poetry Faiz carefully appropriated the teachings of Marx, Hegel and Engels, who in their writings have emphatically "urged everyone to be empathetic

in understanding the problems faced by the labourers" (Bashir). In the following lines of his famous poem "Bol" (Speak) Faiz addresses the downtrodden (labourer):

Bol, ke lab azad hain tere: Bol, zaban ab tak teri ha, Tera sutwan jism ha tera Bol, ke jan ab tak teri ha.

(Speak, for your lips are free:

Speak, your tongue is still your own; This straight body still is yours- Speak, your life still your own) (Kiernan 87)

The following lines are equally replete with the emotion for the oppressed:

Jab kabhi bikta hai bazaar main mazdur ka gosht, Shahrahon pe gharibon ka lahu behta hai.

Ag-si sine main rah-rahke ubalti ha, na puchh! Apne dil par mujhe qabu hi nahin rahta hai.

(When labourers' flesh is sold in chaffering streets, Or pavements run with poor men's blood, a flame That lurks inside me blazes up beyond All power of questioning; do not ask its name).(74)

A host of other poets like Majaz, Ahmed Naseem Qasmi, Amrita Pritam, Hasrat Mohani, Kaifi Azmi, Sardar Jafri etc. followed in the footsteps of Faiz. Much of their poetry analyzed the "contemporary social relations in terms of Marxist concepts like economic determinism and class struggle" (Bashir). In Jamal Ali Bashir's opinion they changed the perception of reading poetry and created an "entirely new form of consciousness" and added a new style of writing Indian literature, a style that made evident "deep and grave realities about life and problems faced by common people", in a language rich in "aesthetic beauty and sensitivity to human feelings and conditions" (Bashir).

Such adventures in thought and technique also enjoy a certain degree of acceptance in contemporary literary criticism and theory. Both are against the totalization or fixation of any trend in both prose and poetry. Contemporary poets and novelists enjoy a fair degree of liberty with both the selection of content and narrative technique. Progressive poetry came very close to Charles

Olson's critical assessment of the formal aspect of poetry. In his celebrated essay 'Projective Verse' Olson called for poetry, where "field composition resisted the closed form of mainstream poetry. Field composition was a poetics of improvisation and spontaneity, rather than using worn-out, inherited forms" (Woods 85). This trend-setting tradition in poetry did not fade away from the literary scene with the demise of its originators, but it continues to be relevant today. Their poetic form is still a reliable and appropriate form to deal with the condition of modern India. Contemporary Indian poets like A.K. Ramanujan, Arun Kolatkar, Amit Chaudhri, Amol Redij, Bibhu Padhi, C.P. Surendran, Gieve Patel, Jayanti Mahapatra, Keki Daruwalla, Nandini Sahu and many more continue the tradition of Progressive poets in both thought and style.

Fiction, Ideology and Progressive Movement

In the field of fiction, Progressive writers produced exemplary short fiction, whereas the trend of writing full length novels came to a sudden pause. The genre of short story became a more convenient tool for Progressive writers to express their discontent at the burgeoning political radicalism and social inequalities. Mehr Afshan Farooqi, an Assistant Professor of South Asian Literature at the University of Virginia, writes in the Introduction to her book *The Oxford India Anthology of Modern Urdu Literature*:

In my opinion, the disappearance of novel form in Urdu has much to do with the Progressive-Marxist culture as well as the location of the movement in a space and time where shorter narrative form was the ideal vehicle for conveying the message of social liberalism that was the role their ideology assigned to literature. (Farooqi XXVI)

Like their contemporary poets, the progressive fiction writers used literature as a weapon in the battle for socio-political change. What interested them more was the faithful portrayal of the prostitutes, labourers, and the domestic servants. In most of the progressive works "delineation of character gave way to the plot which generally moved in a linear fashion" (Farooqi).

Most of the progressive writers had travelled different parts of the world; some of them having studied in England. Feeling inspired by the earth-shaking theories of Marx, Hegel and Engels, and by the writings of Dickens and Thackeray in England, Stendhal and Flaubert in France, and Gogol, Pushkin, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky in Russia, Progressive writers incorporated many new ideas, styles and techniques in Indian literature. They adopted Marxism as the most powerful tool to analyze the structure of modern society. They thought that “reality is the product of social actions and they believed in realism and, therefore, believed that art cannot be divorced from class struggles” (Malik). *Angare* was the first such book to fashion literature on socialist or Marxist ideology. Dubbed as inflammatory in nature as having “hurt the religious susceptibilities of a section of the community”, this collection of short stories was banned by the United Provinces state government in India (Madhu Singh). Apart from radically experimenting with the writing style, the book dealt with issues like “class antagonisms in the then Indian society”, “individual self-respect of every man”, and also conveyed the message that “man is the creator of his destiny and he is capable of utilizing nature for his own benefit” (Bashir). *London ki Ek Raat* (A Night in London) by Sajjad Zahir is another seminal progressive work. This novella marks the complete break with the fiction writing tradition. It did not embarrass the readers with its content less, but with its style more. Written under the profound influence of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, *London ki Ek Raat* was an experiment in fiction writing that adopted a “variety of avant garde European styles and techniques” (e.g. stream of consciousness, interior monologue) and was also the first writing to “display the ideologies and aspirations of Indian youth in the political context of India” (Singh). The novella depicted the anger of the young men who studied in London and knew its repressive policies in India. During the heyday of Indian nationalism, London had become a “hot bed of radical anti-colonial activity” (Ranasinha 33).

Other eminent progressive fiction writers who are still enthusiastically read include Ismat Chughtai, Manto, Bedi, Krishan Chander, Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand and Ahmed Ali. Inspired by Soviet Communism, Russian revolution and international Marxism, these writers established a unique tradition of Indian literature, which has the power to survive through generations to come. Avoiding the art for art’s sake mania, Premchand’s novel *Godan* and short stories, and Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable* and *The Coolie* lay bare the entrails of the diverse Indian society. Manto and Ismat Chughtai are the most controversial progressive writers till date, for they experimented too much with both the form and content. They fearlessly deconstructed the age-old social taboos and brought the themes like human sexuality, intimacy, desire and obscenity in the domain of literature. They were influenced by the “works of Freud [which] prompted them to write about human sexuality more openly than others of the time” (Bashir). In 1941, the short stories *Bu* (Odor) by Manto and *Lihaaf* (Quilt) by Ismat Chughtai were charged in Lahore high court for practicing the cult of obscene in literature. Though rejected for their socialist and leftist leanings, and obscene and salacious content in their own time, both these writers are indispensably relevant in modern day India. The extraordinary readership of the stories like *Toba tek Singh*, *Khol Do* and *Tehri Lakir* (The Crooked Line) is enough evidence to prove their relevance today.

Krishan Chander was a prolific Progressive writer. He churned novel after novel. His first celebrated novel *Shikst* (Defeat), 1943, presented the “misery, loneliness, and dehumanization that results from urban expansion and industrialization” (Farooqi). Rajinder Singh Bedi and Ahmed Ali shared the same ideological affinities as Premchand and Mulk Raj Anand. Bedi’s short story collections *Grehan* (The Eclipse), *Daan-o-Daam* (The Catch), featuring his one of the most celebrated story “*Garam Coat*” (Warm Coat) and the novel *Ek Chadar Maili Si*, translated into English as “I Take This Woman” are thematically very close to Premchand’s writings. Similarly, avoiding any linguistic and thematic intricacies, Ahmad Ali’s

stories *Hamari Gali* and *Mera Kamra* (My Room) dealt with the relevant themes like feudalism, capitalism and imperialism. A number of other writers belong to this movement. Its influence on modern Indian literature is immense. It opened up a new way of writing literature and assessing human experience, which has inspired many great contemporary poets and novelists. Modern Indian historians, theorists and public intellectuals like Romila Thapar, Irfan Habib, Gyatri Spivak, Ajaz Ahmad and Homi Bhaba also think and write on the similar Progressive pattern.

Conclusion

Progressive fiction consciously takes up an ideological positioning where it deconstructs other ideologies based on an illusory set of beliefs, or false consciousness or a used up process of production of meaning. Like postmodern novel, which has become a reaction "against the liberal humanist suppression of the historical, political, material, and social values" of art and life, Progressive fiction also represents the 'non-centric' or marginalized by subverting the mainstream aesthetic and political ideologies (Hutcheon 178). The way Mulk Raj Anand, Sajjad Zahir, Bedi, Krishan Chander and Ismat Chughtai criticized the received notions of art and society in 1930's and 40's, the same way Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbows* contested the disciplinary and forceful "entrapment by celebrating unpatterned, resistant reactions to history, systems, and codes" in 1960's and 70's (Woods 67). In this way, both the formal and thematic experiments employed by Progressive writers have not become clichéd. Their experiments are still very relevant. Be it Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies*, or Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, the progressive element continues to dominate Indian Literature.

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