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Abdul Ahad Azad as a Revolutionary and an Egalitarian Poet: A Study of his *Revolution* and *The River*

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The present paper is an attempt to study Abdul Ahad Azad as a revolutionary and an egalitarian poet of Kashmiri literature. The paper will make an endeavour to show Azad as a small brook arising from Mahjoor's stream of poetry in the sense that Azad's poetry like that of Mahjoor is an action urging poetry, but Azad though taking inspiration from his immediate predecessor, Mahjoor widely differs from him and attains an individuality of his own by moving a step forward from Mahjoor's simple action urging patriotism to express his ardent views as a forerunner of an egalitarian, socialist and classless society. He was a crusader of inequality. This kind of strain was unprecedented in the entire corpus of Kashmiri poetry. Where Mahjoor talked and urged for the unity of Kashmiris, Azad talks of the unity and equality of the entire human race irrespective of any caste, creed, nationality or religion. He was a poet of man, a poet of human values. He laments on the shackles in which he finds man caught up all around, being crushed under the weight of oppression and exploitation. This study will however be made with special reference to two of his most celebrated poems, *Revolution* and *The River*.

Introduction

Abdul Ahad Azad (1903-1948) was a well known Kashmiri poet of the twentieth century. He was one of the pioneers of modernist movement and the first revolutionary socialist poet of Kashmiri literature. He belongs to the famous Dar tribe of Kashmir. He was one of the most explicitly political and nationalist poet of the Kashmiri literature. But Azad's nationalist attitude is tempered by his socialism. Azad was a Marxist and also wrote one of the most influential literary histories of Kashmir in Urdu language, *Kashmiri Zabaan aur Shaeri* (1984). He was also closely associated with the progressive strand of the Kashmir nationalist movement in 1940.

Discussion

The process of bringing Kashmiri poetry in touch with what may be described as the modern sensibility was to all intents and purposes set in by Ghulam Ahmad Mahjoor, and following in his footsteps was his younger contemporary, Abdul Ahad Azad. Many literary critics of Kashmiri literature like Avtar Krishan Rehbar (1997), Trilokinath Raina (2002) and Naaji Munawwar (1998) unanimously estimate the two poets (Mahjoor and Azad) as harbingers of a sort of renaissance in Kashmiri poetry.

Jayalal Kaul (1968) reports, that Mahjoor was the first Kashmiri poet who sensitively realized and proudly valued the richness of Kashmir's cultural past and its glorious history as an independent kingdom. Drawing inspiration from the great Urdu-Persian poet, Iqbal, Mahjoor for the first time initiated in Kashmiri language patriotic and action-urging poetry. In one of his most popular poems, *Walo Haa Baagwaanoo*, (Come, O Gardener!) Mahjoor impels his compatriots to shun off their slavish stupor and to struggle with compassion and fervour for a new, free and prosperous Kashmir:

Mahjoor (1984:214):

Come O gardener! Bring forth the grandeur of a new spring
 Create will that will make the buds bloom and the nightingale dance
 In vain are you crying inside the cage?
 Who will set you free, O nightingale?
 You yourself solve the difficulties of your life.

It will not be erroneous, perhaps, to suggest that at first sight Abdul Ahad Azad looks like a tiny current arising from the stream of Mahjoor's poetry. In fact, much of his earlier poetry bears the colour and tone of Mahjoor's romantic songs both in context and style. However, notwithstanding his indebtedness to his elder contemporary, Azad successively attained an estimable individuality as a Kashmiri poet.

According to Prem Nath Ganju (1987) and Chaman Laal Chaman (1979) two distinctive qualities which make Azad prominent as a perceptive intellectual and a powerful creative talent are: first, enjoying inspiration from Mahjoor and Iqbal both, he treated of the action-urging thought of his poems as the most dominant features of his radically untraditional poetry, and allowed that feature to take the central position amidst all his later poetic outpourings; and secondly, proceeding a few steps forward from Mahjoor's pure and simple patriotism, Azad expresses not only his egalitarian views and his ardent belief in an all-embracing equality of men but also stresses the need for a socialistic, classless and universal pattern of human society. As such he established himself as the very first Kashmiri poet representing overwhelmingly three tendencies, namely, action urging, egalitarianism and social equality, synthesizing all the three into a single dominant and distinctive note of his later poetic utterance.

In one of his representative short poem entitled *Revolution*, Azad defines life as the book of change and revolution, according to him, what gives meaning to life is motion; life is not the name of being static, the real essence of life is restlessness, and what does restlessness mean — it means revolution. It is revolution that gave birth to faith and religion. Revolutions did away with doubts, intuitions and misconceptions and brought to our light firm faith. The wisdom and truth that revolutions brought in has put an end to prophesy, soothsaying and prophethood and has given reason the upper hand:

Azad (1987:161):

What is life but the book of Change?
 Change — more change — and yet more change.
 Flux is the living reality
 And change the meaning of flux.
 It is change that brought forth religion,
 Banished doubt, revealed true faith
 Now reason has banished prophecy

Only poetry and trade remain.

Azad urges men to make use of reason that revolution has brought in and shun prejudices, ignorance and bias and proceed forward to open the gates of the garden of love; the garden of mutual, sympathetic love that one human being feels for his other fellow human being. He makes people aware of how their own sights have become an obstacle, a veil, preventing people to observe the reality before them:

Azad (1987:162):

Advance! Open the gates of the garden of love;

Your own sight is veiling your eyes.

Azad further makes people aware of the utter lawlessness that prevails in the world around, it is a time where slaughter of innocent men is made permissible and is treated as righteous. Everything seems to be out of proportion and topsy-turvy, it is an age where the jackal of mean breed is found relishing on the lion's blood. Whereas, for the innocent people, who become the victim of cruel and unjust authority it is one and the same thing whether one or the other person holds the reins, for power corrupts all:

Azad (1987:162):

To the sheep and the goat, the butcher and the wolf

Are alike — one slays, the other drains blood.

The law has sanctioned human slaughter;

Mean jackals are feasting on lions' blood.

Keeping all the above things in mind, Azad laments on the condition of men where life has been reduced to mere compulsion, serfdom, slavery, helplessness and shame. They are caught up in these mind forged manacles. Azad urges men to rip off these obstructions, these curtains, lift up the veil of heart's ambitions and bring forth revolution upon revolution:

Azad (1987:162):

O Compulsion! Slavery! Subjugation!

O restless, Helplessness heart, O Shame!

Mind confused, reason aghast, soul distraught!

To live a slavish life: a terrible torment!

Rend the veil! Uncover the seething, bubbling heart!

Change! Change! Bring a new change!

However, the most famous and appreciable poem of Azad is *The River*. According to Raina (2002) and Shafi Shauq (1992), prior to Major and Azad, the bulk of Kashmiri poetry treated of either the romantic emotions of human love or experience of mystic nature. That kind of poetry did not reveal any remarkable realization of the importance of issues like patriotism, nor did it present any action-urging message concerning the social, economic or political problems of the Kashmiri people hence, making the majority of the themes unrealistic and idealist.

Taking cognizance of its untraditional and modern thinking of Azad, it will be no exaggeration to describe his above mentioned poem (*The River*) as an epoch making poem in Kashmiri. Continuing his hatred for inertia and love for action Azad talks of how his unfulfilled wishes get fulfilled in his yearnings, restlessness and tumults, he gets pleasure not by staying at one place but roaming from places to place in search of new destinations. He, like a river, moves fearlessly day and night through all kind of surfaces, be it soft or rocky, be it ditches or crevices. His attitude towards the bat and the nightingale is the same, as he is not in need of any flattery nor is he eager for childish frolics. Neither does any one's flattery nor anyone's depreciation affect him, he knows the purpose for which he has come into existence and come what may he will act to achieve that purpose without fearing anything. He is not subservient to any authority so that they may keep him in their good books. He is not in favour of turning back, for him proceeding forward is the only rule of life. For him pleasure lies in convulsions, agitations, revolutions, change and earthquakes:

Azad (1987:74):

My yearnings find expression

In bubbles, commotion, tumult;

It is in wandering to distant goals

That I find the music of life.

I move on day and night

Through rocks, ravines and ditches;

I do not pause for raise,

I do not pause for play;

I am at home with the bats

As I am with the bulbuls.

Flattery cannot tickle me

Nor disparagement make me falter;

A purpose brought me here

And I live to see it through;

I am not fettered, as men are'

By the fear of disapprobation.

Forever faring forward,

I know no turning back;

...

My delight is in sweet eddies,
Revolutions and earthquakes.

Giving vent to his egalitarian and Marxist bent of mind Azad, speaking via the symbol of river, celebrates the way in which the river deflates and outwits the pride of the riverbank and the high ground by cutting their edges and shattering them. It brings the hard and harsh obstructions to ground level by flowing over and above their tops, and in doing so it does not shiver nor does it lose its heart when confronted by oppositions or disturbances no matter of what magnitude:

Azad (1987:75):

I cleave the sides of the banks and bunds,
And level the high ground with the low;
Leaping over proud, strong obstructions,
I scare their wits away.
I do not seek a fight.
But meeting it, I do not quail.

Celebrating the lovers, working class and the labourers as its heroes the river welcomes them by covering its banks with green velvet sheets for those who have fallen in love recently and for the labourers and the working class who have come there after a long days toil to sit, rest and experience tranquility. Be it a wealthy man, a king, a Hindu or a Muslim, the river does not wait for any one. Whoever it is let them come, sit, enjoy, bathe, drink and fill his cups with its waters. For the river the sovereign or the courtier are just a beggar amongst beggars who come to river for all the things mentioned above. The river stating its mission in a more direct manner states that coming across highs and lows, banks and obstructions the river loses control over itself and becomes restless, it pines for unity and equality everywhere and it is because of this that it suffers and strives so much. It is because of the injustice and inequality that it sees around that in spite of being water it feels as if it is a burning charcoal of mulberry wood:

Azad (1987:77):

I spread green velvet carpets
On my banks for friends,
For tired limbs of hard-worked labour
And for lovers of pleasure;
They come and sit and bathe and drink
In freedom and in joy.
But I do not wait on any one!
Hindus, Muslims, Men of wealth,
Rajas, Nawabs come and rest,
Seeking balm for bruised spirits.

But to me they are all suppliants
Among the many who come to me.

Looking at the high and the low,
I get besides myself with ire
I seek equality and unity,
That is why I am in such rush and race;
And, in spite of being water
I find myself in burning coal.

The River which stands for action, egalitarianism and social equality knows very well how to deal with different types of people. It bestows its love equally amongst the ill-tempered as well as the good tempered. Be it a rose bush, or a poisonous plant each has its own individual good or bad nature. It plays sweet notes while among the roses and the nightingales, (that is while being in the company of the good people), whereas amongst the duds and the stone hearted it beats on the drum and makes loud revolutionary pronouncements. Its resounding sounds contain within it softness as well as harshness equally. On the one hand, strong, unjust and powerful people shiver while facing its anger, while on the other hand, it feeds the rose bushes (the good, the poor, the down trodden) with milk like a maid servant. It displays much softness and sympathy while amongst the beautiful and carries through its streams water to the thirsty Iris:

Azad (1987:82):

Big mountains know my might,
For I split their hearts asunder;
But with gentle caressing hands I bathe
The bodies of beautiful girls.
My flowing stream and waves and eddies
Are bursting with truth and love.

I play soft tunes on my *santoor*
To flowers and the bulbuls,
But the thunder of the drums of revolution
Is my music for hard-hearted rocks;
My gurgling sound is sweet indeed,
But it hides a potent fire.

Puppets of time, however great,

Quail at the wrath of my waves;
But I play the nurse to flower shrubs
And feed them with my milk;
To the cedar, pine and cypress
I've given my life without stint.

I love to be gentle, I love to play
In the midst of loveliness;
I carry drink to the thirsty Iris.

In fact, it was this bend of Azad's poetry which established him as the leading inspiration promoting the historic progressive movement in Kashmir. It was none but he who sang the very first songs in praise of Karl Marx and the Russian proletarian revolution and gloriously advocated the cause of the working class. Eulogizing Karl Marx he says:

Azad (1987:99):

His creed: a mirror reflecting Nature;
Gold purified in fire;
The blooming spring of all springs,
Essence of reason and flush of affection,
The revealing sun facing the obscurities go life.

Further, singing in praise of the proletarian revolution of Russia, Azad says:

Azad (1987:84):

When the surging yearnings cut a passage through,
The affluent master toppled down to dust
And the down-trodden labourer appeared on the throne.
Comrade of the worried and the disturbed;
Affectionate friend of the helpless and the unemployed,
Placed the crown of authority on the head of the powerless,
And bestowed the dignity of office on the workers.

Action-urging passion in place of listlessness and languor, restlessness instead of inaction, tumult in place of frigidity, fervour, flutter in place of death-like numbness the recurrent and dominant themes of Azad's later poetry. In order to live a meaningful life, according to Azad, one needs to keep on rushing like a roaring river striking against rocky obstructions and leveling all high and low. The one loved message of Azad's poetry of this tone and colour is the Quranic expression: *Kulla Shaiun Hayye* (All things are Alive; All things are vibrant with Life).

Conclusion

In the light of the above discussion, it can be concluded that going through Azad's poetry one does find a great influence of poets like Allama Iqbal and Mahjoor on him. His poetry falls in the same action-urging category as the above two. Comparing him with his immediate predecessor, Mahjoor, he moves ahead of him and displays a bigger heart and vision by not just being concerned with the unity of Kashmiris against the tyrant laws and authority, but urged for the unity and equality of the entire human race in order to bring about an egalitarian, socialist, classless society. Thus, becoming the poet of man, and not of any nation, creed or religion. He talks of revolution, change and flux as being the only reality of life. He not only through the symbol of the river talks about his socialist ideas but also shows how a person on such a mission of egalitarianism should not get afraid of any opposition or hurdle but just proceed forward fearlessly. He talks of how a person like a crusader should be a terror for the unjust, cruel and powerful authority and on the other hand be a comfort and a ray of hope for the needy, the helpless the down trodden. All said and done, Azad will always be remembered for his rejuvenating and revolutionary poems, and also for his egalitarian cause, a verse of his would be pertinent of mention here:

Azad (1987 105):

O! Adorner of religious values, you have opted for puritanic religiosity
And I have elected for my own faith
You resign yourself completely to the steadfast faith in God
And my aim is to propitiate Man.

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