

## **Modernism and the Progressive Movement in Urdu Literature**

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### **Abstract**

*The paper aims at exploring salient features of Progressive Movement in Urdu literature and taking into account points of comparison with Modernism in Europe. The paper explores evolution of Progressive Movement over the years and traces influence of European Modernism on it.*

**Thesis statement:** The Progressive Movement in Urdu literature was tremendously influenced by European Modernism.

### **1. Modernism**

The term Modernism is used to distinguish the literature that developed out of the First World War. Modernism deliberately broke with Western traditions of certainty. It came into being as they were collapsing. It challenged all the old modes. Important precursors of Modernism were Nietzsche, Freud and Marx who in different degrees rejected certainties in religion, philosophy, psychology and politics. They came to distrust the stability and order offered in earlier literary works. It broke with literary conventions. Like any new movement it rebelled against the old. It was nihilistic and tended to believe in its own self sufficiency. "Readers were now asked to look into themselves, to establish their real connections with the world and to ignore the rules of religion and society. Modernism wants therefore to break the old connections, because it believes that these are artificial and exploitative..." (Smith, P.xxi) The people are provoked to think and decide for themselves. They are expected to reconstruct their moralities.

The concern for social welfare continued. "Every period has its dominant religion and hope...and "socialism" in a vague and undefined sense was the hope of the early twentieth century." (Smith xiii) Marxism suffered an eclipse after the Second World War. Though it still played an important role in the hands of the writers yet some writers like Orwell were disillusioned even before the war.

Thousands in England were homeless. The old values were challenged by a cry for justice because of increasing social awareness. The agricultural depression of 1870-1902 heralded the collapse of values that rural community embodied. (*The New Pelican Guide*, 17) Writers like Yeats, Forster and Galsworthy looked the country house back upon nostalgically.

Out of the nineteenth century realism developed modernism with more complex connotations of the word 'realism'. Nineteenth century Realism was a part of Romanticism though commonly it was taken as a reaction against it. Realism began in England with George Eliot, in America with Howells and in Europe with Balzac. (*Guide to Modern World Literature*, P.xv) It aimed at objectivity, psychological representation of characters and a search for truth in a matter of fact way. In many countries, especially in France, term naturalism was used to narrow down realism by producing fiction guided by principles of scientific determinism. They believed in Darwinian notion of man as an animal and life as a bloody struggle. Naturalism dealt more consciously with the working classes than Realism ever did.

The development of Imperial experience strikes the note of moral upheaval and confusion. The Imperialists, despite their claims to be torch bearers of civilization, were exploiting the colonies for raw materials and income. The First World War punctured this balloon of British complacency and exposed the hollowness of fake promises of the Empire. The hatred of Indians ensued thirtyyear long struggle until on 14<sup>th</sup> August, 1947 India and Pakistan became independent states within the Commonwealth. George Orwell and E. M. Forster, with socialist concerns, fervently wrote against the political subjugation for it aroused strong feelings of guilt.

## **2. Modernism & Emergence of Progressive Movement in Urdu literature:**

Modernism, in Urdu literature, emerged after Iqbal though it had its roots in the works of writers writing in the perspective of 1857 'ghadar'. It started with Sir Syed, Hali and Shibli as they were the first to consciously relate literature with the society. Gradually, it divided into several movements like The Progressive Movement, Cultural movement and Neo Progressive Movement (Agha 385). Modernism in any part of the world is the outcome of the vacuum prevalent in the society. It takes birth at the moment when the old values become meaningless and new possibilities emerge. Old literary forms cannot cope with these new possibilities. Emotionally, man clings to his past though intellectually he wants to cope with the changing world.

The post 1857 writers were involved in political activities. They were using literature as a tool to serve their political interests. They wrote a literature of protest against the foreign government empowered with fatal weapons. Russian revolution of 1917, in which the masses overthrew Imperialism and Capitalism, was welcomed as a ray of hope for all the oppressed regions. They were rational and realistic in their approach towards life. They developed the public taste for philosophy, science and other fields of knowledge. Sir Syed introduced not only new concepts but also added new vocabulary into Urdu language. Hali stressed patriotism and urged for social progress. His 'Musaddas' revolutionized Urdu poetry. "It addressed only Muslims, this being its only flaw"(Jaffery 108). It worked as an example for progressive writers as it depicted the deterioration of elite class and backwardness of the society as a whole. Shibli too contributed through his writings to the political awakening of the people. He laid the foundation of agitational poetry and developed the art of biography and criticism. (ibid 110)

The post 1857 writers are pioneers of democratic literature and criticism that precedes the involvement of progressive writers in the freedom movement. Many foreign writers like Nietzsche, Marx, Lenin, Darwin and Romi etc inspired new writers. Subject became more important than form. They conceived man as a crown of creation, capable of utilizing the natural objects to serve his interests. They strongly believed in the self-respect of every man. These concepts are the crux of progressive literature despite the fact that the progressive writers regarded these modernist writers regressive. They exercised a great influence on the progressive writers.

Europe was in crisis after the First World War. The old values collapsed and the new had not been yet been born. The awakening of labour class and farmers strengthened the freedom movement. Like politicians, writers were also left with no choice except to choose the path to revolution or to quit the scene. At this stage Prem Chand and Josh Malih Abadi chalked out the path for literature of protest or The Progressive Movement. They wrote about the oppressor and the oppressed. They depicted the problems of clerks, untouchables, middle and lower middle class illustrating their psychological state of mind, highlighting their suppressed desires, ignorance, narrow-mindedness, superstitious nature and their exploitation due to corruption prevalent in the society. Josh bitterly criticized the British government and encouraged the freedom movement. After 1916, the youngsters were greatly influenced by Marx's economic theory. In 1935, a party in Congress was established with the name Socialist Congress.

The time was ripe for The Progressive Movement. Fascism and the Second World War threatened the world. People were dying in Berlin. They were being butchered in Italy. Spain was being bombarded. In Asia, China and India were facing the tyranny of the colonizers. Germany declared that any writer who did not support fascism was a traitor. To secure the freedom of literature Gorky, Thomas Mann and other writers arranged an International Conference in 1935 in Paris, in which writers from all over the world participated. No Indian writer participated in it. Only Sajjad Zaheer and Raj Anand attended it. In London, they had already organized the association of progressive writers with the help of Indian students. The first manifesto of this movement was set in London. Here is an extract from the manifesto of the movement: "...we believe that the new literature of India must deal with the basic problems of our existence today \_ the problems of hunger and poverty, social backwardness and political subjection."(Sadiq 191-192)

Before The Progressive Movement, Urdu literature was indifferent to social problems. It was mostly sentimental, imaginative and detached from social reality. The Progressive Movement brought literature close to concrete facts. Dr. Saleem Akhter writes: "...Never before was Urdu literature proved a vehicle for some movement nor was creativity considered a tool to profess some manifesto..."(Akhter 221). The progressive writers were ideologically closer to Communism so these writers wrote against Capitalism. They presented Communism as a solution to the economic and social exploitation of common man.

Prem Chand was the pioneer of literature of revolt. He, in his writings, exposed the British politics and protested against industrialists due to their maltreatment of the labourers. The British government burned his first collection of short stories, *Soze Watan*. He resigned from the government job and lived the rest of his life as a writer. In the first conference of the movement, he professed:

The literature which can stand the test of the time is the one which is thought provoking, fond of freedom, artistically appealing, capable of spiritual purgation, reflective of facts of life, capable of moving, evolving and transforming the people by enlightening them and making them more aware instead of lulling them to sleep which is no better than death. (Akhter 228)

The progressive writers like Krishan Chander, Ismat Cjughtai, Saadat Hassan Manto, Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi, Mirza Adeb, Aziz Ahmed and Mumtaz Mufti seem to integrate these principles in their works.

The first All-India Progressive Writers' Conference was held in Lucknow, in 1936. It was a turning point in the history of Urdu literature. Mr. Ahmed Ali, a professor in Allah-Abad University, said:

It is impossible to go back to the past or revive its atmosphere... The social reality of the past is not the social reality today! ...The poetry of Tagore as well as Iqbal, morbidly escapist, born of a desire to forget the reality, and despite its beauty is a dreamer's dream. (Sadiq 191-192)

The Progressive movement chose as central and essential principle to write on social problems and integrated it into its manifesto as the responsibility of literature to:

- a) Criticize irrational, useless and deteriorating social concepts and conventions.
- b) Lead the people to a new and better way of life.

The Progressive Movement emerged because of freedom movement against the British rulers. It was an anti-fascist movement. Later, it came under the influence of Communism. Literary movements and philosophies like Existentialism, Marxism, Modernism, realism etc also inspired this movement. It thrived despite the opposition of the regressive writers who clung to the past.

In 1939, the second conference of The Progressive Movement was held in Calcutta. The proof of the popularity of this movement was the representative works of Sajjad Zaheer, Krishan Chand, Rajinder Singh Bedi, Saadat Hassan Manto, Ismat Chughtai and Faiz Ahmed Faiz etc. They addressed the problems faced by farmers, women, labourers etc. They wanted freedom, open-mindedness, equality, justice and democracy to replace slavery, narrow mindedness, partiality, injustice and dictatorship. In short, theirs was a literature of protest.

As a protest to classical literature, they laid emphasis on the simplicity of language and style. They used colloquial diction to make common person understand what they wanted to say. They introduced new forms in Urdu literature and widened the scope of poetry by forming new conventions. They modified the art of criticism by emphasizing the analysis of social, political and historical perspective. It transformed this art into science. They dreamt of a humanitarian society free from class distinction.

### ***3. Influence of Modernism on Progressive writers***

Influence of Modernism is evident both on thematic and structural level in the works of Progressive writers. Dr. Gopi Chand Narang slightly differs with the above-mentioned view by saying that Modernism as a movement in Urdu literature reached its peak when it witnessed decline in Europe. He differentiates between The Progressive Movement and Modernism by saying that Modernism was against Marxist views. He admits though, that progressive writers like Manto, Bedi and Ismat were modernists. The Progressive Movement stressed on the commitment but Modernism revolted against it. Thus, it put a limitation on literature by completely excluding the political discourse (Chandnarang 578-585). Other critics, though admitting certain differences, agree on the point that The Progressive Movement was a branch of Modernism like Cultural Movement. The Progressive literature is contemporary literature. The progressive writers like Faraz, Asghar Nadeem Saeed have been lately engaged in creative work.

The Progressive writers wrote on social problems caused by sexual deprivations, urbanization and industrialization. They used psychoanalysis to explore the mind of their protagonists and to describe the real motives of their actions. Many novels from other languages especially Russian were translated into Urdu. The progressive writers showed excellence in the art of drawing sketches of personalities.

In fact, they revolutionized this art in the same way as Strachey revolutionized the art of biography, writing *Eminent Victorians*, in England. Ismat's *Dozakh* and Manto's *Ganje Frishte* are the best examples. Sajjad Zaheer and Ahmed Basheer are also important names in this respect.

The governing class establishes its ideas in morals and art; but in the course of time it disintegrates and its place is taken by a new elite, springing from the common people, which brings with it a more virile conception of life and art. (Murray, 670)

This extract highlights not only a change in social order but also the similarity between the social context of Modernism and The Progressive Movement. There was a shift of authority from aristocracy to middle class in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In the later thirties, history witnessed another change, a shift from governing middle class to a new class of intellectuals and educated people. This change had already been witnessed by Europe in 1890s.

The history of our middle class has inevitably followed the same line that it did in England. ...Then came the disintegration of the Victorian ideal with Bennet, Wells, Shaw and finally World War I which smashed up the old ideals in one common ruin. We stood in thirties where England had stood in 1890s. (Sadiq 195)

In the past, here as well as in Europe, men of letters were patronized but the time, in which Modernism and The Progressive Movement emerged, was the time of the capitalistic society. Indian society was facing problems of class distinction and foreign rule. The middle class was simultaneously regressive and progressive. It could not withstand the change from the old to the new values.

The middle class did not allow even covert reference to sex in literature. It viewed even the slightest mention of sex as indecent. The influence of the new psychological theories on the modern thought, interest in the subconscious i.e. in instincts and desires made it essential to explore the hitherto hidden or suppressed side of human nature. The middle class admitted the presence of problems caused by sexual frustration and perversion but never dared to mention or illustrate it. It refused to move or evolve. This led the modern writers to protest against inertia, hypocrisy, complacency and narrow-mindedness of this class. The source of this protest lay in the inspiration from the Western thought, especially the works of Maupassant, Ibsen, Shaw, Lawrence, Joyce, Darwin, Freud and Jung. Lawrence highlighted the sanctity of Eros, "force of life," raising it to the status of religion though in this struggle he was banned and thus socially 'crucified'. This influence invoked the freedom of literature to explore the realm of sex. In Urdu literature, we have parallel examples like Manto, Ismat Chughtai, Aziz Ahmed, Rajinder Singh Bedi etc. Modern writers refused to believe that sex was something to be ashamed of; something to be enjoyed secretly avoiding the Argus-eyed society. It was allowed to play its role in the life of the individual. Sexual preoccupations became the subject of the writings. The change from agricultural to urban style of life pricked the balloon of pretensions exposing the fact that morality is a matter of economic conveniences and sanctions.

The obsession with sexual matters caused great disturbance in the orthodox circles. While the modern writers did not confuse ethics with aesthetics, the orthodox writers, critics and journalists tried to moralize everything they wrote. Declaring them to be satanic, they ignored the intention of these writers to expose the unravelled expanse of human psyche and their efforts to cure the diseased society. The modern writers did not make evil attractive. On the contrary, by bringing into light the coarse aspects of life they urged the society to purgate itself not by concealing the facts but by finding out the solutions.

...In this respect the attitude of Western people is not a whit different from ours. They too condemn contemporary works dealing with sex in a frank manner...and yet admire The Canterbury Tales, Ovid's The Art of Love, The Decameron etc." (ibid. PP.199-200)

This obsession with sex in modern literature can be considered a sort of defiance against the double standards of the society. It was used as one of the shock tactics to shake the readers out of their complacency. Like D.H.Lawrence in England, Saadat Hassan Manto and Ismat Chughtai in the subcontinent had to face trials for the so called pornography. Industrialization and the World Wars entirely changed the conditions in Europe. On the one side, wars left men with a sense of insecurity. Life became uncertain. On the other side, industrialization caused the feeling of loneliness, on social and psychological level, that threatened the very entity of man and institution of family.

Existentialism emerged as a separate school of thought. Sartre stressed the individual responsibility and concluded that man is condemned to be free. Manto, Ismat and Mufti have also talked ironically about the newly won freedom of man. Sartre's existentialism did not lead to meaninglessness and pessimism; instead it highlighted the importance of freedom of man and social justice. Therefore, he stressed on the need for commitment. Writing is commitment. This is the essential belief of the progressive writers too. He is committed to all those values that can improve the living conditions. Every writer expresses his commitments in his writings in a different way. In fact, commitment and conscience are the two sides of the same coin. This does not mean the production of propagandist literature as was one of the objections against the progressive literature.

Commitment to present reality, social reality is different from propagandist literature. Reality is all time evolving phenomenon. The present advancement in industry and technology is a multidimensional reality. It is both a blessing and a curse for humanity. Industrialization has changed this age into an era of consumerism. Man is an object. His attention is diverted from spiritual improvement to material pursuits. The modernist writers like Jean Rhys, Virginia Woolf and D.H.Lawrence in Europe and Ismat, Manto and Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi wrote on such issues. They probed into social evils and probed into the motives behind them. The writers like Sajjad Zaheer and Ahmed Ali were foreign qualified and they were greatly inspired by James Joyce. They followed his style and technique in their writings. They stressed realistic portrayal of facts in their works.

Short story is the most modern form of literature in the West. Urdu literature imbibed the art of writing short story from the West. Urdu short story underwent the influence of social realism and other literary movements and tendencies in the West. Their social realism was a reaction to the romantic works of Niaz Fatehpuri and Majnoon Gorakhpuri. At that time, Prof. Khwaja Manzoor Ahmed, Prof. M. Mujeeb, Sajjad Haider, Jaleel Qadwai, Hamid Ali Khan, Shahid Ahmed Dehlwi, Manto and many others translated the best works of French, English, Russian, Turkish and Bangali writers into Urdu. The works of Chekov, Maupassant, Tolstoy, Trignov, Gorky, Hardy, Shaw and Oscar Wilde influenced Urdu writers and readers. Maupassant and Chekov are considered to be the pioneers of modern short story. Maupassant reflected the reality of body while Chekhov of soul. Maupassant focused on concrete reality while Chekov presented abstract reality. They exercised great influence on Western as well as Urdu short story writers. We find glimpses of their style in the works of Bedi, Hayat-u-Allah Ansari, Hassan Askari and Ghulam Abbas. They wrote objectively yet sympathetically avoiding sentimentalism. They understood human nature, its complexity, versatility and multisidedness. Bedi followed Chekov's style and technique. Manto has been frequently compared with Maupassant and Lawrence. Maupassant depicted moral decline of French society so did Manto who presented the problems of the marginalized groups of the society like prostitutes, actresses and women who were forced to resort to sex business in a morally conservative society. This influence inspired Krishan Chander to do many experiments; almost every story was an innovation. Ahmed Ali followed the style of Kafka who believed in the reality beyond perception.(Sadiq 192)

Along with social and political problems they portrayed sexual problems. This became an obsession with Aziz Ahmed, Manto, Mumtaz Mufti and Ismat. They detested superficial values and sexual perversion of a socially respectable man. Like Lawrence, they strongly criticized irrational social and moral taboos and consequent pretentious behaviour. They used stream of consciousness technique to expose the hidden motives behind various actions. In using this technique Mumtaz Mufti, Manto and Ismat proved themselves skilful masters. Ahmed Ali tried symbolism and surrealism in his works while Manto and Aziz Ahmed experimented in expressionism in some of their stories. Hayat-u-Allah Ansari also used expressionism and symbolism in his stories like "Maa Beta" and "Shukarguzar Ankhen". These writers used psychoanalysis to explore the sub-conscious of their characters. Manto's "Farishta" and Aziz Ahmed's "Jhoota Khwab" are few examples to quote.

Like European female modernist writers, Urdu female writers also wrote about social and domestic problems. Rasheed Jehan wrote on the subject of women's freedom and her rights. Ismat has a unique place in presenting woman, her sexual development, the subsequent emotional upheaval and psychological state of mind. Hajra Masroor and Khadija Mastoor wrote following the path chalked out by Ismat. Virginia Woolf consciously influenced Qurrat-ul-Ain Haider.

The inspiration may not be a conscious one, but we can trace the points of comparison, and the facts of their life support it too. These writers experimented in surrealism and stream of consciousness. Prem Chand, following Tolstoy, not only presented social evils but also stressed on bringing about a change. He translated the works of Tolstoy. Gandhi Ji influenced him as well.

The works of Aziz Ahmed reflect naturalism and scientific realism of Emile Zola (Shirin 743). He records events taking characters from life and presents them as they are, following the natural sequence of events and time. He himself claims to have been greatly inspired by Aldous Huxley, an intellectual and a writer of allegories and fiction of ideas. Aziz Ahmed in his *Aur Basti nahi Yeh* presents alter egos of a split character and stresses on maintaining the balance as Huxley did in his works like *Point Counter Point* and *Genius and the Goddess*. (ibid 743) Intizar Hussain's novel *Chand Gehan* reminds us of Sartre's *Nausea*. His stories like "Kaia Kilp" and "Akhari Aadami" remind us of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*. (Qazalbash 290)

Sajjad Haider Yuldrum's translations of Turkish stories into Urdu proved to be starting point of Urdu short story. (ibid 290) Munshi Prem Chand also started his literary career as a translator. He translated English works of Rabindernath Tagore into Urdu. Niaz Fateh Puri's contribution to Urdu literature can not be ignored. He translated Arabic stories and Arabic translations of English and continental stories into Urdu. He translated works of Chekov, Voltaire, stories of Sherlock Holmes etc. Terth Ram Puri translated English detective stories thus introducing a new mode of writing into Urdu literature. (ibid. P.292) Other translators include Zaffar Ali Khan, Sir Abdul Qadir, Ahmed Shuja and many others. Literary journals gave special importance to translated work. Writers like Akhter Hussain Rai Puri, Majnoon Gorakhpuri and Manzoor Hussain translated English, French, German and Russian short stories. Majnoon used themes of Hardy in his stories. (ibid. 294) Pessimism, emotionalism and seriousness of tone remind us of Hardy. Works of Rajinder Singh Bedi, Hayat-u-Allah Ansari and Ghulam Abbas remind us of Chekov. Maupassant, Chekov, Maugham and Lawrence had great influence on Urdu literature.

Saadat Hassan Manto took special interest in translating Russian works especially those of Tolstoy, Chekov and Gorky. Autobiographies of Gorki and Chekov were also translated. English writers, whose works were translated included Goldsmith, Hardy, Dickens, Oscar Wilde, Katherine Mansfield, H.G. Wells, Galsworthy, Kipling, Virginia Woolf, Russell, Maugham and O'Henry.

Besides, Chinese, Iranian, Egyptian, Japanese works were also translated. Western naturalists like Flaubert and Zola inspired Prem Chand and many progressive writers. (ibid 294). Others exercising great influence on Urdu literature were Karl Marx and Freud. *Angare* displayed influence of Marxism, French naturalists and Freud. Waqar Azeem said :

Many things influenced Urdu short story e.g. psychoanalysis used by Proust and Joyce; stream of consciousness and impressionism; life and its spirit all embodied in Eros as viewed by Lawrence; Virginia's protest against materialistic life; Huxley's philosophical and logical analysis of life; Freud's stress on the role of sex, conscious and subconscious; Chekov's humane and sympathetic treatment of his themes; Economic theory of Karl Marx all brought about a revolution in Urdu short story. It broadened the scope of this art adding variety to it. (53-54)

The Progressive Movement introduced Marxist criticism. It was an important landmark in the history of Urdu literature. It formed the only school of criticism because all other attempts in criticism were individualistic. Critics like Majnoon Gorakhpuri, Ehtasham Hussain and Aziz Ahmed discovered new aspects of the contemporary literature. They freed criticism from meaningless discussions and author-centered approach and instead gave it a new scientific approach.

Literature is representation of life itself. Like Maxim Gorky, Prem Chand defined literature as a critique of life (Majeed144). It is a teacher and a guide. Munshi Prem Chand in his address to the first conference of The Progressive Movement said:

...the role of the literature is to advocate the rights of the deprived and plead the case of the oppressed individuals, groups and nations. Only, realism can cure society of its evils. (166)

The purpose of art is not only to provide emotional relief or catharsis but to lead to action. A writer is an idealist striving to create an ideal world to live in. The aesthetic view of beauty is also to be modified and beauty is to be defined anew. It is not only to be traced in palaces, princes and castles but also in the ruins and slums. Beauty is to be traced in a sweating mother of clothless children working in the fields; an old beggar dying for want of bread; in the eyes of a child crying for the loss of coin for which he had worked the whole day long. Ismat Chughtai's "Do Hath", Krishan Chander's "Kalu Bhangi" and Bedi's "Eik meli si Chadar" are only few examples. A writer is not nostalgically looking to the past but reflecting the present reality and predicting the future.

#### 4. Conclusion

English and European literature influenced Urdu literature in two ways; directly and indirectly i.e. through translation. Translation of various works not only introduced short story into Urdu literature but also helped it develop as a successful and mature genre of literature. These translations broadened the vision of Urdu writers by introducing new techniques of writing being practiced by their foreign contemporaries all over the world. The Urdu story owes a lot to the translators and translations of English, American, European, Russian and Arabic fiction. These translations not only helped Urdu writers but also made a common Urdu reader more aware person of the world around him. Progress and development made in industrial, agricultural, philosophical, psychological, social and political fields was also transferred through these translations. Due to this influence, Urdu fiction emerged with the spirit to experiment in Existentialism, Marxism, Psychoanalysis, Impressionism, Expressionism, and Surrealism. These translations helped Urdu fiction, especially short story to flourish. Maupassant, Chekov, Maughum, Lawrence had special influence on Urdu literature.

Following the line of modernists, the progressive writers highlighted the external tyrannical conditions and torture faced by inner self but they were not pessimistic about man's destiny. They hoped to bring about a change through constant struggle. They presented man as a dignified and a significant creature, capable of proving himself in a capitalistic and feudal society that is exploiting him. They believed in Marxist maxim of changing the world. *Encyclopedia of Indian Literature* states, "...modernist writers have sought to correct the progressive overemphasis on society, the family and the group, and have focused ...on the individual self, and its own interior and introspective processes."(Datta 2740)

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