

Obituary

Dr Muhammad Ali Siddiqui (1938-2013)

The death of Dr Muhammad Ali Siddiqui, on 9 January 2013, not only came as a great shock to his friends and colleagues but also caused a great loss to the world of literature and scholarship. Over the years he had become an integral part of the literary and cultural scene of Pakistan. In fact the impact of his writings was felt even beyond Pakistan particularly among the Urdu speaking communities of India, Europe and the Americas. Literary criticism was his main domain and it is here that he made his name and earned a respectable place along with other prominent literary critics of the subcontinent. Dr Siddiqui was a staunch progressive, a position he upheld all along.

Dr Siddiqui was a well-read person whose interests were spread beyond pure literature to cover different social sciences. He was also a prolific writer, a fact corroborated by the huge mass of work he has left behind him. It includes seventeen books, hundreds of literary articles, reviews on innumerable books, and literary columns written over a period of more than forty years under the pen name of 'Ariel' in the dailies *Dawn* and *Business Recorder*. In the beginning of his literary career he also wrote English poems and during the long course of his association with newspapers wrote on paintings and other arts as well.

In 1976 Dr Siddiqui's first book came out under the title of *Tawazun* in which he pronounced his literary philosophy by saying that he regarded literary criticism as a part of social philosophy. He believed in the social responsibilities of literature and denounced those who professed the idea of literature for the sake of literature. To Dr Siddiqui, literature is closely linked with society and writers have the great responsibility to not only portray in their work the realities of their society but also to take the society ahead by enhancing the social consciousness of their readers. He was a firm believer in the evolutionary character of the universe and thought that literature should also contribute to the process of change and evolution.

As a committed writer, Dr Siddiqui was quite alive to the literary debates of his times, and never shied away from contributing to them. In fact he was one of the most active progressive writers who took on those who tried to come up with ideas, which could in any way either challenge the progressive discourse or inculcate visions which could harm the progressive growth of society. In the 1960s he responded to the challenge of modernism as depicted in the writings of certain modernists. In the decade and so before his death he was in the forefront of those who tried to expose the hidden political agenda of post modernism and its connection with the imperialistic global designs. Way back in the 1960s and 1970s, Dr Siddiqui stood against the advocates of the prose poem. Though he was swift and upfront in taking on his detractors yet he was not so rigid as to refuse to make alterations in his position either during the course of a debate or on reflection afterwards. This attitude earned him respect from even those who were vehemently criticized by him at one point of time. Hence one sees that an advocate of modernism, Itfikhhar Jalib, a proponent of prose poems, Qamar Jameel, et al., were all quite respectful towards him at the end of the day.

Dr Siddiqui's books *Tawazun* and *Croce ki Sarguzasht* (translation) won the Pakistan Writers Guild Award. His books on literature were of two types. *Tawazun*, *Nishanat*, *Mazameen*, *Jihat* and *Nikaat* comprised diverse literary articles while *Talash-e-Iqbal*, *Josh Malih Abadi ek Mutalea*, *Sir Syed Ahmed Khan aur Jiddat Pasandi*, *Ghalib aur Aaj ka Shaoor* and *Faiz: Dard aur Darman ka Shair* are thematic in nature and dealt with their particular subjects. During his association with Quaid-i-Azam Academy he reproduced some of the old books with additions and amendments. In the late 1980s, he brought out with a small group of close associates, *Irtiqa*, a unique journal of science, social sciences and literature. He remained in its editorial board up until he breathed his last.

Born on 8 March 1938 in Amroha, Dr Siddiqui migrated to Pakistan with his family after partition. Here, he started his struggle and passed through some very difficult phases in his life. He worked in different departments and spent some time with a theatre company too. He continued his education and eventually did his Masters in English literature. Later, when he joined Pakistan Study Centre, he completed his Ph.D in Pakistan Studies on a topic related to Urdu literature.

In the early 1960s, he began writing in newspapers on literary themes. For few years he also served in the British Information Service, Karachi. Thereafter, he took to journalism and worked in daily *Hurriyat* as assistant editor, and *Pakistan and Gulf Economist* while continuing his regular literary column in *Dawn*.

In the middle of 1980s, a major shift came in his career when he joined Pakistan Study Centre, University of Karachi, as a Lecturer. Soon he became Assistant Professor and towards his retirement, became Associate Professor. During this period he also moved to Quaid-i-Azam Academy as its Director and served there for six years. He returned to Pakistan Study Centre before retirement after which he joined Hamdard University as the Dean, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. After this, he moved to The Institute of Business and Technology (BIZTEK). He retired from BIZTEK only few months before his death.

His literary pursuits also took Dr Siddiqui to different parts of the world. He was invited by foreign universities and the literary organizations of different countries. He was a regular visitor to the Middle Eastern countries where he was held in high esteem by the literary bodies of the South Asian expatriates.

Dr Siddiqui's whole life was marked by continuous personal struggle. His life became all the more respectable because despite all the sufferings and the struggles that he underwent, his relationship with literature and his commitment with a progressive and enlightened vision of literature never showed any sign of weakness. He was a member of the Editorial Board of *Pakistan Perspectives* for which he contributed his pieces as well as reviewed the articles received from our contributors. He will be remembered by *Pakistan Perspectives* and all of us at Pakistan Study Centre for all times to come.

Pakistan Study Centre
University of Karachi

Syed Jaffar Ahmed