

Notes

More Than Ever Before

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If in our particular historic political spectra, 'progressivism' is a euphemism for the worldwide movement of the left, it was born because humanity needed and it will last because the world needs it today more than ever before.

It is not first time that we are feeling concerned about the fate of progressive literature. Its imminent death is announced every now and then. Ever since I remember, inquisitive interviewers have been asking me the reasons for 'the failure of progressive literature'. Perhaps this alone suffices to establish its continuous and for some, irritatingly alive presence worldwide. Like Marxism, the movement for progressive literature has had more concerned detractors than propagators who are never tire of announcing the final death/failure/, defeat of the movement. How surprising that like some ancient phoenix, it rises alive and well from its very ashes.

What do we exactly mean by the 'failure' of a movement? If we mean the failure to achieve the aims and ideals of the movement in society, every single religion in the world has 'failed' much more spectacularly than the much-maligned progressive movement in literature. Not withstanding great religious, and perhaps even greater prophets, innumerable saints and martyrs crossing forbidding mountains and oceans to spread the good word, of holy wars spanning several centuries, of magnificent mosques, temples and churches that are the glory of civilization and the pride of the respective adherents of these various creeds, of great music and hymns, composed, written and sung all over the world since pre-history for religious aims, the mass of humanity on planet earth has never in history or prehistory followed the straight and narrow path of righteous living and high thinking. It has not given up cheating thieving, lust and fornication, nor has it desisted from spilling the blood of the innocent. Yet we hardly question the continuous presence of religions or enquire into the reasons of this continuing phenomenon. We know that religions are there because people want

them to be there. Perhaps they emanate from a secrete source in the human heart that, despite all evidence to the contrary, craves for righteous living and high thinking.

Progressivism or, left leaning literature belongs to the realms of 'idea' (hence ideological). Somewhere it too has its roots in the irrational. Its source lies much deeper than all the reasons given by its adherents to validate it. Its bedrock is really desire and dreams something very ephemeral and unsubstantial.

And yet we may never doubt its realness. While the world around us today is not plodding but racing on an incomprehensible course and a totally unpredictable fate, while we watch the crumbling down of all moral value systems that we had come to take for granted in the postcolonial era, while pictures of Abu Gharib cease to shock and outrage our benumbed senses sooner than we thought was possible, if we care to investigate, we find strange signs and symptoms. An international organization, Poets Against War will tell you that their editors have reviewed more than 20,000 poems and are unable to publish them all because they keep pouring in every day. The website of this organization was created in 2003, when in response to the invitation of the first lady of the United States of America to poets to visit the White House, 15000 poems of protest were written and collected with in four days. A collection of these poems was presented to several Congressmen. Indeed the poems did not alter the course of events. Perhaps we could conclude that the poems failed.

What is it that socially engaged literature sets out to achieve. Or for that matter literature. What is its aim and its source? Like other art forms, its purpose and bedrock is shrouded in mystery. It is one of the most intriguing aspect of human existence that humankind, on planet earth besides eating, protecting its physical existence and procreating also composed songs and began to tell each other all kinds of stories. Have men and women done so? What did they expect to gain from this strange activity? Perhaps the shortest and most precise definition of literature could be that it interprets life in all its myriad of aspects, encompassing love and fear longing and aspiration of the human heart. One of the values that remain intact in human history, despite constant violation, is the striving for justice. It was neither born with Karl Marx nor has disappeared with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. You can find its vibrant_expression in the most ancient literature including books of great religions. The concept of *Ram Raj* in India has always been the embodiment of social justice in the consciousness of common men and women. The prototype tales of Mesopotamia, Central Asia and Africa paint a hero who brings down the unjust tyrant ruler, and point out acts

of tyranny and injustice. The poet of Urdu, Sauda bemoaned the pitiable condition of the common folks in India of his time, Nazeer Akbarabadi, unabashedly proclaimed that

*Kia chand kia sitarey falak par tumhain dikhey
Yaro hamain tau sab nazar aati hain rotian*

And Munshi Premchand narrated to us the story of Hori. When Hori is breathing his last on a busy street, the Pundits presents on the scene loudly recommend Godaan. His wife pulls four anas from his pocket. 'this is what he has' she says, 'this is all the wordly possession of this man's life a life of endless toil, starvation and humiliation. This is his Godaan'.

Much of progressive literature would very much change in content when there are no more Horis in the towns and villages of our subcontinent. They have not disappeared. They are proliferating, you would meet one right out of this hall and you don't even have to look hard. Rather perhaps you would have to look away, because their presence is highly annoying to some.

In the context of our subcontinent, progressive literature has also meant a secular approach in the interpretation of events and human behavior. It has been abhorred by certain sections because it did not cater to communal expirations. It did not celebrate the empires of Hindu or Muslim rulers. It did not target different religious communities and glorify their real or imagined magnificent past and failed to satisfy the inner craving of the disposed masses to hang on to glory while they had nothing to eat and were routinely insulted by higher classes. This kind of literature has been written, indeed at one level it has received massive popularity, and yet on a different level, is supposed to possess far greater psychological depth. The lives of the poor are not as bad as you paint, they say, and the rich also suffer. What about the sufferings of the rich? The rich and the powerful also suffer, they say. A rich man may die with tears rolling down his cheeks because he never got true love....! But you have no sympathy for them! You don't think they are even human. At their suffering you only smirk! (But so did Shakespeare. I don't think anyone has praised him for a sympathetic treatment of Lady Macbeth).

And then there is the half a century old subcontinental politics. There the progressives are caught in the balancing act. They are furiously questioned about the commissions and omissions in their stories and poetry. What about the horrible things that the Muslim invaders had done to the hapless Hindus? They are asked. How they disgraced us and deprived us of our honour forever unless we do something about it now? What about the lowering of our mustaches and noses? About the

indisputable superiority of Hinduism over all other religions, past or present? Why don't you write about it?

Across the border the same questions are asked in a different setting. What about millions of Muslims killed by the infidels in the days of the partition? What about the glory of Islam? And even greater glory of the Muslim empires? About the cunningness of the Hindus? What about exposing that just to spite us innocent Muslims these Hindus have become better educated? What about their poking their disgusting nose in our affairs in East Pakistan while we slew millions of our own brethren to bring them to the right path and for their own good? What about Kashmir?

Progressive writers do not write about Kashmir. And when they do, they still fail to please their detractors in their respective countries. Somehow they miss the point and began to write the opposite of what is required. Rubbing their eyes, they begin to see compassion, love and beauty in the enemy. Parmishir Singh, in a story by Ahmed Nadeem Quasmi, of the same title, dies of gunshots on the borders of Pakistan and India trying to deliver a Muslim child to his own people and in *Gaddar*, a novel by Krishan Chandar, a Hindu refugee plodding his way to India from Pakistan discovers a chopped- off arm lying by a bush, lifts it and begins to wonder if it belonged to a Muslim or a Hindu body, finally deciding that it was just a human arm with a hand at its end.

Progressive writers have been termed ghaddars. In the past, many of them in my country have spent long years in prisons or exile. This includes the best writers of all the languages of my country: Faiz Ahmed Faiz of Urdu, Shaikh Ayaz of Sindhi, Meer Gul Khan Naseer of Baluchi and Ajmal Khatak of Pashtu. And here I recount only the most prominent writers. There were so many more.

Kase na mand ki deegar ba tegh-e naz kushi

Magar ki Zinda Kuni Khalq ra w baz Kushi

This, however, does not mean that the progressive made no mistakes. Being part of the cultural activities of a political party, time and again, overzealous bureaucrats have sought to impose ideological restrictions on writers. In Russia, the fate of great writers like Anna Akhmatva and Pasternak are well known. In India and Pakistan writers like Manto, Asmat and Qural-ul-ain Haider were nearly black- listed by PWA. On the other hand, writer of minor talents were praised to high heaven. Let me here tell you that in Pakistan, I tried in vain for years to join any socialist political party. They were all embarrassed by my poems and were unwilling to count me among their ranks. It was only in India that the CPM treated me as one of their own writers, organizing several tours for me and inviting me to their literary events. Are they really so broad

minded, I still wonder, because they really do not claim Kamla Das and Arundhati Roy as one of them. Perhaps the reason for this exceptionally good treatment was simply that they do not understand Urdu, most of these wonderful and lovely people being from Bengal or Kerala. Well, in those desolate days of exile, I counted that as sheer good luck and never probed the matter deeper.

I think the progressive writers movement needs to get rid of certain prejudices. Indeed, it is true that primarily, it is all about social justice and championing the cause of the under-dog, but within this – age old system that prevails in the world, human creativity has produced marvels. It does not make sense to consider all that does not directly relate to class struggle as antagonistic to the movement. The Taj Mahal was indeed constructed by a king yet it is lovely beyond description. Similarly the great religious classics, like the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* should be compulsory reading for progressive writers of the subcontinent to appreciate the genius of the Indian sages. We should proceed with the clear understanding that desire for justice is not the sole prerogative of the party members. In one way or the other it has remained in the human heart since times immemorial. How can we claim to hold the highest ideals of humanity if we fail to appreciate human creativity, the creative use of language, and the pondering over the universe, the creator, the human soul, the complex struggle between good and evil in the human heart.

Despite certain weaknesses, the accusation that the progressive writers movement suffered from slogan mongering is untrue and malafide. During the last century, the literacy landscape was dominated by writers like Nazim Hikmat, Sartre, Paul Nizan and Pablo Neruda who did not only produce progressive literature of the highest quality but led revolutionary lives. In our subcontinent, it will be difficult to find writers better than Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Munshi Prem Chand, or Qazi Nazim ul Islam to mention just a few. The novel by Sajjad Zaheer, General Secretary of PWA, *London ki aik raat*, so elusive and enigmatic is one of the best examples of good progressive literature. Incidentally, Sajjad Zaheer, while he was in prison in Pakistan, also wrote an excellent commentary on the works of the great Sufi poet Hafiz Shirazi. Later it was Sajjad Zaheer, who introduced the form of prose poetry in Urdu literature, published under the title, *Pighalta Neelam*, while the so called modernist anti-progressives looked on in amazement.

This was followed by writers like Krishan Chand and Manto, Shaikh Ayaz from Sindh, Gul Khan Naseer from Balochistan, and Ajmal Khatak and Qalandar Momand from Pashtun speaking peoples of the Frontier province. More recently, Marquise, a self – confessed Marxist

writer, changed the entire literacy landscape, by his powerful magic realism and set new trends. Is the work of another Nobel Prize winning writer, Najeeb Mahfouz, not socially engaged and shall we not count it as progressive? He has passionately written about the suffering poor people of his country and the antics of the ruling classes. True, he has criticized the political parties that claim to be leftist, but we have to understand that the criticism of political parties is not tantamount to the betrayal of the cause. That indeed would be a very narrow view and would lead to an inaccurate assessment of the literary scene.

In recent time, because of the worthy efforts of two progressive literary journals, *Zahn-jadeed* and *Naya Varaq*, being brought out from India, and Pakistani literary magazines, *Aaj*, *Irtaqa* and *Dunayazad*, that publish translations from Hindi and other Indian languages in every issue, a fulsome picture of modern Indian literature has reached Pakistani readers. In the works of these Indian writers we can see the maturing and blossoming of the progressive writers movement, it is difficult to name all because there are so many of them, but just to give examples, in the poetry of Manglesh Dabral and Abbar Rabbi, in the celebrated novel by Vibhoti Narayan Rai, *Shehr main Curfew*, in the fiction of Uday Parkash, in the works of Maha Shivita Devi from Bangal, in the stories of Asghar Vajahat, in the unforgettable novel by Abid Shurti from Gujrat, *Katha vachic Ram Asrey ki Kahani*, in the works of the Marathi writer Dia Pawa and in the excellent novel by Alka Saraogo, *Kali Katha brasata Bypass*, one comes across intensely socially engaged literature of exceptional depth and complexity. It is world class literature and progressive without a doubt as it champions the cause of the dispossessed and stand up for religious minorities.

So the progressive writers movement is alive and well. These writers may or may not be aligned to a political party but the essence of their literature is progressive and I think we should learn to respect their independent thinking as progressive writers and acknowledge their great contribution to the cause of the PWA.

But lest we forget socialism, let me here add, that the present chaos in the world hardly denies the need of creating a better order, social as well as economic. If at all, it seems that the predictions in the communist manifesto are now unfolding before our very own eyes. More than ever before, there is a crying need for creating a better social order. Let me here quote a well known personality, who, in the last paragraph of his article had written:

I am convinced that there is only one way to eliminate these grave evils, namely through the establishment of a socialist economy.

Idealistic claptrap, will you say? Well this person should have some claim to scientific thinking. His name was Albert Einstein.