

The Progressive Writers Movement in Pakistan: Literary Innovation and Politics of Social Reform

Wajid Ali Bhatti

wajidali3711@gmail.com

PhD Scholar, Department of Pakistan Studies, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Pakistan

Dr. Robina Yasmin

Associate Professor, Chairperson, Department of Pakistan Studies, The Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Pakistan

Corresponding Author: Wajid Ali Bhatti wajidali3711@gmail.com

Received: 22-10-2025

Revised: 08-11-2025

Accepted: 22-11-2025

Published: 07-12-2025

ABSTRACT

The progressive movement has always been measured a radical movement in Pakistan. While a protuberant part of the progressive movement was the chapter of social reforms and progress. Progressive literary facilities which have played a vital role in community progress are always overlooked. The most significant offerings of the Progressive Writers Movement to Urdu literature in the indo Pakistan was that it absorbed on social difficulties and reforms. These issues were seldom deliberated so extremely in Urdu literature earlier. The fresh kind of literature that arose from the Progressive Movement presentations that Urdu writers had happening giving consideration to real social problems. These included the oppression of labours and growers by capitalists and feudal lords who strengthened British imperial rule, the side-lining of women in South Asian society, and the limitations of outdated family systems. The Progressive Movement also extended the space of Urdu poetry. It autonomous poetry from old, out-dated banalities and presented modern concepts, images, and constructions. Poets used rhyme in new and active ways. A look at the history of the movement displays that it went over many changes. In Pakistan, it was enfeebled because of political and philosophical reasons. However, its influence to Urdu prose and literature cannot be deprived of. The constant misuse of labours, minorities, and women today shows that history has not done and that class fight still happens.

Keywords: *Progressive Writers, Social Reforms, Urdu Literature, Working Class of Pakistan, Political Awareness*

INTRODUCTION

Progressive Movement based on communalist or leftist faiths' in India then Pakistan. While reviewing progressive movement and their fight for the rights of marginalize segment of society. Then are many kinds of question rose, what was the back ground and goals of this movements. Who are their prominent members and writers? What kind of politics of reform they adopted, What types of challenges they have to face in Pakistan just after creation of Pakistan? Why they failed in Pakistan and what's the status of leftist in Pakistan? There are some questions which tried to talk in this research paper. The hypothesis of this study is that Progressive writer's movement lead a literary movement tendency in subcontinent then in Pakistan. Their confrontation was in contradiction of the capitalism and the government policies through literature and political means. This radical school of believed make a new trend in Pakistan and increase the voice in favour of marginal segment of society.

Historical Background

The idea of confrontation in Urdu literature appeared after Allama Iqbal though it had its origins in the works of writers writing in the viewpoint of revolt of 1857. It ongoing with Sir Syed, Hali and Shibli as they were the first to deliberately relate literature with the social subjects. Slowly, it alienated into several activities like The Progressive Movement, Cultural movement and Neo Progressive Movement (Wazee, 1982). The post 1857 writers were complicated in political actions. They were using literature as a instrument to serve their political benefits. They wrote a literature of objection against the foreign government authorised with fatal arms. Russian revolution of 1917, in which the crowds overthrew Imperialism and Capitalism, was greeted as a ray of hope for all the worried regions (Jaffery, 1956). They were normal and realistic in their method towards life. They established the community perception for philosophy, science and other arenas of knowledge. Sir Syed introduced not only new thoughts but also additional new terminology into Urdu language. Hali strained patriotism and insisted for social progress. His “Musaddas” revolutionized Urdu poetry. It functioned as an example for progressive writers as it portrayed the weakening of elite class and backwardness of the society as a whole. Shibli too donated through his writings to the political arising of the people. He placed the basis of agitation poetry and established the art of life and criticism (Wazeer, 1982).

Towards Resistant Literature

The post 1857 writers were creators of society-oriented and realistic literature and criticism that leads the participation of progressive writers in the freedom movement. Many foreign writers like Nietzsche, Marx, Lenin, Darwin and Romietc stimulated new writers. Subject became more significant than form. They considered man as a crown of formation, capable of utilizing the usual objects to serve his interests. They powerfully thought in the self-respect of every man. These ideas are the core of progressive literature notwithstanding the fact that the progressive writers regarded these modernist writers regressive. They applied a great influence on the progressive writers. Europe was in disaster after the First World War. The old values distorted and the new had not been yet been born. The arising of labour class and farmers reinforced the freedom movement. Like politicians, writers were also left with no choice except to select the track to revolution or to quit the scene. At this stage Prem Chand and Josh Malhi Abadi wrote out the path for literature of protest or The Progressive Movement. They inscribed about the oppressor and the oppressed. They portrayed the difficulties of clerks, untouchables, middle and lower middle class demonstrating their psychological state of mind, emphasising their suppressed desires, unawareness, narrow-mindedness, superstitious nature and their exploitation due to corruption dominant in the society (Javeed, 1989). Josh bitterly carped 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 recognised with the name Socialist Congress. The time was ripe for The Progressive Movement. Fascism and the Second World War endangered 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 oppression of the colonizers. Germany declared that any writer who did not support fascism was a traitor. To safe the freedom of literature Gorky, Thomas Mann and other writers settled an International Conference in 1935 in Paris, in which writers from all over the world contributed. No Indian writer participated in it. Only Sajjad Zaheer and Raj Anand joined 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 excerpt 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 difficulties of hunger and poverty, social backwardness and political subjection (Salik, 1993). Before The Progressive Movement, Urdu literature was unconcerned to social problems. It was mostly mawkish, imaginative and detached from social reality. The Progressive Movement transported literature close to real facts. The progressive writers were ideologically nearer to Communism so these writers wrote against Capitalism. They offered Communism as a solution to the economic and

social misuse of common man. Hence although the PWA was open to all who largely agreed with its manifesto which called for a new literature that lectured progressive ideas and focused on the issue of the poverty, deprived, and servitude of the Indian masses (Ali, 2015).

Progressive Writers met in 1936 in Lucknow just one year after the London meeting of Indian writers, the inspiring figure behindhand this organisation, were Dr Mulk Raj Anand, Dr Joshy Parshad, Permud Sen Gupta and Dr Deen Mohammed Taseer. Sajjad Zaheer had copied the account of its creation in his famous book 'Roshnaai'. It could be said that the Urdu writers were in the forefront but later on almost all the writers of Indian languages had their own organisations with the same goals and purposes: struggle against British imperialism for the liberalisation of India from the foreign yoke; struggle against the henchmen of imperialism, land for the tillers of the soil. The organisation regarded socialism as an economic structure, which could end misuse. Munshi Prem Chand, the great Urdu and later on Hindi writer inducted it (Malik, 2016).

Some Prominent Progressive Writers

Molvi Abdul Haq, Chiragh Hasan Hasrat, Abdul Majeed Salik, Maulana Hasrat Mohani, Josh Malihabadi, Professor Ahmed Ali, Dr Akhtar Hussian Raipur, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Professor Majnooh Gorakhpuri, Rabindranath Tagore, Dr Rasheed Jahan, Sahibzada Mahmood ur Zafar, Professor Manzoor Hussain Sheikh Muhammad Rasheed (Baba-e-socialism) and Dr Abdul Aleem were many of the supporters whose active or tepid backing was not with the Movement. Sajjad Zaheer was one of the prominent figures of the movement. He showed to be a political and literary leader for other members of the movement. Progressive writers were devoted to the cause of peasants and proletariat but they had no proper idea about how these two classes really lived. These writers debated this issue fervently in late nineteen thirties and they proposed that their place in this social ranking is strongminded by the capitalist social order and they advised everyone to defy their social order (Ali, 1952). Likewise Faiz Ahmed Faiz strained to analyse the teachings of Marx, Hegel and Engels and he advocated amongst his contemporaries the point that none of these three were themselves manual workers but they all unspoken the problems of workers intelligently and urged everyone to be vicarious in understanding the difficulties faced by labourers. The progressive examined the situation deeply from social and political angles and found the light of humankind even in this darkest hour the nation's history (Jafri, 1957). Moreover, he said that at least our communication should reach to the middle class even if it fails to reach the labourers.

Another writer, Munshi Prem Chand was not measured a leftist writer but a genteel reformer who lacked an thoughtful of the concept of dialectical materialism, a feature central to Marx's teachings. Moreover, his works reproduce a reluctance to demonstrate a repudiation of religion. This is depicted by how Munshi delivered an address while presiding All-India Progressive Writers' Association in which he completely vetoed the idea of religious revivalism. Moreover, he also rejected the impression of art for the sake of art. This was an inspiration derived from Russian social realism that emphasized that artists should rebel against the out dated styles of society and they should work for political and economic freedom. Similarly, he tried to expose British politics and he carped industrialists for their inhumane behaviour of labourers. From this it could be said that he did have the tendencies of Marxist thought.

Progressive Writers Movement in Pakistan

In late forties when partition was forthcoming, Mian Ifthkhar-ud-Din created the Progressive Papers Limited. It printed Pakistan Times and Daily Imroz. Daily Imroz was a magazine which openly propagated leftist concepts. The Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) was one of the most powerful literary movements in decade that preceded the partition of British India (Ali, 2015). Soon after its formation this leftist joint stock started printing numerous other literary-cum-political magazines. Faiz Ahmed Faiz who

was by then an selection holder of Public Relations Directorate of the British-Indian Army resigned from his station and he was selected as the first editor in chief of Pakistan Times and the Managing Editor of the Daily Imroz. Even when he was caged he technically held these positions.

In Pakistan, the Progressive Writers' Association was unwelcomed due to its political philosophy. On 26th march 1948 CPI in its Calcutta session definite that separate communist party should be recognized in Pakistan. Sajjad Zaheer who was secretary general of AIPWA and follower of central committee until 1948 now became secretary general of Communist Party of Pakistan and Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi was made its first secretary. Communist Party of Pakistan functioned as a legal party from 1948 to 1954. In November 1949, progressive writers called their first all-Pakistan conference in Lahore. Four delegates from Soviet Union contributed in this conference. Moreover, in this conference big pictures of Marxist revolutionaries were decorated. In this conference progressive writer presented manifesto which stated that with the creation of Pakistan new era of revolutionary struggle for the social reform has started and poets and writers cannot persist neutral to it and they must select avenues of action. Furthermore, they emphasized on the idea of true democracy. They laid out different proposals on how to achieve the progress of society. In this manifesto, writers of Pakistan were divided into different groups, which were neutral writers, progressive writers and reactionary writers (Toor, 2011). Neutral writers were writers who believed in art for art's sake and they were connected to stylistic embellishments. Reactionary writers were writers who offered the ideas of elite and status quo and. Progressive writers were writers who thought that reality is the product of social actions and they supposed in realism and therefore believed that art cannot be divorced from class struggles. This is the same idea spread by Karl Marx. Marx did not believe in alienated forms of literature, history and philosophy. In Marx's view, alienated form is a form which does not account for the material situations that shape the society (Slaughter). Therefore, the progressive writers were following Marx's view when they portrayed the social realities in the societies around them, in their work (Malik, 2016).

Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi donated willingly to this movement and under his leadership, the movement made vigorous attempts to influence young intellectuals throughout Pakistan. This movement's success can be attributed mainly due to the personal charm of Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi. They were very well-known poets of Urdu, who are still read today by large numbers of people. Large numbers of young poets and intellectuals were fascinated towards this movement based on its appeal to the causes of social and economic justice. These intellectuals mainly drew idealistic picture of socialism and contrasted it with the current poles of the rich and the poor in Pakistan. Moreover, they inspected social relations in terms of Marxist concepts-economic determinism and class fight. In Ahmed Nadeem's short stories, we see a portrayal of rural life in the Punjab, where there is unceasing struggle between the famer and the landlord. On the other hand, Faiz talked about economic and political struggle and proposed solutions to it. Faiz Ahmed Faiz was awarded Lenin Prize in 1962 by Soviet Union for his offerings to the cause of world peace (Sadiq, 1983). This shows the far reaching and long lasting influence that some writers of the progressive writer's movement had, due to the strength, genuineness and beauty of their writings even when they were publicly discredited and even when their cause had failed.

Reason for Failure

The history of the Left is confusing in that, in recollection, it appears to be a history of failure. Before elaborating on the failure of the Left in Pakistan, it is important to comprehend the failure of the international Left, which has ensued since the collapse of the Russian Revolution terminating in the rise of Stalinized communism. This meant that the Left abdicated from proceeding the project of international socialism and came to bind itself, however innocently, to a politics narrowly attentive on national demands. The Left in Pakistan was constituted in the context of this historic shift and was incapable to chart an sovereign course of political management, even though it had a great deal of popular provision. In the

Bhutto's era the labour welcoming left-leaning PPP cadres, some of whom now held government ministers and offices (Toor, 2011).

There are several reasons as to why the Left failed to assert it. The explanation many offered at the time, and some still do today, is that the Left was simply overwhelmed by the repressive measures of the government, and this made it very difficult for its organizations to operate. That may be, and I am not dismissing the fact that the Left had to operate in adverse conditions, but this does not explain how or why the Left seemed to crumble during, or just following, those potentially opportune moments in which the government was in crisis and thus relatively weak.

The Left finally failed because, at critical moments, it proved unable to distinguish itself from other political tendencies, and thereby incorporated its own political vision to the initiatives of Islamic groups and traditional nationalist parties (Toor, 2011).

Status of leftist in Pakistan

Although the author considers "CPP's history and that of the progressive movement in Pakistan are part of a forgotten past at best and can be measured as discarded 'debris' at its worst", he recognises the resilience of the left activism and its ability to resurface every now and then. Summing up the left's contribution to Pakistani people's history he says: "Most importantly and to re-emphasise, this initially small and incoherent group of people shaped a space in the new country to speak about social reform, labour rights, land distribution, free education, economic and social justice and women's rights with an strength and focus that exceeded all others (Rasheed, 2011). These discussions and debates developed in scope and energy over the years and have remained within the public field as an ideological force that although most of the time is only rhetorically recognised by those in power, can seldom be ignored." In contemporary Pakistan the Left does not exist in a evocative way. Although there has been a renaissance of leftist parties and groups, what does it even mean to call oneself leftist when globally the Left has long been in disarray, if not decay? What does it mean to be on the Left today when, with the exclusion of infrequent and short-lived outbursts, progressive movements have been in retreat since the 1970s globally? The Left worldwide is in crisis and Pakistan expresses this difficulty acutely.

CONCLUSION

Finally, it can be said that All-India Progressive writers' movement changed the passage of Urdu literature by introducing new form and content inspired by western leftist literature. This movement however, to some extent, deteriorated due to the partition and it weakened due to the situations it faced in the two newly independent countries.

One of the unique contributions of the Progressive Writers Movement to the Urdu literary tradition in the subcontinent was its recreation of social problems, an aspect of life that was rarely deliberated otherwise in such a serious and grave manner in Urdu literature. The Urdu literature till now was mostly about imaginative and romantic themes detached from social realities of life. But the new stream of literature that emerged from the Progressive wave, shows how Urdu writers were now worried with social realities like oppression of labourers and peasantry by the hands of industrialists and feudal who were agents of the British imperialists, marginalization of women in the South Asian culture and out-dated family knitting. The Progressive Movement widened the horizon of Urdu poetry; liberated it from the standard cliché, and added fresh modern imagery structure to the poem; used the rhyming scheme with fresh energy and introduced and developed new forms like free verse, dramatic and allegorical poems, with experiments in meters; gave it an philosophical content and used it as a weapon in the freedom fight for India; denounced decadence and cynicism, yet discovered in this attitude also an element of protest against existing

conditions; enriched the capital of poetic diction by using ordinary and shared words which the older classical poets had banished from the realm of poetry, and thus came nearer to the people.

Many progressive poets actually participated in the freedom struggle with their poetry on their lips, and wrote very good poetry in prison as well. They were the poets of a country where great patriots had mounted the gallows reciting poetry with proud defiance.

An impression of the history of the movement discloses that it underwent several phases of change and in Pakistan, was crippled due to certain political and philosophical factors. However, its contribution to Urdu prose and to forms of writing in the rich and diverse world of Urdu literature is indubitable. The still on-going misuse of working class, minorities and women in the modern era serves as neither a reminder that neither has history ended nor the class struggle ceased. The subject masses of Asia, Africa and Latin America do not see the realisation of their dreams in the nightmare of globalisation. Closer at home the voices of men like Sajjad Zaheer, Faiz, Qasmi, Jalib and countless more are commencement to echo more emphatically as the rude sight of commercial plunder is bared to even the dim-eyed on the street. What should be more worrying for the sages of government and movers and shakers of our world is the sight of a supine mass of humankind that does not rise to entitlement its rights and where the intellectual class plays the courtesan.

“Jis khaet sy dehman ko mayser na ho rozi

Es khaet k har khousha a gandum ko jla do”.

REFERENCES

- Agha, W. (1982). *Besween sadi ki adabi tehriken*. In R. Amjad & F. Ali (Eds.), *Pakistani adab: Tanqid*. Federal Govt. Sir Syed College.
- Ali, A. (1952). *The Communist Party of West Pakistan*. Government Printing.
- Ali, K. A. (2015). *Surkh salam: Communist politics and class activism in Pakistan*. Oxford University Press.
- Dawn. (1972, January 2). [Newspaper article title if available, otherwise omit or describe]. *Dawn*.
- Jaffery, S. (1956). *Tarikhi pase manzer*. In *Tarraqi pasand adab*. Maktaba-e-Pakistan.
- Javed, A. (1989). *Punjab main bain bazo ki syasat*. Fiction House.
- Khan, N. (Ed.). (2012). *Beyond crisis: Re-evaluating Pakistan*. Routledge.
- Malik, F. M. (2016). *Anjuman taraqqi pasand musannifin Pakistan mein*. Sang-e-Meel Publications.
- Rasheed, S. M. (2011). *Juhdei musalsal*. Jumhoori Publications.
- Sadiq, M. (1983). *Twentieth century Urdu literature*. Royal Book Company.
- Salik, S. (1993). *Hama yarana dozakh*. Maktaba-e-Sarmad.

Toor, S. (2011). *The state of Islam: Culture and cold war politics in Pakistan*. Oxford University Press. (Note: Original publisher is Pluto Press in some editions; Oxford University Press is commonly cited for the South Asian edition.)

Zaheer, S. (2006). *The light: The history of the movement for progressive literature in the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent* (A. Azfar, Trans.). Oxford University Press.