

Kaifi's Kaifiyat: Kaifi Azmi's Journey as Poet and as Lyricist

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Abstract

*The paper focuses on Kaifi Azmi's contribution in the genre of poetry and song lyrics. It argues that most prominent themes in his works were romanticism and rebellion. Love between young hearts was his concern. Moreover, he was a protest poet who revolted against the oppressive order in his works. 'Kaifiyat' in the title means Kaifi's state of mind when he penned poems and film songs. For instance, he was inspired by Marxism. Further, the analysis would be on his journey as poet and as lyricist. The thrust of study would be on Kaifi's poetic input and his lyrical journey. Certainly, he made changes in his poems to become film songs at the demands of film-makers. He inked many songs for Hindi films but he kept his eloquence with poetry alive. He was a poet of masses. He addressed several workers' union and made them aware of their rights. He hoped that socialism would end all forms of oppressions. The paper will conclude by discussing his socialist dreams for his country. Ali Husain Mir and Raza Mir's book *Anthems of Resistance: A Celebration of Progressive Urdu Poetry* is taken as primary text for the research. The paper uses the approach of Frankfurt school theorist Theodor Adorno. The project undertakes the study of various other articles, journals, newspapers and books related to the area of research.*

Keywords: Romanticism, Communism, Quit India Movement, Social Realism

Introduction: Kaifi Azmi pranced on the literary scene at the age of eleven with his first ever ghazal 'Itna to zindagi mein kisi ki khalal pade'. His three major anthologies of poetry were *Jhankar* (1943), *Aakhir-e-Shab* (1947) and *Awaara Sajde* (1973). He, in his early stages of life, became a committed member of Progressive Writers' Association and "joined the Communist Party at the age of 19" (Jalil 412). He was a quintessential poet of his time. Tyranny, subjugation and corruption frequented his poems. Kaifi's state of mind felt a strong jolt after witnessing a few brutal incidents during the riots of 1984 and 1992 destruction of 'Babri Masjid'. Both the events not only discolored the segments of Indian history rather left

a lasting effect on Kaifi's Kaifiyat. Oversensitive Kaifi penned a nazm *Doosra Banwas* spotting such incidences.

He was fundamentally endowed with romantic temperament. But the atrocious realities of life ushered him to Progressive school of poetry. Thus, he carried weightier matters in his poetry. He became a prominent poet of the working class and voiced harsh realities of life through his regular poetic contribution. His constant belief in the wellbeing of the deprived, crushed and underprivileged could be reflected in many of his poems such as *Makaan, Aurat, Daeera and Hausla*, etc.

As poet, he predominantly dealt with two prominent themes. One was the common human struggle and the second: he kept the idiom of romantic poetry alive. He was a spokesman "for several workers' union" (412) and an ardent activist-poet. His poems reflected his disillusionment with the nation-state. He fancied India as a socialist society. He always wished that there should be an equal distribution of wealth among people irrespective of caste, creed, color and religion. But circumstances turned out to be disparate when the government failed to live up to its ideals.

Initially, the analysis would be on Kaifi's preoccupation with the social causes. In his poem *Daeera* (Circle), he showed despair and distress of his fellow countrymen by borrowing references from sacred and mythological figures as: 'apne haathon ko padha karta hun, kabhi kuran kabhi geeta ki traah, chnd rekhaon mein seemaon mein, zindagi kaid hai sita ki traah' ("I read the lines on my palm, Like I would the Koran or the Gita, In the confines of a few lines, My life is imprisoned like Sita") (Trans. Varma 26, 27). He posited that some evil powers have captivated his countrymen and halted India's progress. In another poem *Hausla* (Courage), he incorporated rich and natural images like sun, clouds, moon and lightning to prompt sentiments of rebel among his fellows. The 'rebel' in Kaifi is noteworthy. He urged his fellow countrymen to keep the spirits high and wait for the dawn of ecstasy "You are the lightning, continue to strike" (Trans. Varma 31). Kaifi, in the poem *Makaan*, epitomized his communist doctrines. He brought to existence his fellow Progressives' blood and sweat: "Tonight a searingly hot breeze is blowing, Tonight on this footpath there will be no sleep, Come let us arise, you and I, and you too, and you, A window in this wall will surely find an opening" (Trans. Varma 3).

He was inspired Marxist ideology and sentiments of revolt were trademark of his poetry. Being a staunch member of Communist Party, he began writing for party paper *Qaumi Jung* (People's War). Later on, he became a part of 'Quit India Movement' (1942). By the time the country gained independence, he had emerged as a quintessential activist. Rizvi Syed Haider Abbas, in his article *A Rebel's Love Song*, stated how Kaifi addressed the injustice inflicted on the poor: "Ailan-e-haq say khatra-e-dar-o-rasn to hai, Lekin sawal yeh

hai kay dar-o-rasn kay baad” (Declaration of rights does lead to the gallows, But the question is what after that?) (2).

He desired to bring forward the bitter truths of life. He wished to make society aware of the unjust treatment given to women in the, then, male dominated India. The portrayal of a woman in the poem *Aurat* is the prime example of his higher consciousness. He had a profound understanding of the social troubles faced by a woman. He ironically used words such as ‘chitaa’ (pyre), ‘farz’ (duty) and ‘qahar’ (curse) in the poem. The word ‘chitaa’ reminds of the inhumane ‘Sati System’ practiced in ancient India. The women were burnt alive on the funeral pyre. One could recall the cruel norms that adjudged a woman as an object. There were several symbolic pyres which surrounded a woman. She had to face trials and tribulations while performing her ‘farz’ and at times, had to sacrifice herself for the sake of others. Her tenderness towards others was a ‘curse’ that crushed and exploited her. The poem aims to evoke revolution among women and also to break from patriarchal chains. The poem calls out for women’s liberty and raises their voices against oppressive order. He encouraged his female companion to stride along with him leaving all the worries aside: ‘Uth, merijaan! Mere saath hi chalna hai tujhe’ (“Rise, my love! You have to walk along with me”) (Trans. Varma 137).

Apart from his poems about human struggle or revolt against oppressive agencies, Kaifi also inked some unforgettable romantic poems throughout his life. Mostly, the romance between young hearts was his concern. Romanticism went hand-in-hand along with his rebellious poetry. He, like Sahir, penned poems with equal intensity. Time and again, he attempted to show the tyranny of oppressive social order that thwarted the growing relationships of young lovers. In his poem *Pehlaa Salaam* (First Meeting), a young couple could not court because of the social constraints. Moreover, the lover remained hesitant in expressing his affections for beloved. He could not muster courage to requite her love: “Rah gayaa’ umr bhar ke liye yeh hijaab, Kyon na sanbhalaa huua de sakaa main jawaab” (What remained for a life was this strange hesitation, Why did my response lack that confident assertion) (Trans. Hussain 59). Aesthetic simplicity, decency and realism were the main characteristics of his poetry. For the sake of producing aesthetic effect, he brought in appealing and natural imagery. In his another poem *Ikhfaa-e Mohabbat* (Concealing of Love), he tried to juxtapose the bravery of the beloved who fights odds in order to unite with her lover and then getting caught in a dilemma to choose either her love or the tyrannical social practices. Lovers in Kaifi’s poem carried high expectations and hopefulness in love, for instance, in the poem *Pashemaani* (A Sense of Regret). Words, such as cajole, seize, call, request and ask justify the statement. ‘Main yeh soch kar uske darwaaze se utha tha, Ki who rok legi, manaa legi mujhko’ (“When from her doorway I stood up to go, I thought she would

cajole me and make me stay”) (Trans Varma 17). He carried the sentiments of love better than his fellow Progressives in the film and non-film poetry.

A few of Kaifi’s poems became a significant part of popular Hindi cinema. In the chapter, a couple of poems are under scrutiny. The first poem was used as a film song without making any changes in it. There was other instance, when he had to make additions in the poem to suit the film narrative and situation of a song. Both the poems were employed in the 1959 movie *Kaagaz Ke Phool*. Once again, the first poem carried the theme of romance. In the poem, he ironically used words such as waqt (time), sitam (revenge) and haseen (beautiful) and beqraar (anxious). The word ‘Waqt’, as it passed, became weird for both, the lover and his beloved. Because of the restraints of the society, they could never unite again. As reader, it was a moment of surprise when Kaifi used the adjective ‘haseen’ for sitam (revenge). Eventually, the lover had smoothly surrendered to his fate (the time). Their opinion regarding love changed drastically and they could not feel the similar ‘bekraari’ (anxiousness) anymore. Both abandoned each other and opted to move on. Therefore, time brought a big gap between them. The poem conveyed a discrete message as how time-wheel eventually can make people forget each other. Symbolism was characteristics of Kaifi’s works. His poem *Waqt Ne Kiya* was later on successfully translated into English by Pavan. K. Varma.

As lyricist, Kaifi was an optimist. Like Sahir, he had leftist bent of mind. He was at his creative best, when he penned down for the dispossessed. His works about human temperament stocked his ‘empathy’ intact. He inked songs with heartfelt concern about the necessity for the healthy relationships among people. In ‘Waqt Ne Kiya Kya Haseen Sitam’, he displayed the despondency and pain of lovers who remained silent while parting their ways. When the poem was included as a film song, ‘sitam’ never meant the revenge of time. ‘Sitam’ turned out to be torments and agonies of the central character Suresh (Guru Dutt, the actor and the director of *Kaagaz Ke Phool*). He was abandoned by Shanti (Waheeda Rehman) in reel life. The song demonstrated vain attempts of the protagonist to find the lost love. The content and context of Kaifi’s poem suited the narrative of the movie perfectly. Thereafter, the song was played in the background to show the plight of a failed actor and once, a renowned director. Guru Dutt used Kaifi’s poem (as it was) to produce a rhetorical effect along with the ongoing narrative of the movie. ‘Waqt’, once, was in favor of the protagonist (Guru Dutt), when he opened his studio as a successful film-director and lived at good terms with his family. Eventually, ‘Waqt’ changed drastically for him, when he was abandoned by his family for his carelessness and negligence. He had to pay a heavy price for it. He lost his mental and physical health. The vicissitudes of Suresh’s life pushed him to his doom. Kaifi wrote it with such intensity that he might have made audience felt ‘empathetic’ towards the

plight of the leading character. The poet managed to reflect inner thought process of the characters. He articulated “the inner world of people without ever judging them” (Anantharaman 118). He was one of those lyricists who could bring out the most persuasive thoughts by practicing the simplest of words in his film-songs.

Unlike Sahir, Kaifi adjusted to the whims of Hindi cinema. He, too, felt displeased at altering words and phrases on film-makers’ demands. Once, he was invited to write a song for already created tune of a song. He felt strange when he happened to find that lyricists were asked to pen down lyrics for already composed musical score. Kaifi expressed his resentment at this moment:

“Ye to vahi baat hui ke kisi ne kahake ye kabar khudi hai

Is size kilaash le aao!

(It is like being told that a grave has already been dug

Now an appropriately sized corpse has to be found to fit in it)” (Trans. Husain and Raza 128, 129)

The word ‘kabar’ denotes the musical score. Every now and then, ‘Laash’ was supposed to be provided by Kaifi to fit in the musical composition. In here, the word ‘laash’ means lyrics. Later on, Javed Akhtar had the similar views on the debate of music versus lyrics. He said that the stress and attention is on melody and it is up to a lyricist to provide right words according to the tune.

Some of Kaifi’s poems carried various kinds of complaints and accusation. He inked one of his complaint-poem *Dekhi Zamaane Ki Yaari* as it questioned the loyalty of friends around him. Mostly, Kaifi’s friend circle was his fellow Progressive writers and some of the Communist party members whom he happened to meet in poetic gatherings and in public meetings respectively. He highlighted the selfishness of the world around him. He failed to find altruists in his life and compared them with momentary ‘tides’. He expressed his resentment for those friends who were opportunists. He brought in his poem the natural imagery once again: “But alas! The tide is yours only for the night” (Trans. Varma 73). The word ‘tide’ and ‘night’ in a line says it all. He compared himself to a ‘moth’ and asserted that he would not find the nectar in the thorns anymore. He further provided satirical commentary on the people who offer with one hand but, would outstretch hundreds of hands to grab as much as they can. He concluded that ‘give and take’ had been a long time tradition in this world and the people intend to take away more than they give.

Guru Dutt inserted Kaifi’s song *Dekhi Zamaane Ki Yaari* perfectly at the end of his film. The song critiqued the film producers and their team who refused to work with Suresh as he lost his ‘use value’. He played the role of a film-director and subsequently, became an eminent and prosperous director. He was successful enough to open up his own studio

(Ajanta Picture Studio). His domestic affairs ruined him completely. There were rumors of an affair between Suresh and Shanti (the heroine, Suresh casted for his upcoming film). The issues were scandalized in the newspapers as well because both were famous with the success of *Devdas*, in which they played lead roles. Suresh's daughter, Pramila, immediately asked Shanti to stay away from her father. The unpleasant domestic circumstances left him an alcoholic wreck. He also lost his star-celebrity status; his 'use value' and the prosperity he gained. Subsequently, he lost trust of his film-making team. Thereafter, nobody wanted to risk their film producing business by working with a failed film-director. Having fallen behind the times, some years after, he arrived back in the studio before dawn and sat on the chair. Immediately, he had a glimpse of the past events happened in his life. At this moment, 'Dekhi Zamaane Ki Yari' was played in the background. As the song ended, he passed away contemplating events happened in his life. The next morning, unbothered film-making team entered the studio and found him dead on the director's chair. Indifferent to the demise of Suresh, the director ordered his team members to quickly dispose off the dead body since they had to capture an important shot of the heroine. Dutt used lighting and cameras to good effect. His purpose was to "evoke a sense of forgetfulness, realization or dream" in the minds of his audience (Tasneem 110). He focused on proper movements of characters in the film. He believed that sensory experience along with the songs would have a lasting effect on audience. Theodor W. Adorno, in his groundbreaking work *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, put forward that:

"most plausible theory of film technique, that which focuses on the movement of objects...the aesthetics of film will do better to base itself on a subjective mode of experience which film resembles and which constitutes its artistic character" (Adorno 180).

Guru Dutt asked Kaifi to make additions in the poem. On Guru Dutt's demand, he incorporated 'Pal bhar ki khushiyaan hain saari' as the third line in third stanza. According to film's narrative, the emphasis was on male protagonist's fading state of joy. The phrase 'Pal bhar ki khushiyaan' carried a discrete message as all joys are momentary in life and nothing stays long. His song carried fickleness of life at different stages and almost enjoyed cult status. As lyricist, Kaifi was bound to practice flexible approach while writing songs for Hindi cinema. He had to bow down against the rigid protocols of song making. But, his eloquence with poetry was always manifested in lyrics he wrote. Ganesh Anantharaman, in his outstanding work *Bollywood Melodies: A History of the Hindi Film Song*, apprised the readers that unwillingly he might have accepted the medium of Hindi cinema but he never failed permeating his poetic standards: "Unhappy he may have been writing for films, but his

integrity as an artiste and his felicity with poetry were reflected amply in most of his lyrics” (118). The lyrical beauty of his songs captivated billions.

His writings on patriotism, secularism and communalism were immensely popular in the second half of the twentieth century. He lectured on the topic of social realism in the meetings of workers’ union. He hoped that socialism in India would end up all forms of exploitation. Ali Husain Mir and Raza Mir, in their path-breaking work, *Anthems of Resistance: A Celebration of Progressive Urdu Poetry* (2006) could recall Kaifi’s celebrated words: “I was born in Enslaved India, lived most of my life in Free India, and will die in Socialist India” (Husain and Raza 224). In last four decades of twentieth century, he was almost the last of Progressive poets (other than Gulzar and Javed Akhtar) who relentlessly gave cadence to societal issues.

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