

## Progressive Aesthetic and Social Commentary in the poetry of Asrarul Haq Majaz

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### Abstract:

Asrarul Haq Majaz, an Indian Urdu poet is known as a Revolutionary Romantic. He is one of the important members of Progressive Writers Association. The Progressive Writers' Association was set up at that period of time when India was struggling for freedom. It was a time of great social unrest and cultural dissonance and the Indian people were highly concerned with restructuring their society and its values. The very manifesto of Progressive Writers Association stated that the progressive writers should deal with the basic problems of life like poverty, hunger, political subjugation etc. It prioritized the social responsibility of writers. So the progressive writers wrote socially oriented literature. Asrarul Haq Majaz as a progressive writer challenges Capitalism and condemns the obsolete customs and values. A protest against Imperialism and Capitalism is very evident in his poetry. His poetry reflects the oppression, agony and also the anger of Indian masses suffering under the colonial rule of Britishers. He has exposed the pathetic and miserable conditions under which the poor, workers, nomads and women were living during that period. He appealed the Indian masses especially the youth to unite and fight against oppression, injustice and inequality. There are a great number of articles on Majaz that mostly talk about his tragic life and his romanticism. The purpose of this article, however, is to explore his poetry as a vehicle for social and political reform. The paper focuses on his poems "Inqalab", "Aahang-e-nau", "Nau-jawan se", "Nau-jawan Khatun se", "Aik Jilawatan ki Wapsi", "Mazduron ka Git", "Khana-ba-dosh", "Sarmaya-dari", "Majburiyan", "Musafir" and "Shikwa-e-Mukhtasar".

**Keywords:** Revolution Protest Justice Equality Oppression Capitalism Freedom

Asrarul Haq Majaz, an Indian Urdu poet is one of the important Progressive writers known for his romantic and revolutionary poetry. He started writing in pre-partition British India when India was going through a great deal of social stress and cultural confusion. The main aim of Indian people, at that time, was to free the nation from the chains of British raj and the Progressive Writers' Association "stands shoulder to shoulder with the people struggling for their freedom and sovereignty and national dignity, and in the world wide struggle for universal peace." (Sahni 182) Progressive writers played a significant role in the social and political awakening of the Indian masses. They were concerned with the problems of starvation,

destitution, impoverishment and oppression. They were dedicated to social and political reform of their nation. Literature produced by the progressive writers served as a catalyst for the emancipation of Indian people. The manifesto adopted by the first All-Indian Progressive Writers' Association meeting on 10 April 1936 said, among other things "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 subjugation .... All that arouses in us the critical spirit which examines institutions and customs in the light of reason, which helps us to act, to organize ourselves, to transform, we accept as progressive ...". (Ali and Rashed 94) Therefore the literature written by the progressive writers is reflective of the social, cultural and the political reality of its times. It criticizes the social and economic inequality and considers the economic and political freedom of an individual as very necessary and significant. Progressive Writers' Association believed that Art and literature should support freedom and democracy and should raise its voice against imperialism, exploitation, oppression, tyranny and inequality. And it should serve as a mirror to society. Therefore, through their writings, the progressive writers protested against all sorts of inequality and injustice and hence much of their works form an important part of protest literature. Protest literature, according to John Stauffer, does not lead directly to social change but acts as a catalyst for it. Protest Literature is a vital tool for social transformation. Poetic protest is "one moment in a process that aims for equality, Peace and Justice." A protest poem is that which "addresses societal dissonance." (Kenny 454). Portrayal of social strife and the themes of equality and justice are the motifs of Progressive literature. As an important part of Progressive Writers' Association, Asrarul Haq Majaz's poetry is a protest against the prevailing social and political norms. It stands for equality, justice and freedom. Through his poetry he condemns the obsolete customs and values. Protest against injustice, exploitation, imperialism and capitalism is evident in his poetry. It depicts the struggles and sufferings of working class and the common people. It portrays a picture of the pathetic and miserable conditions of Indian masses. It reflects the oppression, agony and also the anger of Indian masses suffering under the colonial rule of Britishers. It exposes the conditions under which the poor people, workers, women, nomads etc were living during that period and there is also a rebellion and revolt against such conditions. Through his poetry, Majaz pleads for equality and justice. He has appealed Indian masses, especially the youth to unite and fight for freedom and revolution. He exhorted them to fight against oppression and inequality. In his poetry the anger, agony, misery and the daily bitter experiences of the Indian masses are realistically represented. Social criticism is obvious in his poetry. His poetry is preoccupied with the social and political conditions of his time and with the need for social and political transformation and with freedom. His poetry is deeply concerned with social issues like gender inequality, poverty, social justice etc. His poetry is a protest against various kinds of inequalities and injustice. A "tendency to struggle and a sense of independence and liberty are the basic ingredients of protest" and protest is "the manifestation of a cry for human concern .... It is an endeavor to add meaning to human existence by way of strengthening the concept of social justice, equality and liberty. (Mohan 9). In Majaz's poetry we find all these elements of protest. The theme of protest is predominant in his poems including "Inqalab", "Aahang-e-nau", "Nau-jawan se", "Nau-jawan Khatun se", "Aik Jila-watan ki Wapsi", "Mazduron ka Git", "Khana-ba-dosh", "Sarmaya-dari", "Majburiyan", "Musafir" and "Shikwa-e-Mukhtasar".

Majaz's poem, "Inqalab" is set during the tumultuous period of Indian freedom struggle. It presents a horrible picture of an impending war. Through a beautiful use of metaphors, this engaging and eloquent poem draws the reader's attention to the harrowing condition of India during 1930's. Repetition of the words *khoon* and *jang* emphasize the bloodshed and war that the poet thinks will result in the freedom of his nation. The poem also reflects Majaz's belief in the social responsibility of a writer and his conviction that art and literature should reflect the reality of its times. In this poem he addresses a poet and tells him that he should stop singing of love, beauty and pleasure as it is time to sing of revolution. The addressee may be the poet's former self who was known for his romantic songs. He says that he is not denying the magic of romantic songs but he believes that the times demand him to write about the existing and prevalent problems. In the first twelve stanzas of the poem the poet talks about the magic of romantic poetry but in stanza thirteen there is a change in tone and the poet invites the romantic writer to have a look at what is happening around: "bazzm-e-hastī kā magar kyā rañg hai ye bhī to dekh / har zabāñ par ab salā-e-jañg hai ye bhī to dekh" [But you must also check the status of the assembly of existence; / On every tongue there is now the invitation to battle"] (Trans. Carlo Coppola) The poet tells the addressee to throw away his harp and sing of revolution and freedom: "pheñk de ai dost ab bhī pheñk de apnā rubāb / uThne hī vaalā hai koī dam meñ shor-e-inqalāb" [O friend, throw away your harp now! / Any moment the chaos of revolution will rise"] (Trans. Carlo Coppola) From stanza sixteen the poet paints a picture of the struggle for freedom and justice; of the war and bloodshed. He concludes the poem saying that this fight and blood will result in freedom and a new beginning. In this poem he also talks about the growing rebellious attitude of the suffering people of India:

baḌh rahe haiñ dekh vo mazdūr darrāte hue  
 ik junūñ-añgez lai meñ jaane kyā gaate hue  
 sar-kashī kī tund āñdhī dam-ba-dam chaḌhtī huī  
 har taraf yalghār kartī har taraf baḌhtī huī  
 bhuuk ke maare hue insāñ kī fariyādoñ ke saath  
 fāqa-mastoñ ke jilau meñ khāna-barbādoñ ke saath  
 See those workers advancing fearlessly,  
 Singing something in their exciting tune,  
 Every moment the robust hurricane of revolt swells,  
 Raiding every side, advancing in every direction,  
 In time with the lament of starving people,

Walking in front of the poor, along with the destitute.

(Trans. Carlo Coppola)

The poet is hopeful that the rebellion of the workers and laborers will bear fruit: “This capitalist system will come to an end; / The passionate revenge of the workers will have its result;” (Trans. Carlo Coppola)

In his poem, “Aahang-e-nau”, Majaz is addressing the youth of his nation and telling them that if their spirits are young, if they can see the havoc around, if they have any concern for loss and disgrace, if they have any regard for the dignity and honour of their people they should wakeup and awaken the slumberous world. He is drawing their attention towards the plunder, tyranny, death, bloodshed, oppression, imprisonment that has become the rule of the day. He tells them to unite and fight against the enemies. He tells them that they are not alone, the freedom fighters of Russia and China are their role models and a great number of writers like him are supporting their cause. So they should end this oppression and affliction and make this world a paradise: “You are not alone, you have supporters; / Men of Russia, warriors of China, / ... / And many singers such as we! / Hurl this calamity from people’s head! / quell the fire of hell and turn it into paradise.” (Trans. Carlo Cappola)

Majaz’s poem, “Nau-jawan se” has an exhortative tone. It tries to inspire the youth and enkindle their passion so that they can stimulate change and transformation. Here the poet addresses the youth of his nation and encourages and persuades them to be strong like lightening: “jalāl-e-ātish-o-barq-o-sahāb paidā kar / ajal bhī kaañp uThe vo shabāb paidā kar” [Produce a magnificence of fire, lightning, and clouds; / Produce that youth which would even make death afraid;] (Trans. Carlo Cappola) He wants the youth of his nation to develop a spirit of self-sacrifice, to destroy the outdated values, beliefs and customs and come up with new, relevant and fresh values; to fight against tyranny and oppression, to bring a revolution and to make the world a better place to live in, He tells them “ tū inqalāb kī aamad kā intizār na kar / jo ho sake to abhī inqalāb paidā kar” [Do not await revolution / If possible create a revolution right now.] (Trans. Sami Rafiq)

Majaz’s poem, “Nau-jawan Khatun se” implicitly protests against the plight of women who are confined to the four walls of their houses. It is an indirect attack on patriarchy. Majaz addresses the young women of his nation to come out and take part in the freedom struggle of their country. The poet encourages them to work and act to alleviate their pain and sufferings:

ye terā zard ruḵh ye ḵhushk lab ye vahm ye vahshat

tū apne sar se ye bādāl haTā letī to achchhā thā

dil-e-majrūh ko majrūh-tar karne se kyā hāsīl

tū aañsū poñchh kar ab muskurā letī to achchhā thā

This, your pale face, this dry lip, this fantasy, this solitude;

If you were to derive back these clouds from you head, that would be good.

What's to be gained from wounding your wounded heart more?

If you were now to wipe away tears and smile, that would be good.

(Trans. Carlo Coppola)

The poem also reflects Majaz's belief that women can work side by side with men and prove their worth. He believes that women can do wonders if they come out of the confines of their houses: "tīre zer-e-nagīn ghar ho mahal ho qasr ho kuchh ho / maiñ ye kahtā huuñ tū arz-o-samā letī to achchhā thā" [May houses, palaces, castles, and whatever else be under your authority; / I would say that instead, you should take away both earth and sky.] (Trans. Carlo Coppola) He tells the women to make flags of their veils and fight for emancipation: "tīre māthe pe ye āñchal bahut hī k̄huub hai lekin / tū is āñchal se ik parcham banā letī to achchhā thā" [The anchal about your forehead is indeed beautiful, but / If you were to make that anchal a flag, that would be good.] (Trans. Carlo Coppola)

"Aik Jila-watan ki Wapsi" talks about the return of an exile who was exiled for his rebellious attitude and nonconformity. The poet addresses the exile and asks him if he still has that passion and vigor to fight against injustice, oppression and slavery: "Your voice is there but has it fire or not? / Can you still feel the warmth in your soul? / Can you feel the burden of slavery or not? / Does the blood of youth still run in your body? / If you have all these, then come we are your worshippers" (Trans. Sami Rafiq). He tells him to become a supporter of the afflicted who are ready to sacrifice themselves for freedom. He tells him to rise and become a star on the sky of rebellion.

"Mazduron ka Git" gives voice to the workers. It is a protest against their exploitation. It reflects the passion, strength and bravery of the workers despite their miserable conditions. Their determination and resolution to revolt and their faith in themselves find expression in the verses:

“ham jism meñ tāqat rakhte haiñ  
 sīnoñ meñ harārat rakhte haiñ  
 ham azm-e-baġhāvat rakhte haiñ  
 mazdūr haiñ ham mazdūr haiñ ham  
 jis roz baġhāvat kar deñge  
 duniyā meñ qayāmat kar deñge  
 khvāboñ ko haqīqat kar deñge  
 mazdūr haiñ ham mazdūr haiñ ham”

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we have strength in our bodies,  
Warmth in our hearts;  
we are determined to revolt.  
We are workers! Workers We!  
The day we rise in Revolt  
we shall create world havoc;  
We will turn dreams into reality;  
We are workers! Workers we!

(Trans. Carlo Coppola)

Majaz's poem, "Khana-ba-dosh" portrays an exquisite and a striking picture of the sufferings, misery, grief and wretchedness of the nomads. The poet says that the nomads do not own any land or a home and are compelled to live under the open sky even in the harsh weather. Their excruciating, agonizing and terrible condition and experiences find a beautiful expression in this poem:

māthe pe saḡht-koshi-e-paiham kī dāstāñ  
āñkhoñ meñ huzn o yaas kī ghanghor badliyāñ  
chehroñ pe tāzyāna-e-iflās ke nishāñ  
har har adā se bhuuk kī betābiyāñ ayaañ  
The story of their travails writ on their faces,  
Eyes clouded with sorrow and despair,  
The whip of poverty marks their faces,  
The restlessness of hunger in every movement,

(Trans. Sami Rafiq)

Theme of revolt and rebellion is conveyed through the last three stanzas of the poem where the poet says that the nomads cannot bear this oppression silently forever and the world cannot exploit and tyrannize them forever. They will awaken and fight for their rights:

“āḡhir zamāna un ko satā.egā kab talak

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kab se jalā rahā hai jalā.egā kab talak

kab se miTā rahā hai miTā.egā kab talak

un ke lahū ko josh na aa.egā kab talak

māyūsiyoñ kī tah meñ junūñ-ḳheziyāñ bhī haiñ

aflās kī sarisht meñ ḳhūñ-reziyāñ bhī haiñ

How long will this world make them suffer?

How long will it torture them?

How long will it continue to eliminate them?

How long will their blood not boil?

Hidden in the folds of despair is violence too

Killing people also belongs to the nature of poverty!

(Trans. Sami Rafiq)

Majaz's poem, "Sarmaya-dari" talks about the unjust and inhuman nature of capitalism and raises a voice against its evil influence. It is an explicit expression of the poet's hatred of Capitalism. He has personified capitalism to emphasize and expose its corrupting influence. He compares capitalism to the wind and lightening that destroys the harvest of the farmer: "She's a tempest on whose path is the abode of the poor man; / she's the lightning whose target is the harvest of every farmer;" (Trans. Carlo Coppola) He says that it sucks the blood of workers and is more fatal than epidemics and more horrible than death. It has always exploited the poor and has made a hell of this paradise, earth. It robs human beings of their dignity and honour: "She snatches one's honour, one's shame; / She snatches human nature from human beings," (Trans. Carlo Coppola) But he also urges people to fight against it: "Greetings, old friends! Her glass is now over flowing! / Raise tempests. The foundations of the house are now weakened." (Trans. Carlo Coppola)

Majaz's poem, "Majburiyan" is a protest against the repressive nature of his society where one cannot even express his/her emotions and feelings openly. He is criticizing the obsolete customs, traditions and religious beliefs which result in the repression of the feelings of love and even the freedom to express such emotions freely. The speaker of the poem is in love with a woman who also loves him but they cannot be together due to the fear of society: "She loves me but she cannot come to me, / I worship her but I cannot get her. / What helplessness! What desperation! / I cannot even sing songs for her! (Trans. Sami Rafiq).

Majaz's rebellious attack on conservatism and his love and support for revolt and rebellion is



evident in his poem, “Musafir”. He wants the Musafir to be a rebel and fight against conservatism. He tells him that the obsolete traditions will bother him always so he should destroy the very foundation of such traditions: “Old traditions will continue drawing limits, / keep on breaking the foundations of old traditions.” (Trans. Sami Rafiq) He tells him that he should revolt and rebel until he achieves his goal: “If you have raised the banner of rebellion, / Take it flying to the skies.” (Trans. Sami Rafiq) Majaz’s desire to fight against evil is clear from his verses: “Let there be a huge army fighting; / we too should be in the forefront of that battle; / Let a brilliant sword shine in your hand; / we too should be in the thick of the foray at the hour of battle; / we should be among those martyrs at whose feet / Lies the crown of the Kingdom of the Universe.” (Trans. Carlo Coppolo)

His rebellious attitude also finds expression in his poem, “Awara” which otherwise is an expression of his personal pain and anguish. Here also his resolution and determination to fight oppression is evident: “Poverty and these manifestations are before my eyes, / Hundreds of merciless monarchs are before my eyes, / Hundreds of Cruel dictators are before my eyes, / .... / I shall snatch the dagger from the hand of Changez and break it, / I shall break that gem that glitters in his crown, / Whether any one dares or not I alone shall break it,” (Trans. Sami Rafiq)

His poem, “Shikwa-e-Mukhtasar” is a critique of archaic and outworn system of life and of defunct, antique, hackneyed and trite rules and laws of life. In this poem the poet says that he has no complaints with the women who did not reciprocate his love, with the pious critics who criticized him fiercely, with the custodians of values who did not let the nature of the poet to flourish, with those who laughed at his plight, with the rich and wealthy people. But he has complaints with the rotten practices and customs and with worn-out rules and laws: “My grudge is against the rusted system of the world, / against old laws and out dated rules.” (Trans. Sami Rafiq). Pretti Oza writes that “Protest is the awareness that arises when a man confronts an unjust and inhuman situation and decides to get rid of it by way of raising his voice against it and acting to remove it.” (Oza 38). Throughout Majaz’s poetry we see such an awareness of the vicious and harsh circumstances and a passion to fight against them.

To conclude we can say that through his poetry Majaz aimed to reform the society and liberate his people which according to John Stauffer are the primary effects of the protest literature. By presenting the struggles of the marginalized and by critiquing the existing social and political norms and structures, his poetry champions the cause of transformative change. Transformative change and social justice are still the highly cherished aims for those who believe in social justice and struggle. Therefore “now, more than ever, we need our Faiz, our Majaz” and other such writers. (Mir 49)



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