

The Poetics of Revolt: Ideological and Symbolic Contrasts in Kaifi Azmi's "Tempest" and "Calm Ocean"

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Azmi's use of imagery and symbols in "Calm Ocean" and "Tempest" to portray social injustice and promote transformative change. It also gives a Marxist as well as post-colonial critique of these poems. By contrasting the stagnant inertia in the two poems translated by Sudeep Sen, it emphasizes his dedication to raising the consciousness of the oppressed and challenging oppressive systems. Azmi's poetry serves as a powerful tool for social commentary, reflecting his deep commitment to equality. This study highlights Azmi's enduring legacy as both a poet and an activist, demonstrating how he effectively merged his artistic expression with his unwavering pursuit of social justice. His work continues to inspire, showcasing the power of art to catalyze social change and challenge established power structures.

Keywords: Marxism, Post Colonialism, Imagery, Symbolism, Oppression, Revolt

Kaifi Azmi, a figure emblematic of progressive Urdu poetry and steadfast social advocacy, shines as a symbol of revolutionary ideas. His existence is intricately linked with humanist and communist beliefs and he devoted himself to supporting the underprivileged sections of the society. Through his articulate poetry and passionate activism, Azmi aimed to spark the fires of social reform, confronting the oppressive systems that sustained inequality. His verses serve as a potent tool for societal change, resonating with the voices of the marginalized, encouraging them to stand up against the wave of injustice. Rajiv Hoskote remarked-

“It takes a poet of extraordinary gifts, like Kaifi Azmi, to craft a poetic idiom capable of projecting grief, anger and exaltation while also maintaining a high degree of stylistic vigour. For Azmi, who died in Bombay on May 10, poetry was a form of resistance, an articulation of the self’s protest against the dominance of stifling orthodoxies and the pathologies of power.” (Hoskote)

Kaifi Azmi's formative years were immersed in the vibrant heritage of Urdu literature and the rising nationalist movement. His encounters with the stark realities of rural poverty and social hierarchy fostered within him a profound compassion for the marginalized. His intellectual awakening aligned with the emergence of the Progressive Writers' Movement, a literary and cultural collective that championed social realism and transformative change. Azmi's involvement in this movement reinforced his dedication to leveraging literature as a means for social reform. Anuradha Warriar comments that-

“Kaifi Azmi was first and foremost a humanist, whose sense of social justice and equality for all were not merely poetic flourishes but a way of life that he practiced until his last breath.” (Warriar)

Azmi's Marxist beliefs, deeply embedded in his comprehension of class struggle, influenced his creative work. He regarded poetry as a vehicle to elevate the awareness of the

working class, encouraging them to acknowledge their collective oppression and come together against the ruling elite. His postcolonial awareness, informed by India's fight for freedom and the lingering impact of colonial exploitation, further intensified his commitment to social equity. He understood the complex network of power relations that sustained inequality, both within and outside national frontiers. Nida Fazli in his book "Chehre" appreciated Azmi by saying that-

"Kaifi's entire poetic work is the story of these tears in different words." (Fazli 12)

Sudeep Sen has also made a notable impact on the spread of Kaifi Azmi's poetic heritage through his editorial and translation efforts especially seen in the release of *Kaifi Azmi: Poems, Nazms*. This bilingual anthology, published by Bloomsbury India in honour of Azmi's 100th birth anniversary, includes a thoughtfully chosen collection of 50 poems from the renowned Urdu poet's vast body of work. Sen took on the role of editor for this volume, gathering a group of translators, poets and scholars to present Azmi's compelling verses to a larger audience. This initiative also featured the inclusion of rare archival images, showcases Sen's commitment to preserving and celebrating the contributions of important literary figures. His work has played a crucial role in making Azmi's socially aware and revolutionary poetry available to a wider readership, particularly through this carefully assembled bilingual edition. The poems taken in this paper have been selected from this book.

Kaifi Azmi's poetic perspective often taps into the elemental force of wind and water, elevating these from simple natural occurrences to significant symbols of social and political vitality. In his writings, these elements are not just scenic backdrops but essential energies that encapsulate the core of transformation which is defiance and the human experience. In Azmi's broader poetic realm, water frequently embodies the dual nature of existence, that is, its ability to both nurture and devastate. It can represent the immense and often overpowering currents of society which have the power to either support or ruin the lives of the oppressed. Additionally, it can invoke the hidden strength of the populace, a force that once awakened, can alter the structure of society. The fluidity of water reflects the constantly changing landscape of social and political realities, emphasizing the fundamental instability of oppressive systems. Azmi employs water to illustrate the potential for purification and renewal, indicating that despite significant suffering, there is always a chance for change and revival.

Conversely, wind often functions as a metaphor for the catalyst of change. It signifies the restless essence of rebellion and the invisible force that stirs and contests against the established norms. Azmi uses wind to represent the collective determination of the people, which is the unseen yet impactful force, capable of dismantling oppressive powers. The wind's capacity to infiltrate and disrupt, to carry both whispers and cries, makes it a fitting symbol for the spread of revolutionary thoughts and the activation of social movements. It embodies the relentless drive of progress, the energy that can clear away the old to welcome the new. Wind and water in Azmi's poetry create a vibrant interplay of forces, mirroring the tumultuous nature of social and political conflicts. They represent the ongoing struggle between stagnation and transformation as well as between oppression and freedom. Azmi's application of these elements goes beyond being just a simple imagery and turning them into profound symbols that resonate with the realities of the marginalized. He utilizes them to express the raw emotional depth of social struggles, to evoke urgency and an unwavering belief in the possibility of a brighter future.

Azmi's relationship with these natural forces is grounded in his profound awareness of their influence on the lives of ordinary people, especially in agricultural communities. He understands that wind and water are not mere abstract ideas but concrete forces that mould the everyday experiences of the marginalized. His poetry embodies this insight, capturing the fragility and strength of those who exist at the mercy of these elements. Through his incorporation of wind and water, Kaifi Azmi elevates the challenges faced by the oppressed to a universal level, transforming them into potent symbols of human tenacity and the relentless pursuit of justice.

In the poem "Tempest," the "tempest" itself becomes a metaphor for revolutionary change. It's a surging, destructive force that dismantles oppressive structures. The line "The treasures are at the mercy of the wind" (Azmi, "Tempest" trans. Bakht, line 4) is particularly significant. The wind, which stirs and moves water, becomes a symbol of the forces of change, capable of redistributing wealth and power. This metaphor aligns with Azmi's Marxist ideology, which emphasizes the need for upheaval to challenge the status quo. The "tempest" is not just a natural phenomenon; it's a symbolic representation of the collective will of the oppressed. It's the force that causes "Signs of tyranny" and "Banners of the government" to tremble (Azmi, "Tempest" trans. Bakht, lines 6-7), and ultimately, leads to "Slavery leaving the country" (Azmi, "Tempest" trans. Bakht, line 9). This imagery evokes the power of a flood or a tidal wave, sweeping away the old order and paving the way for a new, more just society. Azmi's connection to water metaphors goes beyond their symbolic power. He understood the profound impact of water on the lives of the marginalized, particularly in agrarian societies like India. Water represented both sustenance and vulnerability, a source of life and a potential threat. Azmi, through his poetry, sought to capture this duality, highlighting the resilience of the oppressed and their capacity to overcome any sort of adversity.

Even his personal life reflects a kind of "fluidity." He moved away from his traditional upbringing to embrace the progressive writers' movement, immersing himself in the social and political currents of his time. He was also involved in the film industry, a medium that allowed him to reach a wider audience with his message of social change. This fluidity, this willingness to move and adapt, resonates with the imagery of the tempest, a force that reshapes the world around it. His connection to the "tempest" is linked to the idea of a cleansing force. The poem suggests that the destruction brought by the tempest is ultimately a positive force, clearing away the old order to make way for something new. This idea of water as a cleansing force is deeply ingrained in many cultures, and Azmi uses it to reinforce his message of revolutionary change. A film Critic states-

"Kaifi Azmi's literary contributions extended beyond the realm of poetry. He was also a prolific lyricist...His lyrics were imbued with depth and meaning, elevating the cinematic experience and touching the hearts of millions." (Khan)

"Calm Ocean," with its haunting imagery and relentless questioning, serves as a poignant critique of inaction in the face of injustice. Azmi's repetitive interrogation of the ocean's stillness, "why aren't you agitated? Why aren't you angry?" (Azmi, "Calm Ocean" trans. Sen, lines 1-4, 6-7, 9-10, 12-15), transcends mere description, becoming a metaphor for the perceived inertia of the oppressed. This relentless questioning, a hallmark of Azmi's activist spirit, underscores his impatience with complacency and his unwavering belief in the necessity of resistance. From a Marxist perspective, the ocean's "tired, defeated" (line 1) state reflects the subjugation of the labouring class, a condition Azmi vehemently opposed. The "shanties born of oppression" and the "builders who have ruined homes" (Azmi, "Calm

Ocean" trans. Sen, line 8) vividly portray the material consequences of capitalist exploitation, aligning with Azmi's critique of economic inequality. The designation of these homes as "illegal" exposes the legal and societal mechanisms used to legitimize oppression, a tactic Azmi consistently condemned.

The ocean's inability to "wipe out" (Azmi, "Calm Ocean" trans. Sen, line 11) these symbols of oppression reflects the perceived absence of revolutionary awareness, a stagnation that Azmi sought to dismantle through his art and activism. The imagery of "breaking the banks" and "overflowing" (Azmi, "Calm Ocean" trans. Sen, line 14) symbolizes the potential for revolutionary upheaval, a moment Azmi believed was historically inevitable. The collective gaze of "the powerless, oppressed world" (Azmi, "Calm Ocean" trans. Sen, line 5) on the ocean underscores the shared suffering and the yearning for change, resonating with Azmi's belief in the international unity of the working class.

Azmi's postcolonial consciousness is equally evident in "Calm Ocean." The "oppressed world" (Azmi, "Calm Ocean" trans. Sen, line 5) symbolizes colonized communities, united by their shared history of oppression. The "shanties born from oppression" and "builders who have ruined homes" (Azmi, "Calm Ocean" trans. Sen, line 8) depict the material consequences of colonial exploitation, where resources are seized, and communities are shattered. The "illegal shanties" (Azmi, "Calm Ocean" trans. Sen, line 11) highlight the colonizer's power to define and manipulate legal frameworks, delegitimizing the existence of the colonized. The ocean's silence, in this context, can be interpreted as a quiet act of resistance against colonial dominance, a theme Azmi often explored in his work.

The phrases "breaking the banks—why don't you overflow? Why don't you rise?" (Azmi, "Calm Ocean" trans. Sen, lines 14-15) signify a call for revolutionary change, urging the ocean to reclaim its authority. The ocean's reluctance to act reflects the complex nature of postcolonial resistance, where the colonized may be wary of open rebellion due to the repercussions of challenging the colonizer's power. The repetitive inquiries and direct address in the poem reinforce the external pressure and internal turmoil faced by the colonized, highlighting the psychological effects of colonial subjugation, a topic Azmi frequently addressed in his poetry.

In contrast to the stagnant calm of "Calm Ocean," "Tempest" embodies Azmi's vision of revolutionary transformation. The recurring refrain, "Beware, the tempest is coming" (Azmi, "Tempest" trans. Bakht, lines 5-10), acts as a prophecy, heralding the inevitable disruption of oppressive structures. The "tempest" itself is a symbol of collective rage and the yearning for liberation, a force that dismantles the status quo. Azmi's revolutionary zeal, evident in his activism, permeates the poem's imagery.

From a postcolonial perspective, the poem's opening lines, "Helplessness is sitting on guard" (Azmi, "Tempest" trans. Bakht, line 1), depict a subjugated people awaiting release. The "bosoms of treasuries are about to burst open" (Azmi, "Tempest" trans. Bakht, line 2) and "earth is splitting to reveal its treasures" (Azmi, "Tempest" trans. Bakht, line 3) symbolize the redistribution of wealth, a forceful reclaiming of what was unjustly taken. These images resonate with Azmi's belief in the right of the oppressed to reclaim their agency and resources.

The imagery of the tempest, with its destructive and transformative power, echoes the necessity of revolutionary action, a concept Azmi championed throughout his life. The trembling "signs of tyranny" and "banners of the government" (Azmi, "Tempest" trans.

Bakht, lines 6-7) represent the crumbling authority of the oppressor, while the "feet of slavery are now trembling" (Azmi, "Tempest" trans. Bakht, line 8) signify a burgeoning resistance. The declaration "Slavery is leaving the country" (Azmi, "Tempest" trans. Bakht, line 9) is a powerful statement of liberation, a reclaiming of agency and self-determination, themes central to Azmi's ideology.

A Marxist reading of "Tempest" complements this postcolonial interpretation. The "treasuries" and "treasures" symbolize the means of production, while the trembling "signs of tyranny" and "banners of the government" represent the weakening of the bourgeois state. The "feet of slavery" symbolize the exploited working class, and the declaration "Slavery is leaving the country" signifies a vision of a classless society, a core tenet of Azmi's communist beliefs. The tempest, in this context, acts as a catalyst for revolutionary change, sweeping away the old order.

The intersection of postcolonial and Marxist themes in the poems highlights the interconnectedness of struggles against oppression, a reality Azmi understood intimately. In many postcolonial contexts, the fight against colonial rule is intertwined with the fight against class exploitation. The "tempest" represents a dual revolution, a simultaneous struggle against both foreign rule and internal oppression. The poem's insistent warning, "Beware, the tempest is coming" (lines 5, 10), underscores the inevitability of change, driven by the collective will of the oppressed, a force Azmi believed could reshape the world.

Azmi's commitment to social justice extended beyond his poetry. He actively participated in labour movements and peasant struggles, using his voice to amplify the concerns of the marginalized. His involvement in the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) further underscored his belief in the power of art to inspire social change. His film lyrics, often imbued with social commentary, reached a wider audience, spreading his message of equality and liberation. A renowned writer remarked-

"Kaifi wrote fiery poems for the downtrodden, disadvantaged, underprivileged, dispossessed and deprived and recited the same from the stages of poetic congregations all through his life. Even a paralytic stroke and chronic bouts of breathlessness every now and then could not dampen his spirits and he remained as rebellious as ever." (Sharma)

In conclusion, "Calm Ocean" and "Tempest" through their exploration of inertia and revolution, reflect Kaifi Azmi's profound commitment to social justice and equality. His humanist and communist ideals permeate these poems, transforming them into powerful calls for liberation. Azmi's legacy as a poet and activist continues to inspire generations, reminding us of the enduring power of art to challenge oppression and ignite the flames of social change. Through his verse, Azmi sought to awaken the conscience of the oppressed and inspire them to rise against the tide of injustice, leaving behind a testament to the transformative power of collective action.

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