

LITERARY PROTEST AND THEORIZATION A CASE OF KASHMIRI LITERATURE*

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ABSTRACT

The present paper basically deals with the historical introduction to literary protest and its theorization with respect to various literary theories. This I have tried to understand through a study of Kashmiri language literature of modern times. In order to fathom the meaning of a text in its true essence, it is necessary to analyze the text in its proper historical and social context. I have tried to understand the significance of the Kashmiri works that I came across during the period of my research through a Marxian approach. Terry Eagleton's Marxism and Literary Criticism has proved significant for me to understand a text and the meaning behind it. I am trying to ascertain how the local literature depicted the political overtures of the period under study. In absence of the press until early 1930s, it remained the prerogative of the literati to subtly at some time and overtly at other times, respond to the different political developments of that period. The lack of advancement in press and print media also was responsible for the lack of development in many forms of literature like novel and short story.

Keywords: Literature, Protest, Theorization, Kashmiri literature. Literary criticism

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INTRODUCTION: From the ancient times, people have locked horns over what should be considered as literature and what not; consequently, literature has been accorded different status at different times. While as Plato abhorred literature and poetry, his student-Aristotle-was one of the earliest to rise in favor and support of the same. As against the criticism of Plato that literature and poetry were imitative, unethical and devoid of philosophy and pragmatism, Aristotle believed that poetry is a 'medium of imitation' that seeks to represent or duplicate life through character, emotion, or action. Aristotle considered this imitative model of poetry as 'representative of life', while as Plato thought that poetry-as-imitation was far removed from truth.¹ Aristotle differentiated poetry as epic, tragedy, comedy and also including some forms of music. According to him, tragedy was the most powerful medium of poetry which could produce its effect without action. His treatise on the literature as comedy is rumored to have been lost. Overall, Aristotle's views about literature and poetry in Poetics, form the earliest surviving dramatic theory and the first philosophical treatise to focus on literary theory.

All through the middle ages, there were sporadic advancements in the field of literature at places like Greece, Arabia, China and India. But it was not until the Renaissance in Europe in the fifteenth

¹ It is ironic that Plato's Republic is an excellent example of creative writing with a poetic dialogue style.

century-when the first printing press was invented-that there occurred rapid advancements in this field. Texts and books were no longer precious and expensive to produce and literature became an object of a broader section of the population. There was large outpouring of literature in the European continent in this period and a number of literary personalities like Geoffrey Chaucer, Petrarch and Shakespeare flourished. Many changes took place in the form, style and make of literature in Europe in the period succeeding the Renaissance in Europe. Poetry witnessed steep growth till the nineteenth century and there were huge advancements in this form. In the nineteenth century there were big advancements in the novel and fiction categories and it later on, in the twentieth century, moved on to more technical and non-fictional categories.

There is no cultural document that is not at the same time a record of barbarism.²

LITERARY PROTEST AND THEORIZATION: But despite huge growth and advancements in literature right from the Renaissance through nineteenth century, there was not much advancement in the literary theory in this period. In its strict sense, literary theory is a systematic study of the nature of literature and of the methods for analyzing literature. Terry Eagleton is of the view that ‘literary theory is less an object of intellectual enquiry in its own right than a particular perspective in which to view the history of our times’.³

In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, a number of aesthetic and philosophic movements like Aestheticism, Romanticism, Germanic Hermeneutics and Marxist Literary Theory, vaguely talked about literary theory; but more importantly, these movements proved instrumental as precursor to theoretical movements of twentieth century like, Formalism, New Criticism, Structuralism and Deconstruction.

One of the most recent of all literary schools that produced a significant impact on the development of literary thought in twentieth century is the school of New Historicism. It developed in the United States in 1980s. Subsequently, there arose a similar school of thought in Europe that came to be known as Cultural Materialism. It was influenced and modeled on the writings of left-wing literary critic Raymond Williams. Both “New Historicism” and “Cultural Materialism” ‘seek to understand literary texts historically and reject the formalizing influence of previous literary studies, including “New Criticism,” “Structuralism” and “Deconstruction,” all of which in different ways add to the literary text and place only secondary emphasis on historical and social context.’⁴ New Historicists also aim

² Walter Benjamin. A German literary critic, Benjamin was also a philosopher, sociologist and a translator. He has made enduring and influential contributions to aesthetic theory and Western Marxism.

³ Eagleton, Terry. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. pp. 169-170.

⁴ *ibid.*

to understand cultural and intellectual history through literature, which documents the new discipline of the history of ideas⁵. In many other different ways, New Historicism is considered as a 'neutral approach to historical events and is thought to be more sensitive towards different cultures'. Working on some similar lines, cultural materialists have tried to 'explore a text's historical context and its political implications, and then through close textual analysis note the dominant hegemonic position'. They lay insistence on the engagement with a plethora of issues like that of gender, sexuality, race and class among many other similarly lesser studied matters prior to this approach.

Different literary theorists have looked at literature with a perspective of their own ideology. In the process they take away, probably, the real sense that literature may convey in a particular society. For instance, a traditional literary critic might argue the moral relationship between aesthetics and the political message of protest literature. Social and historical critics point out that literary protest must contain a specific political aim, such as changing a law or going in for a change. A psychologist sees the protest form by the literary minded persons as a manifestation of the subconscious. Deconstructionists might argue that all literature writing is ultimately a form of protest. A Marxist would have us believe that literary protest should disturb the social order in terms of the relationship between social classes.

One thing is quite clear though, that literature is often 'political' in nature. This particular nature renders the relation between literature and protest of prime importance. As Terry Eagleton postulates in his seminal work *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, that 'artist does not create something from nothing, but instead produces a work that is determined by historical and ideological conditions'. Therefore, when a work or a piece of writing arrives on the scene, its motives are not far from the preoccupation of the author with his historical surroundings and he is invariably motivated in his decisions and ideas by an ideology that he holds close to his heart. This renders the whole work of an author a political premise and lets him wander into the abyss of his mercurial surroundings.

Literature stirs minds and spirits, provides a unifying national consciousness that is often lacking in public life, and gives a nation pride in the face of a hostile environment. It brings about the assimilation of dissatisfied elements.⁶

PROTEST LITERATURE AND POLITICAL PROTEST: Literary protests may manifest themselves in a number of ways. They start by criticizing the political overtures of the existing establishment and may end in revolts and revolutions, instigated by the literary writings and the observations of literary figures. On some occasions they may also work as facilitators between the masses and the establishment. One of the famous theorists of protest literature has been Ted Gurr. His

⁵ The history of ideas is a field of research in history that deals with the expression, preservation, and change of human ideas over time.

⁶ Franz Fanon. As a supporter of Algerian War of Independence from France, Fanon's life and works have inspired national liberation movements in many parts of the world.

approach has been to deal with the possibilities and circumstances that ultimately end up in violent protests and revolts due to the apathetic attitude of the governments and the establishments. In his path breaking work *Why Men Rebel*, Gurr examines the ‘psychological frustration-aggression’ theory which argues that the primary source of the human capacity for violence is the frustration-aggression mechanism. He is of the view that frustration does not necessarily lead to violence, but when it is sufficiently prolonged and sharply felt, it often does result in anger and eventually violence. He explains his hypothesis with his term ‘relative deprivation’ which is the discrepancy between what people think they deserve, and what they actually think they can get. The potential for collective violence varies strongly with the intensity and scope of relative deprivation among members of a collectivity.⁷ Thus, just as frustration produces aggressive behavior on the part of an individual, so too does relative deprivation produces collective violence by social groups.

Herman Boschken also delves about the protest action in similar tones in *The Logic of Protest Action*. He argues that the incidence of protest action is the logical result when rational individuals attempt to control their daily lives and minimize the impersonal impact of institutions. He opines that the majority is full of rancor and believes the minority to be such a distasteful crowd –with different values, goals and needs- that inclusion would make collective decision almost impossible.⁸ In his paper, Boschken tries to conceptualize in economic terms various political factors expressed in protest action and relates those to the assumptions commonly held by those controlling the collective decision making processes.

**What joy to fight, O! For my country’s liberation!
To chase out the frost and make the garden bloom!
My spurs are the unforgotten tears of yesterday.
I have a new fire, a new determination. ⁹**

LITERATURE AND PROTEST IN KASHMIR: In the Kashmiri academic circle, there has not been much headway towards the theorization about literary protest despite the subjugation and willful rule of Kashmir for around 400 hundred years at the hands of many cruel and autocratic rulers. Only a handful has worked on the particular theme and that too in different context. Working on the protest movements of Kashmir in the post-1947 era, Asifa Jan, a renowned political scientist of Kashmir, has figured out that the causes which give rise to confrontation between the power elite and the oppressed

⁷ Gurr, Ted Robert. *Why Men Rebel*. p. 24. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 1970.

⁸ Boschken, Herman. *The Logic of Protest Action*. Western Political Quarterly. 1975.

⁹ Dinanath Nadim, Cited in Ghulam Nabi Khayal. *Progressive Literary Movement in Kashmir*. pp.228-229.

and discontented segments of the society are often attributed to the expectations which rise faster than achievements and thus result in frustration. This is more or less the acceptance of the literary ideas of Ted Gurr. Apart from her work, there is no other substantial contribution in this field that could deal with this topic.

Right from the Muslim rule in Kashmir that started in the middle of fourteenth century, there arose the possibility of friction between the minority ruling class of Muslims and the majority class of Pandits. These were the two prominent communities among diverse religious groups during that period. At the start of the Muslim rule, the minority Muslim population was ruling the majority Pandit population. A large mass of literature by the Pandit community of Kashmir highlights, and at times with exaggeration, the miseries that they had to undergo during that Muslim rule. Their dissatisfaction owed largely to the rule of Sikander (1389-1413) in Kashmir who was responsible, directly or indirectly, for a number of temple desecrations and harassment to Hindu population. The resultant persecution led to exodus of a large Hindu population from the state during his reign. Though Sikander's son, Zainul Abidin tried to mitigate many of the miseries perpetrated on Kashmiri Pandits, yet the antagonism between the two communities had taken their root and the friction would continue over the next few centuries.

At the onset of Mughal rule in Kashmir, the majority population in Kashmir was that of Muslims. This was owing to large number of conversions in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Mughals and their more cruel successors like Afghans, Sikhs and Dogras, proved largely antithetical to the Muslim population of Kashmir. The Pandit population of Kashmir, those who did not convert to Islam, comprised mostly of the Brahman class. They began to pay more attention to education, and learning the official languages of the day. Even in the rule of rapacious Afghans, the Pandits in administrative posts outnumbered their Muslim counterparts. This, coupled with the general apathy of the majority Muslim population, was reflected in different protest forms and activities over the next few centuries. A number of literary works in Kashmir depict these protest forms and activities. Among the Kashmiri literati of nineteenth and twentieth centuries, mention could be made of Maqbool Shah Kralwari, Ghulam Ahmad Mahjoor, Abdul Ahad Azad, Dinanath Nadim and Ghulam Nabi Khayal, among many others, who have all given references to overt and covert political overtures in their writings. The literature of Gulam Ahmad Mahjoor, especially stirred the minds of young Kashmiris in early half of twentieth century to fight the autocratic Dogras under whose reign, Kashmiris in general, and Kashmiri Muslims in particular suffered social, economic and religious persecutions. Mahjoor remained closely associated with the activities of National Conference, which spearheaded the agitation of Kashmiris against the Dogra autocracy after the events of 1931.

CONCLUSION: Literature can be construed to signify its importance in political matters which sometimes aid in its birth, the nature it attains and its impact on society. At other times, great literature itself has played a significant part in the course of political developments of their nations. Be it Franz Fanon in Algeria, Mahmoud Darwish from Palestine or Mahjoor from Kashmir, these individuals have stirred the minds of their fellow nationals to fight the autocratic and oppressive regimes of their nations.

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