

Effects of Sir Syed Movement on Indian Literature and Society: A Guiding Principal for Social Awareness

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Abstract

Different literary and social movements have changed the lives of many. Literature is reflection of society and we can benefit from literature to bring social, political and moral awareness among the masses. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and his fellows did a wonderful job to change Indian society through Sir Syed Movement. Sir Syed Movement made unforgettable marks on literature and lives of the people in the sub-continent especially Muslims. Their poems and fiction brought a revolution and changed the thinking patterns of young people. A pessimistic and hopeless society of 1857 moved in a positive and hopeful direction. In this paper, we are highlighting the significant points of Sir Syed Movement and how this movement was able to bring a positive change in the society. The thesis of this article is that literature has played a vital role in moving societies in a positive direction and it is possible to use Urdu fiction for making desired changes in our challenged-dominating society. Literature has the power to clearly raise social and moral issues and we should use this power in our classrooms and elsewhere to face social, political and moral challenges prevailing in our society.

Key Words: Sir Syed Movement, Fiction, Social Awareness,

Introduction and Background

Societies are products of individuals and their behavior. All true literature is a reflection of the feelings, emotions and experiences of people in their respective ages.^{1,2} Literature portrays the ideologies of the people and in turn, strongly affects the way people think and act in their everyday lives. We

¹ Albrecht, M. C. The Relations of Literature and Society, *American Journal of Sociology*, 59:5, 1954, 425-436. www.jstor.org/stable/2772244.

² Anjana, B. K., & Bhambhra, R. L. *Is Literature the Mirror of Society?* Proceedings of Research Paper presented at the National Research Seminar in English on Widening Canvas of Literature, held in India on 3-4 December, 2015,

have too much emphasis on words and texts around us and there is little focus on meanings and dimensions these works of art and literature can offer to bring positive changes in the world. These concepts and ideas are wonderfully presented by Hashim, Abdullah and Yusof in following words: that the “pressing” matters such as attention to the mechanics of texts is privileged over awareness of social issues in our daily lives. This situation is not entirely unjustified, given that in a literature classroom, students should be taught the skills to analyze texts in terms of their plots, points of view, narrative styles, characterization, use of symbols and themes. Since literary works are mimetic of the realities of our daily lives, they actually present an excellent opportunity to relate texts with current contexts.³

With the changing global and universal scenarios, we should try to engage more and more students with current issues through language and literature. We need to develop habits of meaningful and critical response among students to face these challenges of ever-changing global horizons. Modern societies are using their literature to raise the important social, political and moral issues like Mark Jackett (2007) used a novel to talk about a major social evil or rape and women harassment in his society. Jackett understands the significance of classroom and universities in enhancing awareness among young people.⁴ The same was done by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan through Sir Syed Movement to bring a revolution in Indian society especially among the lives of Muslims in the sub-continent. We agree with Jackett when he argues:

I would rather have them experience a little awkwardness in a ninth-grade English class than find themselves in a situation in their lives similar to Melinda’s. I want students to be able to identify and prevent sexual harassment in their school and community. I also want them to know how to respond if they or someone they know is raped or sexually assaulted.

³ Hashim, R. S., Abdullah, I. & Yusof, M. N. Fiction out of fact: raising awareness about domestic violence in the literature classroom. *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 15, 2011, pp. 1857-1861.

⁴ Jackett, M. Teaching English in the World: Something to Speak about: Addressing Sensitive Issues through Literature. *The English Journal*, 96:4, 2007, pp. 102-105.

There was a beginning of new era in Urdu literature after the terrible events of 1857. Apparently, that incident was directly related to social and political affairs only but it made lasting impacts on all walks of life. With all its intensity, the soul awakening events of 1857 made a mark on the field of Urdu literature as well.

Literature and society have deep roots in each other and it is almost impossible for any litterateur to ignore ups and downs of the society. All genres of literature somehow feel connected to social upheavals of their age. Hussaini (1964) narrates these scenarios of 1857 as: “The fight of 1857 was over. These military rebellions started from Meerath and quickly spread to UP, Bihar and Delhi. Many people died and thousands of families were destroyed. The Mughal Emperor was sent to Rangoon and Delhi, Lucknow and Calcutta were ruined. The rule of East India Company was abolished and The Queen started to rule.”⁵

Urdu literature was part of a different society before the War of Independence of 1857. Poets and literary figures were usually patronized by the rich and the elite. Lethargy and luxuries were part of everyday life. Feudalism and Capitalism had a dominating impact; hence, the similar kinds of effects and elements were visible Urdu literature as well. Tales, epics, love-stories and poetry filled with depiction of beauty are the highlights of this age. Ahmad (1986) writes about this literary scenario in following words: “Seminary, chambers and drawing rooms of the affluent and the rich were only heavens for writers and poets. Hence, literature became a victim of either the viciousness of seminaries or reflective of feudal profligacies. On one hand we find literary traditions of renunciation, mysticism, religious preaching and impractical moralities while on the other hand, there were opposite traditions of greed, male homosexuality, sexual lust and pederasty in literature. This was the background that past generation provided for casuistry motives to the post 1857 generation”⁶

These events of 1857 changed the direction of complete Indian society. Largescale changes started to take place in social, political and civil life. The

⁵ Hussaini, A. A. *Novel ki Tareekh aur Tanqeed*. Lahore Academy Publishers: Lahore, 1964.

⁶ Ahmad, A. *Humarey Adab ke Jadeed Rujhanat*. Pakistani Adab, 5, 1986, pp. 620-621.

British overcame the revolution and gradually started revengeful activities. The Indians were publicly executed while armless citizens, children and women were brutally tortured. There was absolute carnage resulting in loss of public honor and dignity. Society became a victim of degradation and deprivation. The entire Indian nation was reduced to helpless, hapless and desperate lot.

Following 1857 war of independence, Indians has to face a universal revolution which gave birth to new issues and challenges. This opened vistas of new awakening and novel ideologies. Modern learning developed revolutionary changes in people's ideologies. In this way, a new system of thought and civilization started emerging and Indian literature took a radical turn. Explaining his viewpoint, Hassan (1961) writes: "The war of 1857 a part of a long chain of ideology and thought. The way this war affected the intellectual fabric of this age is a subject of interest for literary historian because literature is synonymous with imagination and emotion."⁷

The incidents of massacre and carnage, humiliation of people and injustices and excesses committed against them have an impact on the entire society. Therefore, following the war of independence, the events badly affected the literary centers. Delhi had been ruined. Civilization of Lucknow had degenerated. Bahadar Shah Zafar was the last Mughal emperor. He witnessed the civilization being ravished mercilessly. We can clearly witness a reflection of those times in his poetry. Imprisonment of the emperor of that time, merciless killing of his sons and presentation of their heads to him are a telling evidence of British barbarity. Letters written in Urdu and Hindi of that time truly depict the Indian society.

In view of the situation, Muslims suffered from decadence at intellectual, political, cultural, economic and social levels. Their centuries old power was snatched. The British always had misgivings about Muslims. In this regard, not only economic sanctions were imposed on Muslims but they were also subjected to character assassination. The Hindus got close to the

⁷ Hassan, M. Shair-e-Naow. Froog-e-Urdu Publishers: Lucknow, 1961.

British by portraying that the war of independence was as a Muslim act while the Muslims suffered further economic and social deprivation.

The 1857 war of independence was a major upheaval in Indian society. On the one hand, it cast impacts on economic, social and psychological level while, on the other hand, it expanded language and narrative. In this age, English language and literature started impacting the Indian languages and literatures. In the words of Bukhari (1966): “With the establishment of the British Government, following 1857, the impact of English language and society gain momentum. However, our writers got familiarity with English novel much later. Until that time, narratives were written in Urdu. The best narrative of Urdu “Bagh-o-Bahar” had already been written in 1806. In 1824, Mirza Rajib Ali Baig Sarwar wrote his epic making tale “Fasana-e-Aja’ib” When Newal Kishoor Press was established in Lucknow following war of independence, it was confined to publishing the copies of only the narratives, including those of Ameer Hamza. To achieve this end, expert story-tellers of Lucknow were hired in the press. “Oudh Punj” was established in 1878 which paved the ways for inclusion of novel into local literature. And Sarshar was among those narrative writers who introduced this genre of novel in Urdu after reading English literature.”⁸

In short, after 1857 writers and poets gave a new life in Indian society. These writers spread a message of nationalism, freedom, equality and oneness through literature which focused on ground realities and social awareness. Urdu literature directly took part in facing real life challenges and paved the way for social welfare and development of Indian society.

Societal Concepts and Awareness in Political and Literary Affairs

The incidents of 1857 changed the events in daily lives of people in India. It prominently changed the outlook of people socially as well. People started thinking about their political freedom and independence. There developed a strong feeling of patriotism and consciousness of being united in them. These all circumstances brought into light the Sir Syed Movement to reform society and especially the Muslims. This movement desired to

⁸ Bukhari, S. *Novel Nigari: Urdu novel nigari ki tareekh-o-tanqeed*. Maktba Mary Library: Lahore, 1966.

inculcate rational and scientific thought in the society so that the nation could experience an innovative self-confidence. Hussain (1944) wrote about it so:

“The literary movement which developed after treachery, the names of Sir Syed, Hali, Azad and Nazir are prominent ones in that. It was not only the beginning of a new literary movement but it also prompted a clamor in the static sea of literature.”⁹ The Sir Syed’s broadmindedness affected all India. It brought obvious changings in the literature of that time. It was the beginning of a new era of action and practicality instead of helplessness and pessimism. The writers who were writing under the influence of this movement, they established the relationship of their literature consciously with the politic and society of their times. The aesthetic status of literature was converted towards collective goals. Imaginative and subjective approach of literature was replaced by rationality and representation of real life problems. Literature became a source of cultural, religious, social and cognitive reformation. The tradition of objective based literature was set up in Urdu literature. The new style with innovative thought, passion and change in writings emerged in Urdu Literature because of this movement.

The Sir Syed movement started emergence of modern Indian Movement. Literature came out of court and became the part of common masses. Writers and Intellectuals introduced literature with new ideologies and perceptions. The silent revolution started appearing in literature gradually. An epoch ended and other began to form. Ahmad (1986) wrote about the second epoch:

“So the tradition of following “Modernism” and “Naturalism” was adopted. The poet of that era learnt to weep, laugh and mock at himself. Simplification of language, picturization and rationality took place of technical tendencies of past, repetitions, intuitional and poetic expressions, and intentional complexity in expressing objectives and intuition. The society of that caretaker period was anticipating boldly the upcoming great political revolutions by holding the figures of kindhearted writers and violent political social workers”¹⁰

⁹ Hussain, S. A. *Taraqi Pasndeedyat ki Riwayat*. Nia Dauoor, November. Banglore, 1944.

¹⁰ Ahmad, op. cit.

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Hali, Shible, Nazir Ahmad, Molana Muhammad Hussain Azad all had individuality in their styles. New thought with enlightened minds entered in literature. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan found the secret behind declining nation. He started work for the betterment of nation with the help of his insightfulness. He introduced nation with modern knowledge and modern thinking. He established Scientific Society and MAO College in the sector of education. He inculcated broadmindedness in the minds of nation through political, social and ethical education. Western and eastern both kinds of education were given in those institutions. It produced a new civilization. Akhtar (1984) Writes about it:

“The continuous struggle of Sir Syed and his companions conquered the educational, literary and social berries and new thinking emerged. They searched the solution of changing circumstances in modern education. The educational institution Sir Syed established in Ali Garh despite of extreme opposition, proved a new educational experience in India and later on became a source of providing active workers for Pakistan Movement.”¹¹

The extraordinary efforts of Sir Syed emerged as a regular movement. The prominent poets and writers of that time became the part of this movement. Shible, Hali, Nazir, etc. all were impressed by the efforts of Sir Syed and all were worried about the deteriorating social condition of the Muslims. The writers of that time preferred simple language and style. They abandoned the use of artificial and pompous language. They wrote on multiple topics keeping in mind the reformation of society and rationality.

Sir Syed Movement blessed people with an innovative awareness and knowledge. They realized the importance of Nationality and Freedom for the very first time. The superior feelings for eastern values and spiritualism developed. Industrial and technical progress further enlightened the wisdom. These changings left a great impact on literature. The writers and Poets who were the part of Sir Syed Movement had smelt the new civilization and literature of west. They not only utilized the changings in Indian society but also played their positive and constructive role.

¹¹ Akhtar, S. *Urdu Adab ki Mukhtasir Tareekh*. Sang-e-Mil Publishers: Lahore, 1984.

The pivotal point of Sir Syed Movement is the dynamic personality of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan. He was an exceptional political and national leader. His objective was to mould nation according to modern time and changing circumstances. He put the foundation of proper reformative movement. His friends played a revolutionary role in the poetry and literature.

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan embedded a new approach and thought in literature through “Tehzeeb ul Ikhlauq”. As far as prose is concerned, that was covering the stages of its evolution. It was struggling to represent the realities of life and the secrets of universe. The simple prose of Fort William College, the logical prose of Dehli college, and Mirza Galib’s individual literary prose cannot be ignored in this regard and in particular, Mirza Galib paved the way for Urdu prose with sincerity and its refined specimens are available in the essays of Sir Syed. Sir Syed Movement has a significant place in the expansion of Urdu.

When Indian Muslims started to acquire political awareness after 1857 independence war, the Urdu-Hindi question arose with full strength. Sir Syed Movement, which was initially political in nature, became a major proponent of Urdu as well. And in addition to changing the future of Indian Muslims, this movement made promotion of Urdu as one of its major goals. Therefore, the progress Urdu language made under patronage of Sir Syed can never be ignored and overlooked. In Sir Syed Movement, along with Sir Syed, Maulana Shibli Nomani added new style of writing.

Muhammad Hussain Azad introduced the free verse to meet needs of changing scenarios. His writings took the style of English poetry, novel and critical essays. Conversely, he worked for history and linguistics of Urdu. Maulana Altaf Hussain Haali divulged into the genre of autobiography. “Maqda Shair-o-Shairi” brought a revolution in the fields of Urdu poetry and literature. Zaka Ullah propagated translations and translated works while Nazir Ahmad Delhvi fetched novel into Urdu literature.

The societal image highlighted by Sir Syed Movement helped the Muslim nation to get rid from intertwining of religion and nationalism. Writers attached to this movement penned their ideas about religion, politics, history, education and training that created an environment of true social awareness.

Languid and sad nation rose up again which encouraged positive and healthy lifestyle. A combination of reason, romance and nature in Urdu writings shaped a unique type of literary works that deeply affected Indian literature and society. In addition to explicit and argumentative essays, great quality of dialogue-based writings, journalistic writings and short stories were written.

Humans and humanity are central to literature of any language. Humans carry different types of emotions and feelings at the same time. Happiness, sadness, tension, relaxation, depression, enjoyment and alike create colors in our lives. Literature, in fact, is a representation of these various emotions, feelings and experiences. For expression of these emotions, writers and poets select various genres of literature like poetry and fiction. Narrative writings and fictions styles have changed to keep pace with modern trends. Here novels can be safely termed as emerged form of tales and stories. However, it is of significant value to understand the role of societal image of Sir Syed Movement for this new development. This movement played a heroic role in social, political, literary and linguistic needs of changing times.

Novel, criticism, free verse and short story are western ideas. They are true depiction of modern man. Tales based on supernatural stories were in high demand before novel. Novel, however, deals with realities of modern life. It served as a blessing for progress and development of Indian society. Tales usually do not have any particular purpose whereas novels are almost always written to serve a purpose. With its power to carry strong and realistic messages, novel has opened new horizons of social awareness, freedom, equality and equity in this materialistic world.

Sir Syed Movement left far reaching impacts on Urdu literature. Common readers got rid of unrealistic, imaginary and supernatural stories. Story telling moved to a new direction with strong emphasis on everyday issues faced by Urdu speakers of Indian sub-continent. Scientific developments and new material resources were creating a new type of society. English literature was introducing western thought and ideas. The Indian literature became a reflection of innovative thought and modern ideas in which existence of novel got significance because of a particular up and down.

The person who started fiction writing was one of the supporters of Sir Syed Movement. The tradition of morality in social realism became basic tradition in fiction writing later on. Sir Syed Movement played a very important role in changings that emerged in Urdu Literature. Tayabba Khatoon (2003) write about Sir Syed Movement: “Sir Syed provoked a new spirit of dedication in all the learned people and polished their creative faculties. Consequently, this movement speeds up the conflict between thought and ideas where people started writing on different subjects and issues from the fields of politics, sociology and history in prose”¹²

The aspects of purposefulness and utility are quite prominent, in the literature of that era, due to Sir Syed Movement. The writers, who were associated with Sir Syed Movement, gave a new dimension to literature that established a strong relationship with common people instead of court. The fears like hopelessness, pessimism and helplessness began to decrease in the Muslims due to social and economic uplift. There began to develop an atmosphere of understanding between people and leadership. In this way, Sir Syed Movement set the tradition of objective oriental literature. The writers of that age fully realized their sense of responsibility towards morality and social uplift. Those writers specified the status of man and woman in society and developed the sense of awareness. Syed Moin Ur Rahman (1971) considers this movement a source of reformation of society. “It was the message of Sir Syed that the rectification of men and women inevitable for the reformation of society. The society that does not respect women can never be titled as progressive and ideal. Despite their different Nazir Ahmad and Hali were also highlighting the same thought as individuals.”¹³

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and his companions adopted new system that urged the need of focusing on modern education. The main objective of Sir Syed Movement was to abolish orthodox and rigid customs, traditions and superstitions. He wanted to provoke the feelings of brotherhood, nationalism, freedom and patriotism in people. He knew very well that all India desired to

¹² Khatoon, T. *Urdu Nasar ki Dastaan*. Arslan Books Publishing: Mirpur AJK, 2003.

¹³ Moin Ur Rahman, S. *Mutaaliya Yaldrum*. Nazar Sons: Lahore, 1971.

get rid of cruelty, injustice and slavery. Therefore, he consumed all her energy and efforts to arise this sentiment in people.

In short, Sir Syed Movement brought a revolution in every field of life. The impacts began to appear in all genres of literature. Sir Syed, Azad, Hali, Shibli, Nazir Ahmad and other writers played a positive and constructive role according to the needs of the time. They perceived the needs of new ideas and mind set. Fiction was the result of these revolutionarily changing ideologies which gave birth to the parables of Nazir Ahmad Delhivi.

Conclusion

Society is a broad term which includes many perspectives and challenges. Different kinds of people live in societies who depend a great deal on the society for their traditions, customs, values, cultures and life styles. Many great movements have worked to improve societies and as a result the lives of people living in those cultures. Literary movements have brought new trends and changed the future directions of the nations.

Till 1857, Indian society was going through different stages of change and progress. People from different religions, tribes, identities were fighting a crucial battle of survival in a very special and multiethnic society of the sub-continent. At this difficult time, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and his fellows started a revolutionary movement to transform the lives of common people particularly Muslims and Urdu speakers. Sir Syed Movement made it clear that without focus on literature and education, it will not be possible to survive in evolving future of India. Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and his companions (especially Nazir Ahmad) used literature to highlight the burning issues of their age and spread a message of social awareness through poetry and fiction.

19th century was a difficult period for Muslims of India and still Sir Syed Movement was able to create an atmosphere where social, political and moral issues were raised through literature. Urdu literature is very rich and there is no reason that we cannot use it to pinpoint our major issues of life. We can use Urdu literature (perhaps English literature as well) to promote peace, stability and welfare in our society. The challenges we are facing in Pakistani society should be dealt with at various levels and fiction can play a major role in achieving our goals. Therefore, policymakers, educationists and

administrators should think about role of literature and how can we start a movement like Sir Syed Movement in our society. Many educationists are using literature to develop awareness among the youth about social issues like Hashim, Raihanah, Hamdan, Yusof, Abdullah and Amran (2011) demonstrated the benefits of literature for this purpose. By linking current issues through literature, we can pave the way for harmonious and peaceful society.¹⁴

¹⁴ Hashim, R. S., Raihanah, M. M., Hamdan, S. I., Yusof, N. M., Abdullah, I., & Amran, N. A. Literature and social change: engaging students with current issues in our midst. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 59, 2011, pp. 85–89.