

Classic Poetry Series

Abdul Ahad Azad
- poems -

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Abdul Ahad Azad(1903 – 1948)

Abdul Ahad Azad was one of the well known Kashmiri poets of his era. He was one of the pioneers of the modernist movement. Azad is often referred to as John Keats of Kashmir. Both Keats and Azad wrote modernist poems and both died in early forties.

Abdul Ahad Azad was one of the most overtly political and nationalist poets in the Kashmiri language. But Azad's nationalist sentiment is tempered by his socialism. Azad was a Marxist and also wrote one of the most influential literary histories of Kashmiri in the Urdu language.

Azad was closely associated with the progressive strand of the Kashmiri nationalist movement in the 1940s. Azad critiques religious orthodoxy in his poetry and his *Shikwa-e-Iblees* caused considerable controversy.

In modern times 'Azad' has very laudably and all the more, very loudly beckoned to man to derive inspiration from the evergreen nature around him, and consequently tame his animality to reach upto such heavenly heights. He, essentially, is a poet of human values bemoaning the shortcomings and inhibitions under which Man is constrained to count his days; but at the same time, inspiring him to know his own self as well as his compatriot, which only can usher in an era of mental peace and worldly affluence for him. He has not woven songs of sorrow, but has always wafted an aroma of optimistic rosy future through his pulsating imagination. He has consequently opted for finding an asylum in the future, disdaining the unpalatable present. He may, therefore be called a poet of morrow.

It might well be contended that this kind of ostrich-like behaviour on the part of the poet may sound as self-defeat and hence is a left-handed compliment. Herein, it can be said very conveniently that 'Azad' did not at all shut his eyes towards the present red in tooth and claw; he did not also own self-deceit--a salient trait of Romantic poets. He was very sure of the ground under his feet, but at the same time, he presaged a meaningful future for the Man, though himself living in the present. He was essentially a poet of Man unscreening his wants and aspirations, unveiling the Satan underneath his fair complexion, portraying most pathetically the man's dilemma being ground under the weight of exploitation and oppression and to crown all his faulty attitude of dividing man and man on the basis of religious beliefs. These all stigmatic characteristics of a mentally sick man were obviously unbecoming of him- the crown of creation. Therefore 'Azad' an everawake artist could not all the time afford to deride him,

cultivating in him a sense of irreparable frustration, and blunting his initiative. As his ardent votary, he tried to instill fresh hope in him for bettering his present and on its contours build a happy future. He, therefore, strove hard to keep the spirit of Man alive and kicking. The distance between the actual and ideal was to be smoothed by the Man himself. In utter frustration and inner turmoil, he would never rise to the occasion, hence the need to sustain his hopes holding out economically secure, fraternally amiable, socially agreeable and politically undominating future to him, This, in short, is what 'Azad' strove all his life to accomplish. In all fairness to him, it cannot be dubbed as self-defeat or self-deceit, it is self-education and self-discipline. 'Azad' would never like Man to bite the dust, but rise above it, so that a future comfortable in every respect would be guaranteed for him, This kind of attitude is the forte of all poet-philosophers for them shadow has never been a substitute for substance.

'Azad' is inherently possessed of uncommon consciousness of head and heart. He has never elected to go into the shell like other Kashmiri Romanticists. Instead, he has tried to analyse Man in every sense of the word, bereft of any curves or blind alleys. His approach is direct, therefore sparing us the fatigue of fruitless kite-flying in respect of the essence contained in his poetry. We are saved the embarrassment of solving puzzles and conundrums, rack our brains in interpreting his message and derive inferences interwoven in his poetry throbbing with life. He most candidly asserts that his propitiation of the Muse is only a medium to focus attention on Man. In this field, he wears his profession on his sleeves:-

"O! Adorer of religious values, you have opted for puritanic religiosity; And I have elected for my own faith. You resign yourself completely to the steadfast faith in God, and my aim is to propitiate Man."

In other words, the poet begins with the real and does not get lost in the maze of ideal. Man was made after the image of God; he is a macrocosmic representation of his microcosmic spirit. Therefore, to propitiate Man is actually to adore God. Azad believes in the affirmation of life and not in its negation. For him Man is not a solid bundle of flesh and blood only, but a manifestation of undaunted vigour and unvanquished spirit. He may have forgotten, or even obliged to forget such sterling qualities for the time-being, for which he is not only to blame; Azad's poetic fervour has tried to re-ignite that dead spirit in him. It is awakening Man to his stature:-

"This world is a thorn of unfulfilled ambitions in my garden; And the world-beyond is a blot of scare and fear on my skirt. Therefore, I owe it to Man to usher in a new- spring and bring back blossoming health to this garden of his; So

that Man like the flowers will attain full bloom therein."

It can be conceded forthwith that 'Azad' has no pretensions for being a spiritual preacher. He is mainly concerned with the material well being of Man. He does not make tall claims for reforming the spiritual attitude of Man. He does not go beyond the material contentment of Man, He makes him conscious of his rights and obligations, but does not dabble in awakening him to spiritual consciousness alone. He has concern for him on the material plane only. A hungry man is always an angry individual.

When this anger against the society has made him unbalanced, he can in no way harness his faculties to reach up to the subliminal heights. On the other hand, if he gets two square meals without any fuss or friction, he can usefully yoke his mind to achieve self, consciousness and consequent self-realization; Stuck up in the mire of material insecurity, his yearning for spiritual edification will be an exercise in futility. Self-consciousness presupposes mental peace and equilibrium. If it is denied to Man, how can we expect him to engage himself in self- search. He has his frailties, he is not a super-soul adept in self-denial. He would like to have his minimum wants satisfied, hence abjuring world is foreign to his genius in these circumstances. He is weighed down so much by the oddities of life, that he is always nursing a cramp in his back. With this physical and mental ailment, his soul does receive bruises, hence is incapable of unfolding its wings, without mincing words, 'Azad' has elaborated his point of view in this behalf, in these words:-

"O God, I do not yearn after riches and gold, but would implore you to show me such a world in which Divine obedience is to remember God within always, but not to pray to Him everytime for the fulfilment of each and every want."

He would like Man to be self- reliant, architect of his own fate. He has to put in efforts incessantly for making his life self-dependent and not to look to God for making him materially secure always. Relying on the Grace of God will naturally breed indolence in him and mar his initiative, which 'Azad' would never allow. God's blessings are reserved for those who help themselves. For him the religion of Man is straight- forwardness wedded to truthfulness. Hypocrisy degrades Man:-

"Even though holding rosary in his fingers (A Mussalmaan), or donning the sacred- thread around his neck (A Hindu), such a human- being is diffident to speak the truth, can well be called a 'Peer' among his flock, or a Brahmin among his tribe." According to 'Azad' he does not deserve the title of Man. He deludes people by his outer appearance and exploits their credulity. He is an imposter

and and a pretender. He lacks courage to call the spade a spade. It would be better to quote the exact phrase used by 'Azad' in this respect:-

"Nature had brought you to life simply for disseminating love; instead of it, O! Man, you converted your religion and faith into a lucrative trade, a veritable device for minting money."

The poet in 'Azad' is an indefatigable crusader against inequality between man and man in terms of his religious beliefs, creed, social injustice and political exploitation; but at the same time, he does not subscribe to the theory of total annihilation as propounded by Marxists. He advocates the view of total upliftment called 'Sarvodaya' in Gandhian parlance. He does not borrow foreign tools to make social order viable, but prefers to remedy the ills rampant in Man and his society by home-spun prescriptions. He is enamoured more of Gandhi than of Lenin or Marx:-

"Even the ferocious torrents can be arrested and tamed, if the man plunges himself, with out any fear, into the turmoils and tribulations of life and does not sit on the fence. This very trait of self- suffering is discernible in Gandhi--the Head of our Family, and is completely absent in alien people and their ideology."

'Azad' is alive to the fact that independence of India and that of Kashmir is in the offing. It is a writing on the wall. At that hour of political emancipation, our leaders shall have to undergo an acid test. If they choose the line adopted by our erstwhile rulers, the English, then this freedom will have no meaning. It will mean only change of masters. Indigenous political power cannot be a synonym for corruption, but should in its stead goad man on to sublimity. Political leaders should personify detachment, never feel intoxicated by the power they are supposed to wield- a mandate and a trust from the people. It has often been seen that the man loses his head at this time of his political elevation and paradoxically enough uses the same power given to him by the people, ruthlessly against them. Therefore, he cautions the future rulers of our land in these words:-

"The foreigners have now bolted away after doing a brisk business here. It is the turn of our own kin now, but they also appear to me as the shrewd tradesmen presiding over their business-houses. O! Sylvan pine tree, who does nurse you?" Their tricks of trade to exploit innocent people are enumerated as under:-

"These enemies of healthy social order screen away the truth the people by invoking religion, authority, God and His Godliness and even destiny.

Even though 'Azad' was not destined to witness the era of independence in its fullness, but how prophetically he has pin-pointed the behaviour of our rulers to be. He could smell future in advance. In this predicament, the people have no choice but to opt for slavery once again. The self-centred leadership has monopolized all the fruits of freedom, these have not been allowed to trickle down to the masses at large. Being disillusioned, the man would like to revert once more to foreign domination. The so-called love and concern by which these leaders swear is nothing short of opium mesmerizing the thinking and vision of the people, so that the unbridled rule of these Political jugglers is perpetuated undisturbed:-

"That poor soul can never think of detached behaviour of fearless self-denial; He, who is devoid of his mental as well as physical balance, and to crown all, has planted his feet on the pedestal of authority endangering his equilibrium all the more, that so called concern for the weal of man as professed by such leaders actually dopes the dauntless spirit of man, denying him to keep his head high, and forces him to bite the dust."

'Azad's' conviction in Hindu-Muslim amity and consequent Solidarity is marrow-deep. He abhors division of man into parochial nomenclature. Human beings have one and only one religion that is living up to human values. The fruits of hardwon freedom should not be frittered away on Hindu-Muslim squabbles. Humanity need not be sacrificed at the altar of communal frenzy:-

"Those who call Hindus and Muslims as brothers, hand and glove with each other, are strictly guided by the tenets of the vedas and the Quran; they have no other Holy Book for preaching this enlightenment. If God had to segregate nations and creeds from each other, then He would have provided them with separate earth and Sky."

The children of God share the bounties of the earth together; They are uniform in body and soul. Why should their thinking get muddled?

"I, as a frailman, took into account only the negative aspect of life- the turmoil of the waves, friction and even man- handling, The positive phase of life is contained in the maxim unity amongst Diversity; But, I only paid heed to the brewing of quarrels and the subsequent bad-taste these leave in the mouth. Had there not been oneness of Man how could such ignorant people pull on with those gifted with reason? For me, life is a continuous journey to reach up to that ideal."

After going through the entire poetic prowess of 'Azad' this inference is irresistible that his attainments as a celebrated Kashmiri poet were not a matter

of days; It took him years after years to find his feet and thus project his message through rhyme and rhythm. Thus, we can glean three patent stages in his poetry from start to the end, in which his heart- beats have built inch by inch the premise on which his innate imagination indulged in playful sport. The first stage may well be termed as the period of initiation; Herein the poet has tried to harness his talents in translating his emotions, feelings and experience. This is the first attempt, hence cannot be free from shortcomings. His poetic fervour at this time was greatly influenced by the current Persian trends in vogue in Kashmir. It is more or less a Kashmiri rendering of Persian songs replete with the symbolism of 'Gul' and 'Bulbul'! Not only the content of his poetry is inspired by Persian 'Gazal' but even the form, the phrase, idiom and even vocabulary has been borrowed from it. In this behalf, it may be said that 'Azad' could not gather moral strength to rise above the traditional trends current in Kashmiri poetry till then. He could not also afford to plough a lone furrow and extricate his poetry from the traditional stamp of Persian Muse. Therefore, his poetry at this stage could not be expected to touch the highest water-mark of independent thinking:-

"I became fully intoxicated after gulping down the wine of love, even bordering on lunacy; This, I drank at the tavern of Love, one goblet after another. He filled my heart with inebriating warmth of love to the brim, so that not a niche was available there to lend ear to worldly advice. I experienced a very thin line between my life and death, presumably having lost my head by excessive indulgence."

This kind of sensual and sensuous poetry is not actually in the grain of 'Azad', but he feels compelled to toe the line his seniors had earmarked for themselves. Even the Persian vocabulary has been freely used by him, which to speak the least, has shorn the wings of his inherent imagination. At times, such Poetry sound as versified prose wafting the flavour of Persian propensities:-

"The heart, the life, the love and the reason-The four bloodsuckers, in their own way, torment the helpless and abject feverish sentiment of irresistible call of flesh."

In this stanza only 'chhi' and 'Nali' are pure Kashmiri words, the rest being Persian; such artificial poetic constructions, initial attempts of a novice, can be profusely multiplied.

'Azad' has very sincerely confessed that at the initial stage of poetry-writing, 'Mahjoor'; the Doyen of Kashmir's lyricists, was his mentor. He used to get his poetic compositions revised and corrected by him. We can very safely assert also that at this time 'Mahjoor' was also his model. 'Azad' has at times composed his

own verses on the pattern used by 'Mahjoor'; such Poems even though not imitations strictly speaking, are actually the models before him for undergoing, constant drill to catch up with this 'Master of Kashrniri Muse'. For example, 'Mahjoor' wrote the famous poem is "karo bulbulo deedaari gul" "O Buibul steal a glance at the flowers," and 'Azad' like a faithful apprentice composed a poem with the caption "vuchh bulbulo darbaari gul" "O, Bulbul witness the Durbar of flowers." The construction of verses, their meter, and the content are exactly similar. In the same way, 'Mahjoor's' famous romantic poem "baagi nishat ke gulo" "O Flower of Nishat Garden, come unto me with exquisite fund of coquetry," has been rendered by him into his own picture-poetry like this "baagi naseem ke gulo" "O flower of Naseem Garden, come unto me with captivating babblings of a child."

However, after such a brief honey-moon with this kind of poetry, on which Mahjoor's influence was the loudest, 'Azad' was successssul in carving out an exclusive experimental ground for his independent thinking, totally divorced from the tradition and any extraneous influence. It may well be called the stage of experimentation,

'Azad' was rebel and a reformer at the same time. His imagination pregnant with new values revolutionary as well as altruistic could not remain tethered to the hackneyed norms of poetry for long. The force of circumstances, brought out the real poet in him which was in content and form home-spun and hand-woven, so to speak. After undergoing excruciating travails of labour-pain, when there was a twilight engulfing him disturbing the exact equation between his head and heart, in the second stage of his potic fervour, his imagination got chastened, and his vision was divested of faulty aberrations. He located his goal with meticulous ingenuity. He was no longer a dreamer weaving reveries of sound and sense, but a vigilant sentinel of human values. He chose to discover Man, and his environment contaminated with contradictions. To him love, was not a sentimental frenzy now but milk of human kindness saturating meaningfully every phase of life with its attendant vissicitudes:-

"Love robs even high-statured seers given to penance, and also the well- read matters of knowledge; It tarnishes the innocent and flower- bedecked bodies of fair-maidens. At the threshold of Your Youth, you erred in selecting opulent people as your companions, perhaps not knowing that even the kings have been reduced to abject penury and those who used to give change hands with receiving alms."

This is actually the hard core of life and 'Azad' is now fully groomed to analyse it. For him poetry is a potent vehicle to unravel this bitter truth of life. It is neither

jugglery of words, nor an expedient to indoctrinate people:-

"Taking bold of a pen and to write from beginning to the end cannot be called a pleasing composition. It is nothing but gold-coating on brass, simply to cheat the innocent people."

'Azad' is now alive to the fact that beauty has its limitations; ugliness cannot be termed squarely as its antonym. These are actually states of mind, a very thin line dividing these. In the context of changing values, beauty and ugliness can become complementary to each other, as the sun and shadow in actual life. So, the poet has to proclaim:-

"To the wise love is self-suffering, wrapping their boney skeleton underneath their garments. People with diverse intellectual dimensions call these either devices for minting money, or highway robbery; only a few can read true 'leadership' into it." True leadership worships service before self. It has to set an example for others to follow. 'Azad' displaying courage of highest order took up the challenge of the time, its stresses and strains, its demands and obligations most seriously:-

"Having fully felt the pulse of this age, 'Azad' is now composing these songs in which the 'Flower', the Bulbul, the wine, and their unquenching thirst are totally absent. Can this kind of poetry commend itself to poets?"

'Azad' changed the entire fabric of Kashmiri poetry, its woof and warp. He deviated from the age-long tradition. With eyes wide awake, he metamorphized the content as well as form of Kashmiri poetry. He is alive to the fact that this sweeping change will not earn him laurels for the present, because it will be lacking in the traditional attributes. He bemoans the content of Kashmiri poetry in these words.-

"Was it befitting on your part to have bargained your faith and world for fleeting sentimentality. You were actually nursing with love those flowers which had lost their fragrance. It was not becoming of you." This attitude of the poet heralds the third epoch of his poetry. Herein his imagination has become fully baked, his outlook completely changed and his nerve surprisingly enough quite strong to defy the tradition and usher in a new way of life. He has evolved a method of sweet persuasion punctuated with direct approach. He beckons to Man:-

"O Dullard! you bemoan your lot, and blame your destiny least knowing that this heaven or hell is the outcome of your own actions."

Then what should be the attitude of a perfect Man according to 'Azad':-

"If you are very soft, lying flat like the earth, the world will trample you and also heap indignities on you. If you act like steel, then remember, one day will come, when you might have tamed lions by chains even, yet this very trait of yours might also turn the steel in you into a dagger or a sword."

The attitude of Man should be middle of the road, neither too soft nor too hard. In being too soft, there is every apprehension of losing the image, and in being too hard there is every chance of using that very steel against the people which had earlier shielded them from tyranny and oppression. Therefore, Man has to tread his ground very carefully, paving a rewarding path between these two extremes. He has to apply reason, the guarded treasure of his, and not get blinded by animality:

"O Man, you were supposed to be the lighthouse of innate reason, but you acted like a contagious fire. You have brought discredit to humanity in the most callous way."

Man was modelled by Nature to share the common weal and woe of his co-brethren; but he reappropriated to himself all the good things of life and thus starved his fellow-beings:-

"Nature had uncovered all her treasures for your free use. You had to share these equally with others; but you elected to become their sole guardian-cobra."

His clarion call to awaken Man to his duties is quite understandable in the background of communal disharmony, exploitation, tyranny of foreign rule, appalling inequality and monstrous behaviour of Man having lost his moorings. His nature-poetry should also be construed in that very perspective. He most consciously injects love of motherland and humanity into the dead veins of Man, bringing him back to robust health; Love for land and love for man are the two most predominant ingredients of Azad's poetry:-

"The sweet warbling Bulbuls and cuckoos girdle round my motherland disseminating love and harmony. The flowers of this fairyland hold cups in their hands; How auspicious and thought provoking is my land of birth!

In the very second-breath, he weaves this arresting panorama of bountiful Nature:-

"The 'Dal lake' with its full-grown crop of lotuses is steady and silent, as if to

preservo its ego of immensity, Nevertheless, tho violent water-falls rush down from the hill-tops in frenzied ecstasy; How auspicious and thought-provoking my land of birth is?

His love for Man with unparalleled catholicity can be conveniently inferred from this verse:-

"You proclaimed yourself to be the pillar of religious obligations in terms of Hindus and Muslims; Actually you were least concerned with it. Seeing your actions, the entire humanity is in consternation."

The religious labels dividing Man from Man have no relevance to the demands the universal values of brotherhood are making at present. This kind of inconvenient luxury is out of date now. We had to pay through our nose by this artificial division between the sons of the same soil in the days of yore. This lapse needs to be rectified now:-

"It is verily the man who constructed the temples and who also laid the foundation of 'Kaba'. Therefore, O you believer in the Quran, what fault do you find with the Gita."

Change is the sauce of life, monotony its poison. 'Azad' has explained this universal truth like this:-

"What is life? It is a folic depicting change. Oneness of God was the harbinger of oneness of His creation; The unity of Man is the consummation of that oneness. The real purport of life is continuous turmoil, and the essence of turmoil is change."

This is the message of 'Azad'; continuous struggle against odds. Actually life had never been a bed of roses for him. He could only get a petty pittance of Rs. thirteen per month as a teacher. Despite this economic discomfiture, he never grumbled. He could hardly keep the wolf out of the door, yet he was more keen to drive away the wolves of exploitation, social inequality and political aggrandisement. His poetry is not individualistic. It is the dirge of the underdog scattered over length and breadth of this globe. He does not weave his own sighs into heart-rending poetry, but laments the woes of Man-a fallen angel. He would like to rehabilitate him, restore his pristine glory. Self is absent throughout his poetry. He sings for whole humanity. His entire poetry is a saga of human consciousness; He does not pretend to be a preacher, a mystic, or a romanticist. He is the conscience-keeper of man.

Even though, the present, he was destined to face, was thoroughly unpalatable, yet he disdained it only to build a rosy future out of it debris. Ignoring his own to-day-inhospitable and discomforting, he, like a valiant crusader only looked towards the bright to-morrow, when Man would recognize his own self and get rid of all the ills which irk him at present:-

"The revolution in the thinking of Man will bring back to life the doped Bulbuls, the flowers- gardens will be in fall bloom. Those who are bereft of head and heart will be looked after by this sweeping change."

But 'Azad' died a martyr to his own ideology; burning love or humanity consumed his blood every day in and out, and at a comparatively younger age of forty five he had to drop down his mantle. His 'to-day' was physically over; he had discarded it mentally since long, so it made no worthwhile difference to him; Yet his 'morrow' dawned with all the brilliance he had endeavoured all his life to bestow on it. The poet in 'Azad' can never die because his imagination is wedded to the immortal human values; The soothing touch of his poetic-alchemy will resurrect him in the morrow-the vocal champion of which he was throughout.

He is, to speak precisely, a poet of to- morrow. He only feigned to count his breath in to-day, actually his heart lay in the day following. Therefore, it was not without meaning that 'Mahjoor' his tallest senior, mentor and model paid him this glowing tribute:-

"Oh! 'Azad' has concealed himself from this world; or the cup of life has eluded him. 'Mahjoor' would like to unfold his heart over his death by saying that the sweet-throated Bulbul has opted for silence."

The Stars Speak To Man

You ,? the light of lights?,? imperiled the world
You discredited the human

?You discredited the human
?You trade in faith and religion

?All the doors to the world?'s treasures opened up for you
?You do not share but accumulate this world?'s wealth

?We are all one?,? one flesh?,? nothing but One
?Who put the discord of the Two in your heart?? ?

?Are you a leader of religion and faith??
?You care for neither religion nor faith
?But the whole humanity mourns your fall

?Should we take into our heart a religion which divides the human??
?A religion which turns the unity of the world into a chaos and wilderness

?You name mischief in the world '?religion?', 'nation'?
?What you call enlightenment is mere intoxication

?There is a restlessness in the heart, there is a veil over our dreams
?All this is an illusion. When will you wake up??

?The heartbroken, the dejected, my friends and well-wishers
?How you destroy human hearts in the name of the human??

?You sprinkle the leaves and desert the roots
?You are destroying your own house in the name of the human

Abdul Ahad Azad