

AKHTAR HUSAIN RAIPURI

Literature and Life

[TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: Akhtar Husain Raipuri's [Akhtar Ḥusain Rā'ēpūrī] article "Adab aur Zindagī" (Literature and Life), published in July 1935 by Anjuman-e Tarraqī-e Urdū in the quarterly journal *Urdu*, edited by Bābā-e Urdū Maulvī 'Abdu'l-Ḥaq, took the Indian literary scene by storm. The essay announced the arrival of the progressive literary movement in India and was a pioneering effort of Marxist literary criticism. It represented the crest of a wave of revolutionary thought that culminated in the formation of the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) in 1936. The foundations of the nascent organization's manifesto can be clearly traced back to the principles and ideologies that are outlined in Raipuri's essay.

Raipuri's article is inescapably entrenched in the currents of colonial Indian thought and is a product of those very peculiar circumstances. The literary milieu in India at that time was a composite of many waves of novel thought and literary movements, both national and international. While Europe saw the ascendance of Marxist criticism, the home front saw the emergence of post-Iqbālian literary thought that coincided with mass political mobilization on a scale larger than ever before. The conditions were ripe for a fresh group of young writers with the new ideas, hopes and anxieties that became the principal movers for the progressive movement in India. The concern of this essay is the expression of those very anxieties and this, by itself, makes the essay very significant in the annals of Indian literary history.

However, the question arises: what might this essay hold for us today? The article in its time raised questions about what it means to be an *adib* (writer) and what literature is? Should literature be responsible, activist or otherwise? At what point, if ever, does an *adib* cease to be a product of his surroundings, wholly (un?)affected by socio-economic and political considerations?

The essay, at the very least, forces us to ponder these questions, no matter what answers Raipuri suggests in it. It forces us to reflect on our own socio-economic condition and the thoughts and concerns of an audience today, even if the answers to these concerns differ from those proffered in the article. A famous verse of Faiz Ahmed Faiz asserts:

*Yūñbī hamēsha ulajhtī rabī hai zūlm sē khalq
Na apnī rasm na'ī hai na un kī rīt na'ī*

Thus, forever, has humanity grappled with tyranny
Neither is our custom new, nor theirs

Raipuri challenges the reader to reassess his inclusivity in this *khalq*. Assuming that literature is a subset of human culture, does one choose to reflect the human condition and the attention this surely demands of anyone who claims to be a part of the *khalq*, or does one take a different position?

The question also arises—if a reader were to engage Raipuri's arguments—of how to appropriate or evaluate literature such as that produced by the likes of Naiyer Masud or Qurratulain Hyder, and on a theoretical level these queries are valid. However, special attention needs to be paid to a certain kind of literature that is grounded in the “real” world (not necessarily adhering to social realism), the production and evaluation of which necessitates closures and compromises within the critical and literary world at a certain, as yet indeterminate, level. While the answers to these questions are always, as the history of this debate has proven, more complicated than simple affirmation or denunciation, the act of questioning remains pertinent.]

WHAT IS LITERATURE? Is it art for art's sake or art for the sake of life? What are its objectives? These questions are as old as the history of literary knowledge. The standard-bearers of “art for art's sake” think that just like the spirit and God, literature too is some kind of supernatural entity; and just as beauty and truth cannot be evaluated by common standards, in the same way pleasure and delight can only be derived from literature when it is placed outside the strictures of society.

According to the aesthetic point of view upheld by the likes of Hegel, Schopenhauer, Fichte and many English littérateurs and thinkers, the purpose of art is the search for beauty. The ethical way of thinking, which is expounded by Tolstoy, holds that art is the reflection of virtue. However, from the economic and material point-of-view, both of these standards are vague and incomplete.

If it is true that the writer is a human being and like all human beings is affected by his environment, and if it also true that the production of literature is a kind of social activity and humanity is affected by it, then the aims of literature and humanity necessarily coincide. Literature is a branch of life and there is no reason why, in a natural world, since it analyzes and explains human emotions, it should become something of a Holy Spirit speaking from on high.

Life is an indivisible whole, a unity, and does not admit of compart-

mentalization into the separate categories of science, arts or philosophy so that anyone could just get up and say, "I have no business with life; I live for myself alone." Like everything else, literature and art are nourished by life and serve it. Literature connects the past with the present and the present with the future. By breaking the shackles of color and race, country and nation, it offers humanity a message of unity. There is no reason an artist should claim such a significant social obligation as their personal property and have any such claim on their part be accepted.

What is this beauty for which the champions of art for art's sake have been pursuing for ages? It is actually impossible to define beauty. In a famous essay Voltaire has ridiculed those people who want to establish certain standards of beauty. He writes that even a frog claims beauty for its soft, shiny skin, and even the face and full lips of an Abyssinian beauty entices her lovers to sacrifice themselves for her. According to the classical German philosophers, beauty is not that which "makes men happy."

This means, then, that the purpose of literature is to be first and foremost innately entertaining, and since it is also claimed that art is the most important branch of life, entertainment, therefore, becomes life's apex. Then, it is also the case that what is pleasurable to one person might be disagreeable to another. This view of literature and life is so meaningless that it is pointless to write about it. So then, is the purpose of art to search for truth? What is truth? Can there ever be a definitive and final definition of truth that is acceptable to all? What's good for one person can be bad for another. What is right and true for the rich is wrong and false for the poor. What then is this truth that literature seeks?

Apart from the purpose of life, literature can neither seek this purpose nor is it even possible. Life's tidal flow compels it to follow along, rather than call itself the keeper of life's mysteries or the creator of beauty and love. The obligations and aims of an ordinary human being and a *littérateur* are one and shared, the only difference being that while the latter interprets his milieu the former is simply affected by it. Indeed, in the world of literature one can find scores of examples of writers who wanted to go forward or backward totally impervious to their milieu. If one reflects upon the causes of such a drift, it would become evident that this was a reaction to circumstances and not some state of inspiration.

In order to understand the goals of life, we must make a cursory examination of the foundations of society and figure out why a society flourishes or decays, and towards what end such changes propel it. Society is an aggregate of people who come together for a common purpose. Coming together and cooperation necessarily presuppose a common goal. Every individual's material needs are more or less the same, and

society begins with a view to abet the acquisition and distribution of the basic needs of life. In other words, the very cornerstone of society lies in the production and distribution of what will satisfy a man's material needs, and the relationship between individuals changes according to the balance between these two factors.

The "progress of the society" implies the strengthening of the relationships between its individual members; that is, the basic needs of life are more easily accessible, which enables the individual members to satisfy all their desires. The more extensive and effective the means of production and the more acceptable to the masses the system of wealth distribution, the longer the economic system of a society will endure. Societal development is actually the development of these very means of production. In order to understand how man advanced from the primitive to the industrial age we would have to first look at how the ax was transformed into the tractor, how the spear became the machine-gun.

The means of production can be divided into two categories. On the one hand there are those natural means and elements that have to be made productive according to needs. On the other hand there is the human labor that makes this possible. The natural resources such as land, minerals, and raw materials are the same today as before. They never change. Societal change and development, however, is always dependent on the human effort which turns these things into something functional. A field in which outmoded farming methods used to produce about ten maunds of grain, today yields hundreds of maunds thanks to the use of machines. It is this progress in the means of production by which the success of a society is judged.

The cornerstone of the organization of society has been laid on the production of life's necessities and society can only exist as long as the feeling of unity amongst its members remains extant, which is ensured by the fulfillment of everyone's needs. This makes it compulsory that the methods of production and distribution be such that each individual is able to satisfy his needs by working within the limits of his capacity. Thus, the connection between production and distribution guarantees the strengthening of the relationship between individuals.

Every philosophy of life strives for the same goal: that each individual is provided the opportunity for spiritual, mental and physical growth. However, man's material existence demands that first and foremost his bodily needs must be provided for. The only people who acquire capital wealth and prosperity are those who somehow or other seize control of the means of production. It is the people who are deprived of these things who are poor and destitute. Whenever it is possible for society as a

whole, rather than just a certain class within it, to gain control of the means of production, the distribution of resources is performed in such a manner that every hardworking person is freed from the care of earning a livelihood, and if the society can provide the surety and security of nurturing and supporting future generations, then this would be the height of the society's material progress. And beyond that, intellectually and culturally it would drive humanity towards a higher status. At that point the collective spirit would become supreme and the disparity between the majority and minority would disappear. This is the primary aim of life and it demands that every branch of life strive towards its attainment.

Keeping this in mind, the prophet of modern literature Maxim Gorky has said: "Literature is humanity's critic. It makes the latter's perversion manifest, and unveils its ineptitudes. Its greatest achievement is that it provides longevity and stability to man's fleeting existence. The purpose of its distress and disquiet is to make man understand that he is not subservient to circumstances, rather circumstances are subservient to him. It wants to tell him that he is the master of his own life and can guide it whichever way he wants. From this perspective, literature advocates change, breaks conventions, and is the precursor of the modern age."

Literature answers the questions of what man must love, what he must hate, and how he must live. And if the truth be told, literature has nothing to do with didacticism. It does not provide the bitter medicine of counsel and admonition for mankind's malady but instead nurses it with gentle, soothing melodies. While it is true that literature derives from the past and the present, what it preeminently seeks is the future. If it looks back, or left and right, it is to see the contours of life's path so that mankind may find its way more easily forward. On the historical front, literature's place is not at the back of the ranks but right in the front lines. Even as literature transcends the limits of time and space it seeks to reflect its environment so that, by becoming aware of both its beauty and its baseness, humanity may ascend the steps of progress.

The difference between knowledge and literature is the same as the difference between a teacher's threats and a mother's lullabies. It is the teacher who, through story and song, explains the mysteries of life to man. The aims of literature should be to reflect those emotions which light the way toward human progress and condemn those which prevent man from progressing. Additionally, literature should adopt a mode of discourse that is accessible to the greatest number of people because, in any case, the aim of life is to attain the greatest possible good for the greatest number of people.

The benchmark of true literature is that it relays the aims of humanity

in a way that enables the greatest number of people to accept its influence. For this, one needs to be inclined towards serving humanity in the first place, because just like prophethood, literature demands self-sacrifice rather than the harangue of a professional pontiff! It is important for the writer to understand the past, the present and the future so that his compassion is not wasted and he can explain the signs and intimations implicit in history. Then again, life can only be understood when one has experienced its fires and has been a part of its upheavals. To try and understand its meaning while remaining outside its ebb and flow is like standing on the shore and estimating the ocean's depth. In this case, the *littérateur* can neither relate to the feelings of the people nor convey his meaning and message to them. This standard would appear to be too high and difficult because, until now, literature has remained under the control of a body of people who were paid for counting the waves in the river like some king's famous courtier.

It will be asked, then, what path should the writer take? In what direction must he orient his imagination and creativity so that they merge with the highway of life from which they have so far remained quite distant? The famous Russian thinker Prince Kropotkin answers: "If the pain of humanity is in your heart, if the strings of your emotions are attuned to their sorrows, and as a sensitive human being you are receptive to life's message, then you will be against all types of tyranny. When you concentrate on the starvation of millions of people, when you look at the thousands of bodies writhing on the battlefields, when you find your brothers facing the afflictions of imprisonment and the gallows, and when you see cowardice triumph over bravery and vice over virtue, then prose writers and poets, if you are human, you shall come forth! There is no way that you can remain silent. You shall support the oppressed because it is the duty of every human being to defend reality and truth."

The primary duty of literature is to initiate the erasure of discrimination based on nation, country, color, ethnicity, class or religion and to represent the group that takes practical steps with this aim in mind. To bear enmity toward the enemies of humankind is actually a proof that one feels compassion for humanity. The only thing our literature has accomplished so far is to lament the impermanence of life and the helplessness of man. It should now shed its faintheartedness and boldly proclaim that life is eternal and man is its true architect. What is meant by the Day of Judgment is that the collective spirit should assume the reins of justice, consign despotism to hell forever, and on this very earth create a paradise where man can reach the limits of his physical and spiritual progress. The paths of humanity and literature are not different and their salvation also

lies along the same path. That path lies in oppressed mankind's recognition of its rights, and recognition of those who have usurped those rights. Additionally, it also lies in breaking all the limitations that block man's way toward development and progress.

On one side there is that pensioned police superintendent who, after spending his entire life exhibiting arrogance and greed, counts his sins on the beads of a rosary. He needs books that help him weep and sleep at night. Then there is the cleric who, under the cloak of religion, is the worst materialist and whose avarice finds some solace in the recitation of ream upon ream of vile poetry. Moreover, there are those educated young women who, having heard the cold sighs of wife-adoring poets, pine for some such crazed lover. These women only want to read stories where they themselves are the heroines, where the heroes commit suicide and lie writhing like butchered poultry.

Well, until now you have been writing for these very people. Will your future literary endeavors be dedicated to them as well?

On the other side there is the peasant who firmly supports the entire structure of society. The landlords and usurers are sucking his blood like leeches. The clerics spray him with the magic breath of self-sacrifice, patience and thankfulness. His wife is forced into making shady deals for the sake of bread. His children, fed up with being hungry, lie in wait to pick your pocket. There is the laborer who is the pillar of the edifice of society. He creates the wealth that is snatched away by another for whom the title "lord and master" has been coined in the dictionary. In hovels that are worse than jail cells, that hungry, ill-clad worker dies in agony, afflicted with cholera and plague, desperately wanting to be some moneylender's (*mārvārī*'s) bull or some rich man's pet dog!

Has his pathetic condition ever pricked your heart? Have you ever paused to think why this happens? Has it ever crossed your mind that you might eradicate the very grounds and pretexts for this? If not, then you are a source of shame for literature. For such writers Kropotkin has this to say: "Do you wish to become a writer? Then reflect upon the story of your country's afflictions and if, subsequently, your heart does not bleed then throw your pen away. The only use for that pen is to keep unveiling the impurity of your shameless heart!"

It is as if today literature is speaking to us in the voice of Kabir Das:

Kabir stands in the market square, a firebrand in hand
Whosoever burns his house can come along with us

We are not concerned with people whose minds have become brothels in the pursuit of wealth and who are the bondsmen of capitalist pub-

lishers and heartless, ignorant citizens. We are addressing those who consider the creation of literature nothing less than prophecy, who speak the truth and abide by it, and in doing so are not afraid of any barriers. □

—*Translated by Adeem Subail*