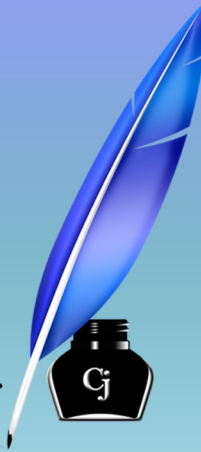


ISSN 0976-8165

*The Criterion*



# The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access Journal

June 2013 Vol. 4 Issue- III

**Editor-in-Chief**

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

**Managing Editor**

Madhuri Bite

[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)  
[criterionejournal@gmail.com](mailto:criterionejournal@gmail.com)

## Prism of Marginalisation : Sahir Ludhyanvi's Poetry

**Mohammad Kamran Ahsan**

Fulbright Fellow 2011-12  
Yale University, New Haven CT  
USA

The genesis of Progressive Writers' Association in London's Nanking Hotel in 1934 ushered in a new era in Indian Literature. The group of Progressive writers was pondering over the future of Indian literature that can fit and suit the demands of crucial period of anti-colonial resistance. The manifesto had a strict adherence to the 'doctrine of social realism in literature'. (Hafiz Malik p-649) though this (Soviet literature, social realism) was attributed by the western critics as a 'perfect propaganda instrument'. (Ibid) Sajjad Zaheer, the convener of PWA and his peers gave an institutional shape to these progressive ideas; they called a meeting of Marxist intellectuals and prominent literary figures in 1936 in Lucknow. The first PWA meeting was presided by Premchand, a key figure in Hindi-Urdu literature. The manifesto of Progressive Writers' Association was based on dialectical materialism, '*the philosophy of the revolutionary working class party.*' (Cornforth, p.7)

*In this philosophy—dialectical materialism—are embodied the general ideas by means of which the party understands the world which it is seeking to change and in terms of which it defines its aims and works out how to fight for them. In this philosophy are embodied the general ideas by means of which the party seeks to enlighten and organize the whole class, and to influence, guide and win over all the masses of working people, showing the conclusions which must be drawn from each stage of the struggle, helping people to learn from their experience how to go forward toward social realism.* (Cornforth, p.10,11)

Hence Progressive Writers denounce the literature that escapes the actualities of life as 'rigid formalism, and a banal and perverse ideology.' (Ali Mir & Raza Mir, p.5) As PWA manifesto was based on the idea of social realism, the Progressive literature dealt with oppression, marginalization, division of society based on economic conditions that was hitherto neglected by the classical literature. In essence, Progressive literature was an intrepid challenge to the classical literature. Sahir's poetry can be viewed in post-colonial perspective as '*intellectual history of post-colonial theory is marked by dialectic between Marxism, on the one hand, and post structuralism/post modernism, on the other.*' (Leela Gandhi, p.viii) It addresses the issues of imperialism, subalternity, gender and neo-colonialism in the colonial and postcolonial era. This paper discusses progressive trends and the themes of marginalization in the poetry of Sahir Ludhyanvi. Sahir's poetry exposes various facets of marginalization prevalent in the society, i.e. economic, social, and psychological. His progressive spirit can be gauged by his bold assertion against classical literature. He intrepidly challenges the hegemony of classicists,

*Mujh ko is ka ranj nahiN hai, log mujhey fankaar na maanein*

*Fikr-o-sukhan ke taajir mere shairo ko asha'ar na maanein.*

*(I do not regret the people do not consider me an artist that the traders of thoughts and words do not think of my poems as poetry.) (Ali Mir & Raza Mir, p.152)*

Like the founders of PWA, Sahir also shared the *zamindar* (feudal) heritage, but his experiences were in sharp contrast to the *zamindar* (feudal) way of life owing to the marital disharmony between his parents. In the epigraph of *Talkhyaan* (The bitter words), he expresses his grief and pain that he undergoes due to the vicissitudes of life.

*Dunya ne Tajarbaat o hawaadis ki shakl me  
jo kuch mujhe diya hai, voh lauta raha hun mein.*

*(The world in the form of challenges and experiments)*

*Whatever has given me, I return with compliments. (Tariq Mehmood)*

Sahir's literary talent can be estimated by the fact that he got acclaim in his early twenties by publishing *Talkhyaan* (*The Bitter Harvest*). Makhmoor Saeedi attributes *Talkhyaan* as a 'voice of an unsuccessful lover who adores values of liberty and justice.' (Makhmoor Saeedi, p.12) Sahir holds the feudalistic society responsible for his personal tragedies in particular and for the human miseries in general. Saeedi explains the reasons of Sahir's wide acclamation, 'Through his poetry Sahir exhorted the youths to overthrow the oppressive foreign rule and its ruthless native stooges, and hence this message also consisted in it the poet's dejection of love, it had a wonderful appeal for the youths.' (Ibid) Sahir's contempt towards his feudal heritage is evident in the following verses; he mocks the slavish and obsequious mentality of his ancestors towards the British rulers.

*MeiN un ajdaad ka beta huN jinhoN ne paiham,  
ajnabi qaum ke saaye ki himaayat ki hai,  
ghadar ki sa'at-i-naapaak se lekar ab tak,  
har kadey waqt me sarkaar ki khidmat ki hai.*

*(Syed Ehtasham Hussain, p.7)*

(I am the descendent of those who ever supported alien invaders, since the unholy mutiny they had been serving the British government.)

His attitude towards literature was more subjective; he viewed poetry as an expression of subjective feelings. His epigraph 'determines the boundaries and limitations of his poetry' (Saeedi, p.17) Makhmoor Saeedi quotes the lines from his interview with Nida Fazli, in which Sahir boldly expressed that sublime poetry is only that which is a reflection of poet's own ideas and personality.

*"In fact literature is the expression of reality, this is a psychological process. If a poet writes against his own nature, for a particular label, he can't be satisfied."* (Saeedi, p.17) Sahir's views should be viewed in the broader perspective of progressive literature. Despite his

association with progressive literature, he always does not conform to the themes and subjects dealt by Progressive writers. Sahir audaciously proclaims his individuality in the following verse,

*Le de ke apne paas faqat ek nazar to hai,*

*Kyon dekheN zindagi ko kisi ki nazar se ham.*

(The vision is the only asset for us, why should we visualize the life from other's view point.)(Syed Ehtasham Hussain, p. 76)

Many critics and readers of Sahir have complained about the sustained poignancy and theme of human predicament in his poetry, but Sahir explains the cause of this despondency;

*Ham ghamzada hain Laayen kahaN se khushi ke geet,*

*Denge wohi jo paayenge is zindagi se ham.*

(I am agrieved, where from shall I get the songs of happiness?,

I will return the same that I get from this life.)

In order to peruse Sahir's thoughts and poetry, a close reading of his personal experiences instead of the philosophical perspective, is required. His rancour towards monolithic and totalitarian feudalism can be attributed to his own personal tragedies owing to the peripheral status of his mother. His father Fazaldeen was a zamindar, who had married many times in order to get a son. Sahir's mother was his eleventh wife. Due to the unequal familial status of his mother, his father wanted to keep this wedlock secret from the public. Sahir's mother wanted social acceptance to her marital relation. Sahir was the only son of Fazaldeen. Marital discord between Sahir's parents resulted in a litigation where Sahir's father demanded the custody of young Sahir. Keeping in view Sahir's education, the magistrate assigned the custodianship of Sahir to his mother. Sahir's activism in politics affected his educational pursuit as he was expelled from the Government College, Ludhiana and Dayal Singh College, Lahore respectively. After the expulsions Sahir could not continue his studies and fully devoted himself to literary and political activism. In addition to his familial tragedy, many failed love affairs also had an effect on his life. His unsuccessful love affair with Punjabi writer Amrita Pritam is noteworthy here. Amrita Pritam herself admitted her profound love for Sahir even after many years of her marriage to Pritam Singh and her subsequent relationship with Imroz due to her separation from her husband.

*'After his departure, I would keep his cigarette butts in my cupboard and when I would lit these butts one-after another, I would feel as if I was touching his hand.( Amrita Pritam, p.52)*

Sahir's revolutionary activism was not limited to the politics, but his approach to love also has the same rebellious nature. He exhorts the oppressed masses to rise against the rotten system, in the same fervour he encourages his beloved to rebel against the constraints of society.

*MeiN Tasawwuf ke maraahil ka nahiN huN qaayal,*

*Meri Tasveer pe tum phool chadhaati kyo ho,  
Ek sarkash se muhabbat ki tamanna rakh kar,  
Khud ko Aayeen ke phando me phansaati kyo ho  
Jab tumhe mujh se zyaada hai zamaane ka khayaal,  
Phir meri yaad me yuN ashk bahaati kyo ho,  
Tum me himmat hai to dunya se baghaawat kar do,  
Warna maa-baap jahaan kehtey haiN shaadi kar lo.*

*(I do not believe in the stages of mysticism, why do you offer garlands on my image?)*

By loving a maverick, you are trapping yourself in the grip of law. When you value society more than me, why do you weep in my remembrance? If you have courage, rebel against the society, otherwise marry according to the wishes of your parents.) (Masood Munawwar, p. 76)

Woman in Sahir's poetry occupies a significant space. In many of his poems we see Sahir as a Marxist feminist. He presents an image of oppressed feminine, his approach to women's marginalized image might have been influenced by contemporary nationalistic discourse that visualized 'Mother India' as an oppressed and fettered feminine figure, but apart from nationalist rhetoric, he presents a very realistic picture of woman's marginalization in his poem 'Chakley' (Brothels). Sahir seems to support Marx's view, "Prostitution is only a specific expression of the general prostitution of the laborer." (Marxist Feminism) Thus the brothel is just a microcosmic world of the bourgeois exploitation of humanity in general and women in particular. The erotic pleasure derived from the prostitute is akin to the voyeurism of capitalist class that it derives from the plight of poverty stricken proletariat. In the sordid world of capitalist domination, the entire humanity is treated as a prostitute. These prostitutes are also subjected to the psychological oppression because of the patriarchal notion of morality. They are stigmatized by the same society that venerates the visitors of these brothels. Sahir views women's marginalization as an outcome of capitalist ideology and postulates that the elimination of capitalism is "the means for ending women's oppression". (McHugh, Nancy Arden, p.79) He clouts the idealistic notion of eastern piety and intrepidly challenges religious patriarchs of the orient. Hameed Akhter, a very close friend of Sahir from Lahore explains that Sahir visited many times the red-light area of Lahore just to witness the real life of this notorious world. (Azhar Javed, p.9) The poem is a pungent criticism of the watchdogs of society.

*Sanaa Khwaan-i- Tasdeeq-i- Mashriq Kahaan hain?*

*Where are the eulogizers of the eastern piety? (Tariq Mahmood, p.36)*

This also became theme song of a Hindi movie "Pyasa" (Thirsty) directed by Gurudutt in which Sahir made slight changes in order to suit the language of the movie. Hence 'where are the eulogisers of eastern piety' was altered by "Where are those who are proud of India?"

Theme of woman's exploitation crosses the boundaries of time in Sahir's poetry. In 'NoorJahan Ke Mazaar Par' (At NoorJahan's Mausoleum), he lambasts the "glory" of emperors. In this poem he acts as a spokesman of thousands of poor and destitute women victimized by the royal lust and sexual exploits. In a philosophical tone, Sahir presents an image of despotic and totalitarian authority that is lying buried in the grave; the desolation and loneliness of mausoleum is in sharp contrast to the royal luxuries. This desolate atmosphere hints at the oppression and atrocities of the royal emperors as well as their fate. Sahir's message is similar to Thomas Gray's in 'Elegy written in a country churchyard'.

"All the paths of glory lead but to the grave.'

His depiction of oppressed feminine is not limited to the brothels or imperialism, rather he bluntly exposes 'feudal libido' and sexual promiscuity of his own ancestors.

*Sabz kheto me dubki hui yeh dosheezaayein,*

*In ki shiryaano me kis kis ka lahoon jaari hai,*

*Kis me juraa'at hai ke is raaz ki tashheer karey,*

*Sab k lab par meri haibat ka fagoon jaari hai.*

*(The damsels hidden in the green fields,*

*Whose blood they have in their veins,*

*Nobody dares to expose this secret,*

*Everybody is dominated by my authority.) (Ali Sufyaan, p.75)*

'Tajmahal', the masterpiece of Sahir, presents an entirely different image of this 'symbol of love'. His biographer Ali Sufyan attributes the original idea of this poem to an Urdu writer Commander Syed Anwar, who in his story presented Tajmahal, not as a symbol of love, but as a nasty joke with the poor and destitute masses, who could not do anything for their beloveds. Converse to the fetishistic image of love, presented by Shakeel Badayuni,

*Ek shahanshah ne banwa ke hasiN Tajmahal,*

*Saari dunya ko muhabbat ki nishaani di hai. (Syed Ehtashaam, p.33)*

*( Having made Taj Mahal, an emperor presented the world a symbol of love.)*

Sahir's vision is based on the sordid reality of masses, living in hunger and squalor. He speaks as a spokesperson of the voiceless subaltern workers, whose labour remained unrecognized and is lying buried in the foundation of this beautiful edifice. Sahir juxtaposes two contrasting pictures; grandeur and beauty of Tajmahal is mocking at the toil of destitute subjects of Mughal empire. Thus, Sahir views Tajmahal as a "vulgar advertisement of the love of an exploitative king and the shameful exhibitionism of the elite, an obeisance to which would be insult to the love of ordinary people, including that of the very workers who built it." (Ali Mir & Raza Mir, p.156) Sahir's approach towards marginalised subjects is akin to Thomas Gray's,

*In silence they rise, in silence they set,*

*Who keeps track who keeps an account.*

In the same poignant tone, Sahir delineates the eternal saga of marginalization and anonymity;

*Anginat logo ne dunya me muhabbat ki hai,*

*Kon kehta hai ke saadiq na the jazbey unkey,*

*magar un ke lea tashheer ka saamaan nahin.*

*(Countless people in the world showed their measure of affection*

*Who can say that they were not true to their assertion?*

*But they were without the means to blow their trumpet of devotion*

*They were destitute of means, but never without emotion.” ( Khwaja Tariq Mahmood, p.17)*

Some of Sahir's poems conspicuously present an existentialist angst owing to the nasty experiences of life. Sahir seems to consolidate Sartre's view that "man is born into a kind of void (le neant), a mud (le visquex). He has the liberty to remain in this mud and thus lead a passive, supine, acquiescent existence in a "semi-conscious" state in which he is scarcely aware of himself." (Cuddon, p.104) In 'Yeh Dunya' (This world), he gives a vivid description of a world that is in eternal conflict, societies that are hostile to their own members and ruthless capitalism. The human beings of Sahir's existential world are in utter confusion about their own existence and the objective of their lives.

*Har ek jism ghayal, har ek rooh piyaasi,*

*nigaaho me uljhan, dilon me udaasi,*

*yeh dunya hai ya aalam-i-bad hawaasi.*

*“Every one is half dead, every soul in dread,*

*Vision is in confusion, a loss of feeling kindered*

*Is it a living world, or is it a prison instead. ( Khwaja Tariq Mahmood,p.44,45)*

Sahir associates his anguish of failed love affairs with the plight of hungry and downtrodden masses. He compares his agony to the pathetic condition of human existence that is incarcerated by the stringent classification of rich and poor. The dismal condition of the proletarian world compels him to ponder over the divine existence. He is skeptical of any divine agency who governs this ruthless, exploitative world of bourgeois.

*Yeh Sabhi kyo hai, ye kya hai mujhe kuch sochne do*

*Kon Insaan ka khuda hai, mujhe kuch sochne do.*

(Why and what is this mess ? Let me think,

Who is the God of the humanbeings, let me think.)

Despite the depiction of an existential and confused human world, he does not lose the hope; he envisages the panacea of all human miseries in Marxist proposition of equal distribution of wealth as well as in human endeavours to win over all the obstacles in the path of human development. In 'Voh Subah' (That Dawn) he envisions a bright future for downtrodden masses in their own endeavours. He exhorts the subaltern, oppressed classes to do away with their subalternity.

*Sansaar ke saare mehnat kash khaitoN se miloN se nikleN ge,*

*Beghghar, bedar. Bebas insaaN Taareek biloN se nikleN ge,*

*Dunya aman or khushhaali ke phooloN se sajaayi jayegi,*

*Voh subah hamiN se aayegi.*

*Universal workers will unite, with their labours will redeem*

*The homeless, the helpless, out of darkness, will arise in esteem*

*The world will celebrate enjoy, hopelessness will not recur*

*That dawn we will bestir! (Khwaja Tariq Mahmood, p.65)*

Sahir's vision of equality and egalitarianism was not based on the idea of 'beauty emerges from chaos and disorder'; he opposed the idea of creating a better world by destructing the existing one. He opposed the ideas of Iqbal and his progressive peer Josh Malihabaadi.

*Takhreeb ka jab tak talaatum nahiN aata,*

*Tameer ke HontoN pe tabassum nahi aata, (Syed Ehtashaam Husain, p.66)*

(The creativity does not smile until a destructive cyclone transpires)

Iqbal also espoused the change of oppressive world order by destructing the existing one.

*Jis khait se dehqaan ko mayassar na ho rozi,*

*us desh key har khosha-i- gandum ko jalaa do.*

(Burn the every sheaf of the farm, where from the farmers are not provided the sustenance.)

Compare to these views, Sahir's vision is more creative and practical;

*Jis se dehqaan ko rozi nahin milney paati,*

*Mein na doonga tujhe woh khait jalaaney ka sabaq,*

*Fasal baaqi hai to taqseem badal sakti hai,*

*Fasal ki khaak se kya mangega jamhoor ka haq.*

I will not suggest burning the harvest that is restricted for farmers.

If the harvest is intact, the distribution could be changed,

How will farmer's share be demanded from the ashes of the harvest?)

But Sahir faced opposite reality of his favourite philosophy i.e. Marxism and Leninism due to ugly turn in international politics. His hopes were shattered when he witnessed the unsavoury political situation of his dreamland Russia after the death of Stalin. The vision that endeared him throughout his life was losing its sheen because of the duplicity of the followers of this ideology. (Saeedi, p.36,37) In his poem '1971' Sahir mourns the degradation of Marxist followers.

Apart from beourgoise exploitation and women's issues, Sahir presents a glaring picture of communal Indian polity. "Jashne Ghalib" ( Celebration of Ghalib) is a pungent criticism of hypocritical state policies regarding Urdu language. Urdu, once the language of masses, now is subjected to linguistic genocidal policies of the state owing to the parochial communal politics. As soon as Urdu was given the status of national language of Pakistan, it was tagged as a language of Muslims. In an anguished tone, he delineates the plight of Urdu in its own motherland. Sahir's approach regarding marginalization of Urdu is very broad. From the point of view of use of language in his poetry, he used simple language free from the ornate Persianised words. By using simple Urdu, he liberates the language from the domination of Persian that was the language of elites during the Muslim rule in India, and hence he contributed in making Urdu as the language of masses. This is an interesting point to note, though it is a little diversion from the topic, one of the major contributions of Progressive writers for Urdu language is the de-islamization of the language. Tariq Rahman, a historiographer of Urdu gives a detailed description how Urdu became language of Islam changing its position from the language of love in the wake of Urdu-Hindi controversy. In essence Sahir decolonized Urdu from the hegemony of *Ashraf* (elite) because of its Persianised vocabulary and ornate style.

Sahir registered his protest against the moral policing of the state; his poem "Aakhri Buraai" (The last Evil) is very humorous in tone as well as is a severe criticism of state's failure to provide basic amenities to its citizens. This poem was composed on the state's ban of liquor in Bombay. In an undaunted voice, Sahir reminds the state its duties.

*Sharab band karo,*

*bas yehi buraai hai,*

*jis se mulk ki asmat pe harf aataa hai,*

(Prohibit the liquor,

This is the last evil that is a blot on the nation.)

Disillusioned by much awaited freedom that brought blood soaked partition with it, Sahir expresses his grief over the shattered dreams of a peaceful, dignified independent India in his poem '26th January'. He held the corrupt and feeble leadership responsible for the plight of independent India and its masses. For Sahir, Independence was simply the change of foreign colonizers to the indigenous ones. Sahir pointed out neo-colonialism in the form of government

policies that were only for the benefit of capitalist class. A deep humanism is evident throughout Sahir's poetry. He vehemently opposed war and viewed it as the biggest threat against humanity. In the backdrop of Indo-Pak war and the anniversary of Tashkent Treaty he wrote "Aiyee, Shareef InsaanoN' (O! Gentle Humans), in which he expounded a more constructive war against the human oppression, poverty, marginalization and ruthless capitalism instead of the disastrous war for the expansion of territories. Sahir propagated magnanimous Indian notion of *Vasudhaive kutumbkum* that means the entire earth is but one family.

*Khoon apna ho ya parayaa ho,*

*Nasl-e Adam ka khoon hai aakhir,*

*Jang mashriq me ho ke maghrib me,*

*Amn-i-alam ka khoon hai aakhir.*

(Blood! Be it ours or others,

This is the blood of human race,

War! Be it in east or west,

This is the murder of world peace.)( Saeedi, p.127)

In the backdrop of Second World War, he wrote,

*"Parcchaayiaan" (The shadows) is my first long poem. This poem is a part of the movement that is driven against war and safeguard of humanity in all over the world. I think that every youth generation should endeavour to give the better and beautiful world to the next generation than the world that it has inherited from its ancestors. My poem is a literary form of this endeavour."* (Syed Ehtasham Hussain, p.24)

Sahir described the dire consequences of war on the human existence. The poem associates the plight of war ridden lovers with the predicament of entire humanity who is facing the brunt of war in the form of hunger, squalor and utter form of marginalization. Sahir says that in the previous war, only the houses and human beings were burnt, but the next war will even burn the loneliness and shadows. His views are very relevant in the perspective of nuclear era where the atomic war is impending on the world. The human race is still facing the severe consequences of first atomic attack on Japan during Second World War.

To sum up, Sahir's poetry subtly depicts various modes of marginalization. He is considered among those progressives who never used language only for the propagation of political beliefs. His poetry is the "heritage of Indian culture. He is a link between the poetic traditions of Iqbal and Faiz. His poetry is purged from the ornate Persianised style" ( Masood Munawwar,p 77), rather he expressed his feelings in a simple voice that was very appealing to masses. In short, Sahir's poetry gives voice to the problems of masses that are still unsolved and unheard of by the repressive state in colonial and postcolonial India He uses poetry as a vehicle to convey the message of equality and social justice in order to create an egalitarian society free from the

fetters of ruthless capitalistic marginalization. Sahir's poetry depicts eternal saga of economic exploitation of underprivileged, gender oppression and abuse of power.

### Works Cited:

- Hafeez Malik, *The Marxist Literary Movement in India and Pakistan*  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2051241>
- Maurice Cornforth, *Dialectical Materialism*, Lawrence and Wishart: London, 1961.
- Raza Mir & Ali Mir, *A Celebration of Progressive Urdu Poetry: Anthems of Resistance*, IndiaInk:2006
- Leela Gandhi, *Post Colonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, Columbia University Press: 1998.
- Makhmoor Saeedi, *Sahir Ludhyanvi: Ek Mutaala'* (*Sahir Ludhyanvi: A study*), Modern Publishing, New Delhi
- Amrita Pritam, *Sahir Kuch Laazwaal Yaadien*, (*Sahir: Some unfading memories*) in Makhmoor Saeedi's *Sahir Ludhyanvi: Ek Mutaala'*.
- Syed Ehtashaam Husain, *Tohfa (The Gift)*, Bazm-I –Sahir: Faizabad, Tanda 1989.
- Marxist Feminism,  
<http://www.feministissues.com/marxist.html>
- Mc Hugh Nancy, Arden. *Feminist Philosophies A-Z*
- Masood Munawwar, *Firaaq or Aihatajaaj ka Shaayar*, (*The Poet of Protest*) in Makhmoor Saeedi's *Sahir Ludhyanvi: Ek Mutaala'*
- Khwaja Tariq Mahmood, *Poems of Sahir Ludhyanvi*. Star Publications: New Delhi, 2002.
- Azhar Javed, *Nakaam-i- Muhabbat: Sahir Ludhyanvi*. Alhamd Publications: Lahore, 2006.
- Ali Sufyaan Afaqi, *Sahir-i-Azam* (Sahir the great). Maqbool Academy: Lahore, 1997.
- J.A. Cuddon, *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. Panguin Books: New Delhi, 1999)
- Tariq Rahman, *From Hindi to Urdu: A social and Political History*. Orient Blackswan, 2011.