



Poetry as Mirror: A Reading of Select Poems of Sahir Ludhianvi

Bhavna Jagnani

Post-graduate student, Department of English,
The Bhawanipur Education Society College, Kolkata

Abstract: Literature, irrespective of its genre, has always assisted in showing a mirror to society. Abdul Haye, popularly known as Sahir Ludhianvi, was one such poet writing in the post-Independence era, who was also a part of the Progressive Writers' Movement. Being a part of it, his poetry is revolutionary –writing during the Partition, he questions various issues, whether it is the position of women and how they were exploited and oppressed, or the effects of political decisions, sometimes the decision and the leaders themselves. He also encourages the public to voice their problems. His poetry is so nuanced that it contains various layers. He understood that his responsibility as a poet was to show the flaws of the society, while also suggesting ways to remedy them. This paper seeks to analyse select poems of his through various lenses, namely postcolonialism and feminism.

Keywords: Partition, mirror, revolution, question, oppression

Introduction

Sahir Ludhianvi (1921-80) was an Indian poet who wrote primarily in Urdu and is popular for his progressive poetry. The Progressive Writers questioned the social injustice within the broad framework of the Indian society. Javed Akhtar, while talking about them, says that the main aim of writers like Sahir Ludhianvi was

to raise the consciousness of the people by protesting against all kinds of exploitations. They raised their voice against the imperial aggression and capitalist exploitation and called for a revolution through their writings. (Mukherjee 92).

In order to do this, he used the medium of poetry to showcase the follies of the society to people and awaken them to bring about a change for building a better future. Since it was a matter of the common masses, they wrote about Partition and their experiences in Indian languages as it was necessary to educate the oppressed about the injustice imposed upon them and empower them to raise their voices against it. His famous works include *Talkhiyaan* (Bitterness) and *Aao Ke Koi Khwab Bune* (Come, Let's Weave a Dream). His poetry can be viewed through various lens, particularly postcolonial and feminism –'postcolonial studies' analyses the "literature that was affected by the imperial process, the literature that grew in response to colonial domination, right from the time of contact between the coloniser and the colonised down to the contemporary situation." (Nagarajan 185), while the theory of feminism is applied in his poetry on the state of women, whether during colonisation or post-Independence.



Discussion

Sahir's poems which are often remembered are romantic ones and the ones that are very easily overlooked portray the mundane realities of the marginal and oppressed class. Instead of celebrating Partition, he showcases the other side of the silence –his poetry brings to the forefront the negative effects that Partition had on people. While on one hand, some people were enjoying their Independence, on the other hand, some people were grieving their loss –loss of their home, their identity, and their loved ones who were killed during the riots. Through his poems, he voices the oppressed, showcasing their suffering during Partition which gave rise to religious disputes, while also encouraging them to raise their voice against the oppressors. Ali Safar Jafri wrote in the preface to *Parchhaaiyaan* (Shadows) that his “success arises from the directness of his expression aimed at capturing the harsh realities of our time.” (Deol 183). Sardar Jafri writes about such poets that they “were serious folks, who were fully aware of their social responsibilities, and that was why their poetic outcomes reflected a high level of thoughtfulness...” (Narang 112).

The Undivided India was under the British Raj from 1858 until it got divided into India and Pakistan in 1947. The Indians were exploited in every way possible. Sahir Ludhianvi, the “poet of the moment” (pal do pal ka shayar), raised his voice on a lot of issues. With the change in time, readers have forgotten the purpose he wrote his poems for, but if delved deeper and analysed, keeping in mind the social scenario, they bring to the forefront the anguish of the people, even of those at the ground level. Urdu poets like Sahir, Faiz and Khusro, lamented and grieved about the helplessness of the Partition in their poetic works. He simply portrays the world he lived in, in his poetry. He writes in the frontispiece of his book, *Talkhiyaan*: “Duniya ne tajurbaat-o-havaadis ki shakl mein/ Jo kuch mujhe diya hai, voh lauta raha hoon main” (What the world, in the form of experiences and accidents/ Has bestowed on me; I hereby return). (Mir 139). He resonates a similar feeling in the lines: “Aaina-e-havadis-e-hasti hai mere sher/ Jo dekhta raha hun vo kehta raha hun mai” (My verses are a mirror, to reflect the vagaries of nature/ I have penned what I have seen, without an axe to grind). (Rajoria 3).

The creation of the two nations on the basis of religion –Pakistan for Muslims and India for Hindus –led to an agitation. Partition changed the bond of love and respect both the communities used to share. People were supposed to ‘relocate’ accordingly. The forceful displacement of the individuals induced in them a sense of identity crisis –neither did they remain ‘Indians’ (residents of undivided India) nor did they attain the identity of the newly formed country –they were tagged as refugees. Riots in the name of religion led to bloodshed. He questions the uncured malady of religion in his ‘nazm’, “Chhabees Janwary” (Twenty-sixth January): “Mazhab ka rog aaj bhi kyun la-ilaj hai” (Why even today is there no remedy for a disease called religion?) (Deol 162-163). Everyone was looking towards a free land; but none wanted the divide, let alone a riot. It may be said that while Independence was an event to celebrate, some people did so with violence and bloodshed –“Har kuucha sho’la zaar hai har shahr qatl gaah” (Every street is on fire and every city is a slaughterhouse) (Deol 163). The utopian society that everyone dreamt of turned into a hellish nightmare which seemed to have no end.



Ludhianvi openly questions Nehru's regime and his promise to bring a just and egalitarian society. He claims that the leaders are to be blamed as much as the people are –“Mujrim huun main agar to gunahgaar tum bhi ho/ Ai rahbaraan-e qaum khata-kaar tum bhi ho” (If I'm the culprit, you're a sinner too./ And leaders of the nation, you too are not blameless.) (Deol 163). The same people who promised them a better world to live in were the ones who shattered their dreams. Claire Chambers notes that “most of the national leaders who replaced British colonizers were actually similar to the people they represented, in every area except their race.” (Chambers 144). This sentiment is expressed in his poem, “Mufaahimat” (Compromise) where he says: “Ye jashn jashn-e-masarrat nahin, tamaasha hai/ Naye libaas mein nikla hai rahzani ka juloos” (This is not a celebration of joy, but a vulgar spectacle/ The same procession of robbers has emerged wearing new clothes) (Mir 57). The situation of the people at the ground level remained unchanged –they were earlier oppressed by the British, now they were being oppressed by the leaders.

The poet talks about the dreams that the leaders had shown them before independence and the failure of those dreams in the 'new' India. He calls for the necessity of critical introspection as to why these dreams have failed so miserably. After independence, the country's wealth increased gradually, he observes, but this increase was not egalitarian and poverty still ravages the nation. Long before, the political leaders talked about improving the lives of the people who were going to fight with them in the struggle for independence. After getting the power to rule, they forgot about those common people and only thought about themselves. India, thus, failed to live up to its ideal of the welfare state. He writes about his anguish in “Chhabbees Janvary” (Twenty-sixth January) –he questions the leaders who showed big dreams –“Jamhuriyat navaaz bashar dost aman khwaah/ Khud ko jo khud diye the voh alqaab kya hue” (Cherisher of democracy, friend of humanity, wisher of peace/ What happened to all those titles we had conferred upon ourselves?). (Deol 163).

He talks about this inequality in “Ye duniya do rangi hai/ Ek taraf se resham ode, ek taraf se nangi hai” (This world is double-faced/ One side covered with silk, the other naked) (Mir 38). He portrays the dual standards of the people. The progressive writers believed that this wasn't the end of the world; it can be changed if efforts are put in –to remove capitalism, to build a world where only equality thrived. He concludes this poem with the lines: “Jab tak oonch aur neech hai baaqi, har soorat be-dhangi hai/ Ye duniya do-rangi hai” (For as long as there are the privileged and the dispossessed, there can only be disorder/ In this two-toned world) (Mir 42). He writes in his 'nazm', “Vo subha kabhi to aayegi” (Surely, that morning will dawn some day), that the people have to strive to achieve such a world of their imagination: “Voh subha kabhi to aayegi...Voh subha hameen se aayegi” (Surely, that morning will dawn someday...We are the ones who will bring about that morning) (Mir 41).

Unlike some writers who only talked about the oppressed man's condition, Ludhianvi was among those few who wrote about women's state as well. He emerges to be a feminist who gives them a voice and brings to the forefront the way they were being treated by men. The major victims to the violence became women who were considered to be the 'honour of the house'. He laments about the scenario in his poem, “Ye zameen kis qadar sajai gai” (How the land is decorated!) (Ludhianvi): he says that the people decorated the roads with riots; giving each woman an image of Mother Sita, he portrays how she was being tortured by the rioters, as Ravana did in *Ramayana* –



“Zindagi ka nasib kya kahiye/ Ek sita thi jo satai gai” (What can be said about the fate of life/ There was a Sita who was harassed) (Ludhianvi). Women became doubly oppressed –first due to patriarchy and second because they were termed as ‘refugees’.

Violence was not only projected during the movement across the borders but also continued post that. The only profession that was available to women was prostitution. Ludhianvi consistently spoke against the oppression perpetuated upon the women, who were continuously being ‘otherised’. He writes on this state of theirs –“Aurat ne janam diya mardon ko mardon ne use baazaar diya” (Women gave birth to men, they gave her a place to sell herself) (Deol 144). He talks about gender discrimination, when in the same poem, he writes: “Mardon ke liye har a’ish ka haq aurat ke liye jiina bhi saza” (Men seek enjoyment the way they want it, but woman is punished just for the sin of being alive.) (Deol 144). In the case of sex workers, the society has always judged and continues to judge the woman’s character. They did not go into the depths to acknowledge why their number has increased. If there was no man to go to the ‘red-light areas’, there would not be the need for a woman to work as a sex worker. Men never face the judgement –they are allowed to enjoy themselves. It is even commented that maybe ‘their woman’ (wife) wasn’t successfully keeping him happy (referring to their ‘unhappy’ sex life). Blaming the woman for their husband’s desires and actions was something very common –Ludhianvi writes: “Mardon ki havas hai jo aksar aurat ke paap mein dhalti hai (Man’s lust is laundered in woman’s sin). (Deol 145). Their bodies were considered to be a commodity; they were exploited both physically and economically. This gave rise to a sense of alienation in women. Ann Foreman, in *Femininity as Alienation: Women and the Family in Marxism and Psychoanalysis*, notes that while “men seek relief from their alienation through their relations with women, for women, there is no relief. For these intimate relations are the very ones that are essential structures of her oppression.” (Mukhopadhyay 71). The human relations became hollow; friendship became meaningless.

Expressing a similar sentiment, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, by whom Sahir was highly inspired –so much so that “when people sensed the delicate mood in [his] poetry, the beautiful interplay in his words and the lilting nature of his verse, they thought of it to be an absolute imitation of Faiz’s poetry” (Manwani 77) –stated, in “Subh-e-Azaadi” (Dawn of Independence), that this wasn’t what the people wanted –

Y daagh daagh ujaala y shab-gaziida sahar

Voh intizaar tha jiska y voh sahar to nahien

Y voh sahar to nahien jis ki aarzu le kar

Chale the yaar k mil jaaye gi kahien n kahien

(This blemished sunrise, this daybreak of a night –mangled and mutilated

What we were waiting for, this is not the dawn

This is not the dawn in whose expectation friends set out

in search of a journey’s end, finding it somewhere) (Narang 115).



According to Faiz, it defeated the purpose to have Hindus and Muslims “live in two countries, and there was so much tragic bloodshed and suffering because they worshipped different gods.” (Narang 115). Like Sahir, who urges people to have faith and not lose hope, Faiz, through this poem, encourages them to keep moving forward as they have not yet achieved what they had actually wished for –“Chale chalo k voh manzil abhi nahien aaii” (Keep moving; we haven’t reached the goal yet) (Narang 116).

Another poem of Sahir’s, “Kabhi khud pe kabhi haalat pe rona aaya”, raises multiple questions. He writes that the people cried for both themselves and the situation –for themselves, because they had lost their identity, there was an identity crisis; and for the situation because it was not what they thought or had planned when they were fighting for freedom. They wanted to be free from the British, which they did, but they also received a growing hatred amongst themselves. He questions the reason of their existence in a world of hatred, where humanity is dead, and the result of their meaningless life post Partition –“Kisliye jeetey hain hum, kiske liye jeete hain?/ Baarha aise sawaalat pe rona aaya” (Why is it that we live, who is it that we live for/ Sometimes, I cry at the thought of these questions). (Manwani 252). The last line of the ‘nazm’, “Sabko apni hi kisi baat pe rona aaya” (Everyone frets over their own petty considerations) highlights the idea of individual and collective trauma. (Manwani 252). Collective trauma is described by Rachel Thomasian, a therapist from Los Angeles, as a “distressing, fear-inducing experience that is felt collectively.” A psychologist, Marianela Dornhecker, further argued that “while a whole group may be exposed to a collective trauma, not everyone is impacted the same.” (Bologna). This difference in impact is what is known as individual trauma. Though everyone had to go through Partition, their experiences were different. The poem portrays the feeling residing in a man’s heart –a mixed feeling of pain and loneliness.

According to Ravikant, “Till recently, we as a nation, in fact, have been sleepwalking through these decades until an odd film or a novel, or the actuality of a riot awakens us to momentarily remember and refer back to the nightmare of Partition.” (Begum). If one goes by this observation, Sahir Ludhianvi’s poetry should have made us recall the devastation but unfortunately, some of his poems which were written keeping Partition in the background, are romanticised. One reason of this can be the use of ‘beloved’ –he used this term to denote a communistic society but it has been misinterpreted by the modern readers to be a ‘lover’. Hence, the poem which he addressed to the society is misread to be addressed to the lover. Another reason which might be possible is that sadly, his poems are still relevant. They are usually misread in today’s world and are happily termed ‘relatable’ –this is problematic. Firstly, it is necessary to keep in mind the time he wrote in and the effect it had on him; secondly, if they are still relevant, it means that the society hasn’t changed –it still has the same social issues that were there at the time of Partition. As Javed Akhtar in an interview points out that some people happily say that it is still relevant but this actually means that nothing has changed –the society is still the same; the pain, the suffering is still there. (Jashn-e-Rekhta).

Some of these poems, though addressed to the lover, bring to the forefront the intrinsic aspects of the ‘romanticised’ things in the world. For instance, he breaks the romantic association with the Taj Mahal –he critically questions the romanticising of the monument and reminds people of the hard work of the labours and how they were exploited, a fact that is easily and conveniently overlooked by the lovers. He turns “our attention from our admiration of this edifice towards the blood, sweat



and tears of the workers who slaved in order to construct it.” (Mir 141). He writes: “Un ke pyaaron ke maqaabir rahe be naam-o numood/ Aaj tak un pe jalaayi na kisi ne qandeel” (Their loved ones lie in unmarked graves/ Dark, forgotten, unvisited) (Mir 142). This poem intends to break the notion of measuring love on a materialistic scale instead of the true feeling. The obsession of capitalism and materialism had decreased the actual feeling of love. In the novel, *The Unanswered Question*, written by Sarat Chandra Chatterji, the “heroine, after pointing out some of the flaws in the myth of Shah Jahan’s marital devotion, concludes that the Emperor would have probably built a monument like Taj even if Mumtaz had not died, that he would have found some other excuse to build it...” (Kumar 58).

For Ludhianvi, it is an unnecessary opulence ordered to be built by the ruling elite, which seems to mock the common masses and insult those who could not afford even a tomb upon their loved ones’ graves—“Ek shahenshaah ne daulat ka sahaara lekar/ Hum ghareebon ki mohabbat ka udaya hai mazaq” (Are but an emperor’s display of wealth/ That mocks the love of the poor) (Mir 142). For him, the monument stood as a symbol of a man’s arrogance for his wealth and his ability to exploit the hard labour of the poor workers. While this can be read solely as a romantic poem written by one lover to another, it can also be interpreted as Ludhianvi portraying the capitalist society –even after Partition, the rich became richer, the poor became poorer.

One of his longest poems, *Parchhaaiyaan* (Shadows), also portrays the story of two lovers torn apart due to the Second World War. While addressing their situation, Ludhianvi subtly merges with it the reality –he brings to notice the consequences the war can have on Indian landscape. All the points discussed above find a place in this poem. The poem that started as a love poem with beautiful imagery soon takes shape of the dreadful experience of the war. He portrayed the horrors through the life of two lovers. There were only two poets, Sahir and Faiz, who were able to mirror “the horrors of war against the backdrop of a relationship between two individuals.” (Deol 185). The people involved in the riots became worse than animals –they, in reality, embodied the ‘savagely’ nature that had always been associated with the Orient –they were considered by the West to be irrational and primitive. He writes: “Har gaanv mein vahshat naach uthi har shehr mein jangal phail gaya” (The dance of savageness was seen in each village/ And the wilderness of the forest spread into cities). (Deol 198). The status quo was such that when the farmers had nothing left –they had sold their bullocks, their farm, everything –they started selling their flesh to survive –“Kuchh bhi n raha jab bikne ko jismon ki tajaarat hone lagi” (When nothing was left to sell then the flesh trade started) (Deol 199). All relations ceased to exist; everyone was everyone else’s enemy.

Ludhianvi urges the others to support the devastated souls in raising their voices against the oppressors –“Chalo k aaj sabhi payamaal ruuhon se/ Kahein k apne har ik zakham ko zubaan kar lein” (Let us address all those devastated souls/ That they should give their wounds a voice and let them speak) (Deol 201). Ludhianvi ends the poem with the depiction of the effect of war:

Guzashta jang mein ghar hi jale magar is baar

A’jab nahien k y tanhaaiyaan bhi jal jayein

Guzashta jang mein paikar jale magar is baar



A'jab nahien k y parchhaaiyaan bhi jal jayein

(In the last war, homes were burned, but this time

Even the loneliness may burn away

In the last war, only bodies burned, but this time

Even the silhouettes may burn away) (Deol 202).

Partition had not only separated the nation but also its cultural identity. The 'new' India had no place for Muslims and their language, Urdu. Even though they neglected the language, they celebrated the Urdu poets like Mirza Ghalib. In the death centenary of Ghalib in 1969, Sahir was invited as a chief guest and he recited the poem, "Jashn-e-Ghalib" –a poem that openly questioned the hypocrisy of the government to organise such an event after mistreating Urdu all these years. He points out the, "exhibitionism of public personalities, the hypocrisy of paying tribute to Urdu's greatest poet while the language in which he wrote was being called the language of treason and being systematically excluded from public discourse and the country's education system." (Deol 172). He writes:

JIS A'HD-E SIYAASAT NE Y ZINDA ZABAAN KUCHLI

US A'HD-E SIYAASAT KO MARHUUM KA GHAM KYON HAI?

GHALIB JISE KAHTE HAIN URDU HI KA SHAA'YIR THA

URDU PE SITAM DHA KAR GHALIB P KARAM KYUN HAI?

(The government that crushed this effervescent language

Why should that government grieve over the dead?

The man called Ghalib, was a poet of the Urdu language

Why should they be unfair to Urdu and benevolent towards Ghalib?) (Deol 174).

In another 'nazm' of his titled "Bangaal" that he wrote in 1944, he grieved the condition of the lower strata of the society during the Bengal famine in the preceding year. During the famine, the distribution of the food supply hindered as per the class difference –the people who had money had food, the rest did not; millions of people died due to malnutrition or disease. He highlights the disparity between both the classes: "Milen isiliye reshama ke dher bunti hain/ Ki dukhtaran-e-vatan taar taar ko tarsen" (Do the mills knit silk/ So that the daughters of the land be deprived of the threads?). He questions the purpose of growing crops if everyone does not have an access to them – "Zamin ne kya isi karan anaaj ugla tha/ Ki nasl-e-adam-o-havva bilak bilak ke mare" (Is this why the earth sprouted grains/ That the race of Adam and Eve weep and die). (Ludhianvi (2019) 65).

While assessing Ludhianvi's use of poetry to show the mirror to the society, it should not be forgotten or eliminated that his film lyrics serve the same purpose. They had both the tune of a song and a social message that he used to present through his poems. Javed Akhtar mentions that he proved that "film songs and good poetry are not contradictory. They are compatible and they can be complementary." (Manwani 335). It can be said that the films, no doubtedly, played an important role



in portraying the revolutionary sentiments. Ludhianvi, when he entered the Hindi film industry, used the films as a medium to express and articulate the sentiments and continued to write thoughtful lyrics. As he himself believed and explained the 'cerebral quality' of his lyrics: "If they [films] are used to bring about constructive and positive change, people's thought processes as well as social progress can be influenced greatly and very rapidly." (Manwani 345).

Ludhianvi questions the whereabouts of the leaders in his 'nazm', "Jinhein naaz hai hind par vo kahan hai?" (Where are those who were proud of Hind?) -he questions how the women were pushed into prostitution in their leadership. In this particular poem, which was also incorporated as a song in the movie, *Pyaasa* (1957), Sahir questions the Nehruvian idea of nationalism and portrays the negative effect of Independence. Though the ultimate goal was supposed to be an egalitarian society, this was far-fetched -the immediate effect was a capitalist growth where the financially unprivileged section had to suffer the most. He understood that to achieve the dream of an egalitarian society, much work was yet to be done.

Ludhianvi wanted to leave a better world for the future generation. He intended to portray the follies of the society through his writings -he writes in the prologue to *Parchhaaiyaan* (Shadows) -"...every generation should strive to pass on to the next generation a world that is better and more beautiful than the one they inherited, my poem is a literary manifestation of the same effort." (Rao). Even though he criticises the society and shows them a mirror, he is quite optimistic that a day would come when the sufferings would stop to exist. In his poem, "Vo subh kabhii to aegii" (That morning will someday arrive), he cherishes the dream of creating a just and egalitarian world. He writes:

Vo subh kabhii to aegii

Jis subh ke khatir jug jug se hum sab mar mar kar jeete hai

Jis subh ki amrit ki dhun mein hum zeher ke pyale peete hai

(That morning will someday arrive

The morning for which we are waiting for eternities

To listen to its sweet music, we are drinking glasses of poison). (Ludhianvi).

Through his 'nazm', "Main zindagi ka saath nibhata chala gaya" (I partnered life on its roller-coaster course), he tells the sufferers in an optimistic note that it is useless to mourn over what has happened; instead, they should accept the way life has turned out. He writes: "Barbaadiyon ka sog manaana fazool tha/ Barbadiyon ka jashn manaata chala gaya..." (I felt it unnecessary to mourn the devastations/ I chose to celebrate them instead). (Ludhianvi).

In his 'nazm', "Ponchh kar ashk apni", Ludhianvi motivates people to take a stand for themselves, live with dignity and respect. Until they don't lift their head and speak for themselves, they won't get their identity or be recognised -"Sar jhukane se kuchh nahin hota sar uthao toh koi baat bane" (Nothing will happen by bowing your head, instead hold it high) (Ludhianvi). He teaches them that race, caste and religion has no significance in the face of humanity; the need is to spread love in this world where Partition has left only hatred. He urges them to come together, unite and



fight against the wrong –“Rang aur nasl jaat aur mazhab jo bhi hai aadmi se kamtar hai...Nafraton ke jahan mein hum ko pyar ki bastiyan basani hai” (Colour and race, caste and religion, whatever it is, is inferior to man...In the world of hatred, we have to create colonies of love) (Ludhianvi). He reinstates in them that they are first the children of humans, hence, religion comes second –“tu Hindu bane ga n Musalmaan bane ga/ insaan ki aulaad hai insaan bane ga” (You are neither a Hindu nor a Muslim/ You are a descendant of humans; you will grow up to be a human being). (Deol 167). Karim notes that his “poetry is permeated with a sense of loss, of poverty, of hunger together with the sense of hope, of courage.” (Karim 142).

Conclusion

He drew the society’s attention to “the plight of women to advocating communal harmony or stating his disgust for mankind’s avaricious ways.” (Manwani 343). Tagore, in the inaugural address to the Second Conference in 1938 in Calcutta, said that “...a writer isolated from the society can never become familiar with humanity...It must be a writer’s duty to instil new life into the country, to sing the songs of awakening and valour, to carry the message of hope and happiness.” (Sahni 181).

Sahir Ludhianvi has portrayed the devastations caused by the Partition and wrote about the situation of the country at that time. On the other hand, he didn’t lose his optimistic attitude –through his poems, he reassured the readers that one day, each and every struggle of theirs would yield a good result. Though he was disturbed by how things turned out, he knew that mourning was of no help; they would have to accept the fact and try to start their lives anew.

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Author Bio: Bhavna Jagnani is pursuing her Master’s degree in English Literature from The Bhawanipur Education Society College, Kolkata. She has completed her Bachelor’s degree in English Literature from the same college.