

Postmodernism : An Evolutionary Study of Gopi Chand Narang's Critical Thought

Dr. Shaista Hameed Khan¹, Dr. Rehana kausar^{2*}, Dr. Wasif Latif³

¹Associate professor, department of Urdu, Govt College University, Lahore.

^{2*}Associate professor. Head of Urdu Department, Lahore college for women University, Lahore

³Assistant professor, Department of Punjabi, GC University, Lahore

Abstract

The article under consideration presents an evolutionary study of the intellectual and critical dimensions of Gopichand Narang, a prominent critic of Urdu criticism, in which the interrelationship, intellectual continuity and theoretical differences between progressive modernism and postmodernism are clarified. The article objectively and analytically examines the changing concepts of style, form and phonetics in Urdu literature, based on Narang's stylistic and linguistic critical theories.

Through the analysis of the art of Mir Anis Allama Iqbal Faiz Ahmed Faiz and other prominent poets, the practical form of Narang's critical approach and its intellectual significance are revealed. Gopichand Narang's criticism plays a very effective and important role in the formation of intellectual breadth, ideological diversity and contemporary critical consciousness in Urdu literature.

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Introduction

Gopi Chand Narang stands among the foremost critics, theorists, and linguists of Urdu literature. As a writer, critic, scholar, and professor, he enjoys equal recognition and esteem in both India and Pakistan. Progressivism, Modernism, Postmodernism is a collection of his critical essays, first published in 2004. The volume opens with introductory discourses and concludes with a selection of Narang's representative critical writings.

In literary criticism, the term stylistics is of relatively recent origin. From the sixth decade of the twentieth century onward, it came to denote a critical methodology that, in contrast to the impressionistic and subjective tendencies of traditional criticism, undertakes an objective and linguistically grounded analysis of the style of a literary text. On this very foundation, two significant modern trends in criticism—stylistics and structuralism—emerged.

Tariq Saeed, in his book *Style and Stylistics*, writes:

“A discerning master of style employs words that are vibrant and distinctive, and with particular care forges among them a sense of coherence and organization. Yet, if he lacks concision, a certain diffuseness and looseness may still find a place within his thought.”¹

After discussing the concept of style, Gopi Chand Narang turns his attention to the styles of Mir Anis and Allama Iqbal. In the age of Anis, two major poetic modes were in currency. One was the classical tradition, within which Mir Taqi Mir was acknowledged as Khuda-e-Sukhan (the god of poetry). The other was the style that Nasikh, along with his students, followers, and contemporaries, carried to the heights of popularity. Gopi Chand Narang accords greater importance to understanding art through the lens of form. By the time poetry reached Anis, the genre of the musaddas had already attained a high degree of refinement.

What is noteworthy is not merely the extent to which Anis's poetic personality influenced this genre, but also the manner in which his eloquence, when cast into the mould of this form, manifested itself in a distinctive shape. Thus emerged the style of his poetry that has been universally acknowledged, yet whose stylistic and phonetic elements have not, to this day, received the detailed critical attention they deserve. In Anis's marsiyas, alongside the two established types of stanza—regulated and free—there exists a third form as well. Ostensibly, these appear to be muraddaf stanzas, but in reality the rhyme scheme is also regulated, as they conclude on consonantal closures. To suggest that the tradition of the qasida assumed a new mould within Anis's marsiyas would not be an exaggeration.

Anis was equally adept in the idioms of both battle and courtly life. By drawing upon the tradition of the qasida within the emotional and narrative space of the marsiya, he endowed eloquence with a new expansiveness. In the opening four lines of each stanza, he so skillfully interwove the grandeur of the qasida with the delicacy and softness of the ghazal that the marsiya acquired a new stylistic form—one that remains the exclusive hallmark of his art.

Gopi Chand Narang examines the phonetic resonance of Allama Iqbal's poetry with profound critical insight. It is commonly felt that there exists in Iqbal's voice a unique enchantment, an irresistible pull, and a musicality unparalleled in the entirety of Urdu poetry. His tone carries such majesty, energy, boundlessness, and reverberation that it seems to rise and expand beneath the vault of the heavens. Alongside its charm and appeal, there is a striking force, fluency, sharpness, and

agility—as though a melody were bursting forth from tightly strung chords, or a mountain spring had suddenly broken loose.

What, then, is the phonetic secret of this natural musicality, and to which specific sounds is it indebted? If this mystery can be deciphered, the entire phonetic system of Iqbal's poetry may be unlocked. To grasp Iqbal's distinctive sparing use of aspirated and retroflex sounds, it becomes necessary to compare his poetry with that of a poet whose diction lies close to everyday speech, and in whose work such sounds occur naturally and frequently. Such a comparison would also help determine the average, natural frequency of these sounds in Urdu, and reveal whether Iqbal indeed deviates from this norm. Few would disagree that among the great Urdu poets, Mir Taqi Mir stands closest to the idiom of spoken language. Hundreds of his ghazals freely employ aspirated and retroflex sounds even within their refrains and rhymes. In contrast, a significant number of words in Iqbal's poetic system prominently feature sibilant and continuous sounds, or sounds articulated from the front of the mouth, thereby contributing decisively to the distinctive resonance and sonorous power of his verse.

Syed Abid Ali Abid, in *She'r-e-Iqbal*, writes:

“So far as the communication and expression of meaning are concerned, Iqbal's poetry has reached its highest point of perfection. A peculiar state descends upon the heart when familiar symbols suddenly begin to guide one toward entirely new horizons of meaning.”²

In the twentieth century, after Iqbal, Faiz remains the only poet whose significance has been almost universally acknowledged. Although other notable poets were active in his time, none attained the degree of acceptance and popularity that Faiz enjoyed. The worth of Faiz's poetry asserted itself gradually over time. After *Naqsh-e-Faryadi*, *Dast-e-Saba* was regarded as a marked advance—important not merely in a biographical sense, but also in terms of creative achievement.

In the early phase of his career, critics did not accord him much importance; however, with the passage of time, his stature continued to rise. Although objections were raised to his lyrical tone and to what was perceived as ambiguity in his verse, Faiz's position in Urdu poetry grew ever more elevated. He drew richly upon the classical tradition and, through the force of his creative imagination, endowed words with fresh meanings and renewed resonance.

The mode of lament we fashioned within the cage—

In the garden, that very mode has endured as the idiom of expression.

Gopi Chand Narang, while illuminating the art of Jameeluddin Aali, observes that a strong tradition of the nazm is clearly evident in his work. Aali pursued a new and demanding direction in Urdu poetry—the creation of the long poem. Under the title *Insaan* (Man), he composed an extended poem of nearly fifteen thousand verses, which he himself described as a verse drama of his own making. This work constitutes a complete book, within which he portrays the human being in all his dimensions and manifestations. Aali worked across a wide range of poetic forms and their varied modes of expression, including ghazals, nazms, doha, songs, national anthems, and column writing. He was also associated with Pakistan Television and Radio Pakistan. However, it was through his doha and national songs that he attained the greatest recognition. In addition, Narang discusses the creative achievements of Manto, Bedi, Intizar Husain, Premchand, and Ifikhar Arif within their respective artistic contexts.

In order to avoid undue prolixity, we now turn to the central themes of progressivism, modernism, and postmodernism. Just as post-structuralism is historically subsequent to structuralism and also represents a departure from it, postmodernism likewise follows modernism historically while simultaneously constituting a rejection of it. In the fine arts, the term postmodernism first gained currency within art theory; its application in sociology and literary studies came later.

In the work of Leslie Fiedler, references to postmodernism can be traced as early as 1965. The term gained wider acceptance in France, where thinkers such as Daniel Bell, Baudrillard, and Lyotard began to engage with postmodernism as a theoretical framework. As societies increasingly enter the postmodern phase, that portion of knowledge which cannot be assimilated by the electronic mind, or subjected to electronic analysis, will inevitably fall behind, relegated to the shelves of the past.

Gopi Chand Narang writes:

“Postmodernism does not accept any theory as final or absolute. Indeed, it is fundamentally opposed to the very act of formulating theory. Every theory, by its very nature, is authoritarian, and therefore inimical to creativity and freedom.”³

Knowledge that was once pursued to illumine the human mind or to refine and cultivate the personality will now be produced solely for exploitation within a market economy, or wielded as an instrument of power. Over the past few decades, computer-generated knowledge has increasingly assumed the status of a productive force. One of its most visible consequences is its impact on the working class. In developed countries, the number of factory and industrial laborers has begun to decline, while the ranks of white-collar employees and professional technical workers are expanding at a rapid pace. Jean-François Lyotard maintains that computer-generated knowledge will constitute a major stake in future contests of international power, and it is quite possible that forthcoming rivalries and hostilities among nations will revolve around control over electronic repositories of knowledge. In this sense, the acquisition of knowledge—like territorial conquest—may assume, on a global scale, the proportions of an all-consuming desire. As has been explained, the defining mark of modernity was inseparably linked to the grand narrative of human progress. That enchantment has now been broken. Postmodernism places no faith in any grand narrative—whether Hegelian or Marxist—for the postmodern mind subjects all such totalizing systems to skepticism and doubt. The authority of grand narratives, that is, of overarching philosophical traditions, has eroded. Thinkers such as Michel Foucault oppose totalizing modes of thought precisely because they pave the way for the most oppressive forms of colonialism and imperialism.

Rauf Niazi, in his book *Postmodernism*, writes:

“The intellectual foundations of the postmodern age are characterized by a disavowal of inherited certainties, and Lyotard’s assertion that the postmodern condition marks the advent of a new culture—one that is steadily replacing modernity itself.”⁴

Modernism, in the wider world, had already begun to decline in the aftermath of the Second World War, around 1946–47. In Urdu literature, modernism emerged as a counter-current to progressivism. Like progressivism, modernism, too, sustained and animated Urdu literature for nearly a quarter of a century before its creative energy gradually waned.

Aal Ahmad Saroor stood at the forefront of the progressives and, in age, was senior to many modernist writers. Yet, when modernism took shape, he did not fall victim to a generational divide; rather, he came to be counted among the vanguard of modernism and played a significant role in its interpretation and articulation. Similarly, the late Khalil-ur-Rehman Azmi and Baqar Mehdi were a generation or so ahead of many modernists, but throughout their lives they continued to stand alongside the younger generation that followed them.

Baqar Mehdi writes:

“Modernism did not undertake the project of turning the world into a terrestrial paradise, only to transform it into a ‘hell,’ as progressivism did. Modernism rejects the seductive binaries of ‘construction’ and ‘destruction.’ It regards literature, first and foremost, as a mirror of the self, yet it does not treat the self as the final word, for modernism does not, in principle, believe in any ‘final word.’”⁵

Modernism claimed to be apolitical. Its engagement with existentialism and the theme of alienation (alienation) was complex, yet its rejection of the overtly political—particularly the Marxist agenda of progressivism—became its easiest point of emphasis, and thus received the greatest focus. Unlike the progressive movement, modernism did not issue a formal manifesto, nor did it establish an organization, appoint office-bearers, pass resolutions at regular intervals, or expel dissenters from its ranks. Whether it was the Sir Syed movement, the progressive movement, or modernism, every phase of change bears its own singularity. The most significant commonality across these movements lies in the transformation of outlook and creative approach—changes arising both from historical circumstances and from the internal drives and demands of literature itself. All other details are but a collection of contradictions, which literary history sifts through and labels as the defining characteristics of a given era.

References

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