

## **Spirit of Humanism, Social Harmony, and Justice in Kaifi Azmi's Poetry**

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### **Abstract**

When one reflects on Progressive Movement in Urdu literature, “one's mental horizon is illumined with a myriad of stars—Faiz, Majaz, Krishan Chander, Sardar Jafri, Ismat Chughtai, Sahir, Kaifi, Jan Nasar, Akhtar, Rajender Singh Bedi, Majrooh—there are innumerable names which shine like a galaxy and leave us wonderstruck” (Akhtar and Zaidi). The Urdu Progressive Movement in poetry has a strong element of social consciousness and humanism.

**Keywords-** Kaifi Azmi's Poetry, Spirit of Humanism, Social Harmony, Justice

### **Introduction**

The Progressive Movement in Urdu poetry was imbued with social consciousness and deep humanism. It gave a rare combination of creative activity and a strong streak of social activism. As one of that movement's most articulate voices, Kaifi Azmi's verse reflects a fierce sympathy for all marginalized and belittled beings. Utilizing powerful and intensified imagery, it imparts the message of empathy, social justice, and equality for all. With his simple poetic skill, it bespeaks the aspirations of proletarians. Kaifi is a deeply passionate socialist poet. His verse exemplifies his socio-political battle in times of chaos. He became a towering metaphor for the movement of social change, that values the spirit of resistance and stands for hope and humanity.

Azmi's legacy continues to be celebrated in India and around the world. He was a prominent figure in the Indian Progressive Writers' Movement, and his poetry and lyrics dealt with themes of social justice and equality. He was also a strong advocate of women's rights and worked tirelessly to improve the lives of marginalized communities (OV Digital Desk).

Kaifi belongs to the second generation of Progressive Movement poets advancing the ideology of revolution mingled with romanticism through their verse. The first generation of poets raised their voices against inequality, poverty, slavery, the social plight of women, untouchability, communalism, exploitation, capitalism, feudalism, orthodoxy, narrow-mindedness, pretentiousness, and backwardness. These poets viewed the social setup as a division between oppressors and the oppressed. They chose the side of the oppressed beings. They seek to awaken them and organize them to create a revolution of change. They dreamt of a society where there was no exploitation, tyranny, hegemony, anarchy, and corruption. Their poems and stories were marked with Marxist Socialist ideology seeking peace and equality in society. Among the second generation of these progressive poets were great poets like Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Sahir Ludhianvi, Raghupati Sahay Firaq, Wasir Badr, Jan Nisar Akhtar, Pirzada Qasim, and John Elia, who enriched the world of Urdu literature with the vibrant ink of their pens for years. In this second group, there was also an intellectual like Kaifi Azmi, who was both a progressive poet and a progressive human being. Kaifi Azmi is considered as such because, like his poetry, there was no contradiction between his thoughts and actions in his personality. He practiced the ideas and viewpoints he promoted through his poetry throughout his life.

Kaifi's specialties included speaking plainly and truthfully, fearlessly blowing the bugle of revolution, and directly attacking social evils and malpractices.

The era of Kaifi Azmi in Urdu literature was a time of revolutionary dimensions. In those changing times, he exhibited a unique style of verse, marked with simplicity. He also gave new ideals and artistic dimensions to romantic and revolutionary poetry. "Kaifi wrote fiery poems for the downtrodden, disadvantaged, underprivileged, dispossessed and deprived and recited the same from the stages of poetic congregations all through his life" (A. Sharma). He emphasized and professed social justice and equality through his poetry. His verse professed human compassion, and sympathy towards the poor, the deprived, and the laborers: -

Look at me, for I am he  
Who made a few machines and  
By their owners  
Was dumped into them unhesitatingly  
As though I were mere fuel (Azmi, 123).

His poem "Makaan" (House) speaks "of the irony of labourers who help construct a building with their blood and sweat but are not allowed to enter it after the construction work gets completed" (A. Sharma). He says how the laborers and hardworking people have built all the paraphernalia of human civilization, but these belongings have been seized by a few oppressors. This poem highlights the plight of exploited beings who are doomed to lead a miserable life. It denounces a system where the poor, underprivileged, and homeless build palaces for the privileged and rich people but they have to dwell on the footpath without any roof: -

Tonight a searingly hot breeze is blowing,  
Tonight on this footpath there will be no sleep  
Come let us arise, you and I, and you too, and you  
A window in this wall will surely find an opening.

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We made the wall strong, stronger and stronger still  
Embellished the roof, gave doorways a strength untold.

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When the palace was built, someone else sat on guard  
In squalor we slept with cacophony our bed (3).

He had cultivated this candidness through great effort and struggles. His poetry served a social purpose and worked in the public interest by making readers more sensitive and upholders of human values. He was a poet of the people and a representative of culture. His journey began with romanticism, passed through the stages of religion and communism, and concluded with human compassion. Whenever it came to the rights of the oppressed victims of politicians, Kaifi Azmi did not hesitate to take to the streets.

Kaifi Azmi transformed the sorrows and emotions of common life into his pen. He was born with a deeply compassionate heart. From childhood, he was an extremely sensitive and responsible person. Despite being born into a landlord family, he had no pride or harshness in his nature. In his childhood, he closely witnessed the brutal exploitation of farmers, laborers, artisans, and sweepers from both Hindu and Muslim communities. This firsthand experience of such exploitation made him a staunch opponent of the feudal system. He wanted to uproot the deeply entrenched feudalism in Indian society to solve the poverty of the

Indian people. He was a strong opponent of religious hypocrisy and fundamentalism. Endowed with a progressive heart, he considered humanity as his religion.

One of the most brilliantly penned poems “Aurat” (Woman) addresses women through a progressive male narrator and records a voice of protest against the atrocities being inflicted on women. The poem challenges the socio-gender consciousness of Indian society.

In every corner a pyre smoulders for you  
 Death changes the garb of duty for you  
 Elegance is an invitation to destruction for you  
 The world is nothing but poison for you  
 Change the season if you want to blossom too  
 Rise my love! You have to walk along with me (137).

The poem propagates the ideal of equality and places a demand for a much-needed social change. For raising the voice for basic human rights and justice to women at a time when no debate of such kind was in vogue in South Asia, “Aurat” truly deserves the status of a manifesto of feminism in Urdu poetry. Kafi calls upon women to walk side by side, acknowledging their weaknesses and strengths, urging them to walk step by step together:

Break the bond of custom, from the prison of tradition escape  
 Delight not in your weakness, from this imagined delicacy escape  
 From these self-conjured vows of greatness escape  
 It too is bondage, from love’s bondage escape.  
 Not only the thorn, the flower too emasculate.  
 Rise my love! You have to walk along with me (137-139).

This poem portrays a woman not as a glorified object of beauty but as completely equal to a man in terms of rights and opportunities. The poem is a milestone in itself as it speaks of women's empowerment and gender equality with a deeper understanding: -

A poem ahead of its time, Azmi’s liberating notions remain simultaneously constructive as well as destructive in their approach to the ideas of Indian womanhood. Constructing a pattern of free spirit that appears both empowering and novel for the time, Azmi destructs the narrow lines of supposed femininity that contain such revolutionary ideas for women (A. Sharma).

For a progressive human being and poet alike, it's essential not just to believe in the principles of freedom, equality, and fraternity as mere ideals but to imbue these principles with reality in their own lives and make a full effort to live by them. Kafi lived by what he preached. An analysis of his perspective on women makes it clear that in his life and poetry, the relationship between man and woman was based on an emotional, and meaningful partnership that was marked with gender equality. His poetry also emerged at a time when women were contributing shoulder-to-shoulder with men in the fight for freedom.

Kaifi Azmi was first and foremost a humanist, whose sense of social justice and equality for all were not merely poetic flourishes but a way of life that he practiced until his last breath” (Warrier). Due to his adherence to socialist ideology, his poetry reflects a powerful voice of protest. He dreamt of a socialist Hindustan. He raised his voice for farmers and laborers who had been suffering under the burden of the landlord system during the pre and post-independence times. He writes: -

phir bhī rahtā huuñ kisān  
 vahī k̄hastā, bad-hāl  
 qarz ke panja-e-k̄hūnīñ meñ nidhāl  
*Still, I remain a farmer,  
 Destitute, wretched.  
 Resilient amidst the claws of debt* (Azmi, Kisan)

For almost six decades, through his rebellious and revolutionary poetry, Kaifi targeted various issues ranging from British imperialism to the atrocities of America in Vietnam and the hidden agendas of Indian politicians, from socialism to the growing specter of communalism.

Go to the jungles of Vietnam  
 Its crucified cities and wounded villages  
 Which have by the Bible reader  
 Been crushed and burnt,  
 Go, they have been calling out to you for ages (Azmi, *Selected Poems* 125).

He always strived for national unity, communal harmony, and Hindu-Muslim unity. He continuously tried to break the chains of slavery that the English government tried to impose on the country based on communalism. As a Muslim, the consciousness of being in the minority and the feeling of insecurity have always inspired him to speak out against communalism.

bastī meñ apnī hindū musalmāñ jo bas gae  
 insāñ kī shakl dekhne ko ham taras gae.  
*In our Basti, where Hindu-Muslim just settled,  
 We longed to see the face of humanity* (Azmi, basti mein apni hindu musalman jo bas gae).

Kaifi remained the flag bearer of humanity throughout his life. Upon hearing news of communal riots from anywhere, he would feel restless. The riots that occurred immediately after independence shook him profoundly. During the partition time, he deeply felt the pain of communalism and hostility towards humanity and expressed it fervently in his long poem 'Khoon-e-Jangi'.

On the path of the progressive movement, 'Inqilab' was Kaifi's potent weapon. For him, freedom and equality were the goals, the inspiration was the dream of a new morning, the vision of a new world of socialism. But when this dream began to shatter, he was so deeply wounded that his sorrow spilled over into his poetry in a different style. Seeing the decline of humanity and society, in despair, he honestly accepted the disillusionment of his dreams.

I search for a new world that I cannot find,  
 I search for new earths, new skies, I cannot find  
 If perchance I find them, if somewhere they be,  
 I see in them no signs of a new humanity (Azmi, *Kaifi Azmi: Poems/Nazms* 124).

Since Kaifi is a poet who cherishes humanity, he is deeply pained by inhumane actions. However, even though this poet feels disheartened, he carries a lamp of hope in the darkness of this despair and distrust. Seeing murder, communalism, discord, and plunder all around, he is certainly distressed, but despite these conditions, his faith in humanity does not waver. His poetry expresses his firm and unflinching conviction in humanity.

Kaifi Azmi is a symbol of our shared cultural heritage of Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb. Many elements that nurture the spirit of communal harmony and tolerance are evident in his writings. By referencing the stories of the Gita and Ramayana, and by holding up the ideals of Ram and Sita, he often conveys profound and complex messages. Sometimes, while calling upon the soldiers, he writes:

With your blood draw a line on the ground  
 Let no Ravana cross it ever  
 Smash the hand if hands are raised,  
 Let no one ever touch the garment of Sita.  
 You are Rama, you are Laxman too, comrades  
 Now in your hands we leave the country, comrades (Azmi, *Selected Poems* 105).

In such times when *Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb* is constantly under attack by communal forces, his remarkable poem “The Second Exile” is extremely relevant. At a time, when dreadful politics is being played in the name of Rama, Kaifi’s poem gives us the light to move from a dark society to a brighter one. The poem recognizes the wounded emotions and makes a call to the spirit of unity and brotherhood.

They who had come to my home in order to burn it  
 I know your daggers were vegetarian, my friend  
 And that you had thrown your stones only towards Babar  
 It’s the fault of my own head that it go bloodied  
 Ram hadn’t even washed his feet in the Sarju river yet  
 When he noticed the deep stains of blood  
 Getting up from the river’s edge without washing his feet  
 Ram took leave of his home saying:  
 The atmosphere of my capital doesn’t agree with me  
 This 6 December, I am exiled once again (Azmi, *Kaifi Azmi: Poems/Nazms* 58).

Kaifi's poetry contains revolutionary ideas, but his emotions are more deeply felt. He was a socialist poet who made poetry a vehicle of sympathy for the working class, the poor, and the deprived. He was a poet for the exploited class, always raising his voice for them. Calling him “a progressive romantic or a faithful revolutionary”, a famous columnist in *The Hindu* writes: -

There are three fundamental points of inspiration in his poetry. First, strong opposition to communalism, casteism, social hierarchies, and discrimination. Second, raising a voice against social tyranny and injustice. Third, never giving up on hope, commitment, and the spirit of morale because the work of poets and artists is to dream, and the future of humanity rests on hope (Salam).

He always presented his views with complete truth and without fear. He never fell into the abyss of despair. He constantly searched for a new light in literature and life, showing the public the path to progress in thought and culture. He was a gem of literature who brought poetry closer to the common people. He left a precious legacy of beautiful poems and songs that will remember his miraculous writing for centuries.

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