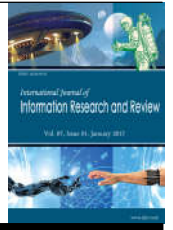




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## REVIEW ARTICLE

### K.A. ABBAS AS THE SOCIALLY – COMMITTED BUT POLITICALLY UNBIASED WRITER: AN APPRAISAL

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#### ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to fling on K.A. Abbas as an unbiased writer. He is a writer of 'common man', who exhibits the real life stories of poverty and hunger, exploitation and protest, alienation and hope and stands firmly for the values of democracy, secularism and socialism. K.A. Abbas, effects desire for social change through the usage of realistic technique.

#### Keywords:

Political Consciousness,  
Struggle, Untouchability,  
Socialism, Dehumanization.

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## INTRODUCTION

Khwaja Ahmad Abbas occupies a distinct place as a multifaceted writer in the crowded gallery of Indo-Anglian writers. He is said to have attempted all forms of literature with the only exception of poetry. Unfortunately he has not received as much critical acclaim and appreciation as is usually expected for a writer of such versatility. It is either because Abbas started his writing career in Urdu dialect and later on started translating his works into English by himself or perhaps he could not reach upto the dimension of his contemporaries like Mulk Raj Anand. "The nature, the function and the evaluation of literature must necessarily exist in close correlation" (Wellek 238) is a subtle and well conceived observation shared by Rene Wellek and Austin Warren which could be adopted as a guiding principle to undertake a serious study of any work of literature. When the question of nature of literature is dealt with it would be quite appropriate to examine how 'novel' as an aesthetic device has come to dominate the world literary scene. It is perhaps the most important vehicle of imaginative writing in modern times. Novel owes its origin to the interest people show in the great panorama of life around them. It could be looked at as a special way of telling a story in which the writer may represent the characters and events of a period in relation to their environments. "The reality of a work of fiction, i.e.; its illusion of reality is its effect on the reader as a convincing reading of life" (Wellek 213).

Abbas as a truly representative novelist of his times deserves a close scrutiny on the extrinsic and intrinsic levels. Any extensive evaluation of works of literature should begin with its setting, environment and the external causes. Equally important is the interpretation and analysis of the intrinsic qualities of the works themselves, for only the literary creations will justify all our interest in the life of the author and finally our study of the whole creative process. The literary creations of Abbas also must be viewed and analysed against this background when one reads through a novel, one realizes that the role of its creator is of paramount importance, as Richard Gill puts it: "... a novel is a world specially made in words by an author. A novel exists in the way it does because an author has chosen to put it together in that particular way" (P 77). In this respect, though as much a form of art as drama or poetry, stands inseparable from its creator. K.R.S. Iyengar observes: "The novel is a means of expression for the author and it is ultimately born of understanding and love ... the novelist's understanding and love will make his writing transcend the merely local and controversial and attain the vitality and dignity of creative literature" (P 322). The truism that the study of a work of literature and its author as something interlocked should properly be applied in evolving the correct perspective of K.A. Abbas as a writer. The political consciousness and social commitment are the most outstanding features finding their pre-eminent roles in his creativity. Going through the early influences which contributed to the growth of his genius, one can have an estimate of the political and social ethos projected rather richly in his novel *The World Is My Village*. Though the early novelists of India started writing in the vernaculars like Bengali, Urdu etc., the more educated among them translated their works into English. Some of these

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writers wanted to interpret India and its culture to the westerners. They adopted the medium of English also because they realised the universality of that language. There were also other educated men with literary taste who were eager to bring to their regional dialect all that was beautiful from the West. Abbas emerged as a writer in the literary horizon after his apprenticeship in journalism at a time. When the great trio of Indo-Anglian fiction namely Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao were holding sway over the field of novel. Their unquestionable superiority may have dimmed the brightness of no less great a writer like Abbas.

It is true that Abbas has introduced Muslim characters in his novels for the purpose of comparison and contrast. Like Khushwant Singh, Abbas also is actually an agonistic in matters of religion as he declares in his autobiography:

“It was a compromise with religion and I was a new convert to agnosticism, without realizing that, that itself was a Compromise. I believed and I did not believe I was not sure of anything – God and Devil, Heaven and Hell – the prophets and the Apostles.... So I took refuge in the hall way house of agnosticism” (P 7).

Abbas is actually conscious of his role as a writer. The motivation for this he attained in his youth as he says in his autobiography :

At the age of nineteen, I did experience an emotional shock which did many things to me – it sharpened my perception of happiness and sorrow, it made me revolt against conventional values and codes of morality. It challenged my imagination and it aroused all my latent powers of self-expression” (7). It made him a writer and sent him out “to the ends of the earth, an ally of all causes that were devoted to the building of new values in a new society” (P 7). As Kushwant Singh remarks in his article namely ‘Compulsions to write’ : “A writer’s work is never done till he dies. If there is anything in what he wrote, it lives after him” (Dhawan 41). It can be aptly applied to Abbas because he was a writer who could not help writing till his death and it is upto the present day readers of his works to judge and recognize his role as a writer with a mission.

Apart from the creative urge which is common to all artists, Abbas seems to have enjoyed the sheer pleasure of communicating with his fellow beings what attracted him most. When somebody wishes to communicate, he can best do so by thinking deliberately about the exact role he wishes to assume. Abbas shows clearly his fixedness of purpose in all forms of his writings, i.e. amelioration. He seemed to have understood from his acquaintance with people or knowledge of events what he himself should do or what his mission in life was and that was what he was engaged in his entire life. When he writes about an experience, he invests it with meaning and imagination which sufficiently come to his help. His autobiography *I Am Not an Island*, is a self-justification of what he is and what he aims to be. He Observes:

“The world has made me and I have made the world ... I am involved in humanity even as humanity is involved in me, as the seed is born of the tree, and the tree is the offspring of the seed” (P 5).

Abbas’s formation as a writer was closely linked with the political turmoil of the 1930’s. He has explained how a tragic

event like hanging of Bhagat Singh and other revolutionaries shook him completely. He records his trauma:

“Ashamed to make a public demonstration of my sentiments, I walked out of the library, walked out of the college and the campus, crossed the railway line, went to the exhibition grounds which lay desolate and deserted and only then I sat and cried my heart out. Looking back over the years, I find that in that moment I shed my boyhood along with the tears” (P 62).

The reactions to such emotionally volcanic situations in his life compelled him to seek relief in writing. In a sense, writing was a moral necessity for him to give vent to his pent up emotions which would affect some soothing purgation as he records:

“... at every tragic turn in my life, writing about it would be a solace – a solution” (P 62).

Like many other writers of the period, he was also shaken by political issues like the Bengal Famine, the brutal Imperialism, Fascism and social evils like dowry system, child marriage and untouchability. “Political consciousness flows in the very life-blood of Indo-Anglian fiction” (Bhatnagar 9). He further tries to view it “as the novelists’ endeavour to relate themselves to the mainstream” (P 9). Since literature is the reflection of life, no serious writer can escape from picturing the harsh realities of his age at P.P. Mehta points out:

“Contemporary novels are the mirror of the age, but a very special kind of mirror, a mirror that reflects, not merely the external features of the age, but also its inner face, its nervous system, coursing of its blood and the unconscious promptings and conflicts which sway it” (96)

M.K. Bhatnagar sees the role of the novelist in creating political consciousness as something different from that of politician:

“This is obviously not the political consciousness of the professional politician. It is political consciousness as it forms part, an organic part, of human consciousness in the environmental context. It is, in fact part of the total consciousness” (P5).

It is no exaggeration to describe Abbas as one of the foremost writers who drew largely from the political, social and cultural milieu of the period of independence struggle. Mehta has rated Abbas’ novel *Inquilab* as a significant work inspired by this struggle:

“Among the significant works inspired by this struggle are the novels like *Inquilab* by Khwaja Ahmed Abbas, *Waiting for the Mahatma* by R.K. Narayan, *Kanthapura* by Raja Rao, *MotherLand* by C.N. Zutshi and novels of social justice like *Untouchable* by Mulk Raj Anand, *Into the Sun* by Freida H. Das, *We Never Die* by D.F. Karaka etc. (P 97). As the patriotic zeal was inculcated in the writers by the emergence of Gandhiji on the national scene, he became a living force in many of the novels of that period. But to Abbas, Jawaharlal Nehru was his hero though Gandhiji is presented as a prototype. His admiration for Nehru was based on the latter’s socialistic credentials. His protagonist, Anwar justifies Nehru’s approach on several occasions apart from calling him a hero in *The World is My Village*:

“But Jawaharlal, is a socialist and a Rationalist. He does not believe in the superiority of Brahmins. He is an

agnostic. You should have made common cause with him, if not with Gandhi” (P 181).

When Anwar suspects the nature of the relationship between Nehru and Gandhiji, in the interview after joining the “National Herald” he asks Nehru:

“Can you tell me what is the significance of your attachment to Gandhiji so much. You are a socialist and Gandhiji is well not a socialist” (P 146).

He is given a satisfactory reply by Nehru:

“Don’t be too sure of that Gandhiji is a better socialist than some of the socialists flaunting red silk ties and scarves.” (P 146). Many literary critics of Indo-Anglian literature are inclined to look at Abbas as a writer with propagandist zeal. The most distinguishing characteristic of his novels is the tendency to view human relationship primarily from a social or political angle. Indo-Anglian novels are largely based on Indian themes and they represent all the problems of the living conditions in India. No writer with a deep social commitment can turn his face away from dehumanising hunger, untouchability and other social brutalities. Abbas seems to have understood that all the social injustices were the creations of inhuman political dispensations such as Imperialism, Fascism and Capitalism. In this sense, as a socially sensitive writer, Abbas is a propagandist of a particular view of life, Events and characters of his fiction are never born out of an emotional vacuum; they are born out of some scolding experiences. Abbas’ social commitment as a writer is discernible in all his literary works. Both as a writer and individual, he is very enthusiastic about socialism as a cause to stand for :

“I still feel enthusiastic about certain causes – freedom, socialism and peace, among them” (P28).

Whenever he lent support to the leftist cause, which originated from his deep-rooted sympathy for the downtrodden masses, he was equally susceptible to the freedom of the individual psyche. He never hated to be called a Marxist in its true implications as he explains in his autobiography:

“I believe myself to be a Marxist though I believe that Marxist methods be applied to the tenets of Marxism itself” (336)

Thus, Abbas’ status as a Marxist is officially not acceptable to the present day propagators of the doctrine. Ahmad Hasib, a very constructive critic of Abbas has rightly evaluated his political leaning thus:

“If one draws a distinction between socialism and communism, one will find the epithet, ‘socialist’ more applicable to Abbas than communist” (18).

Thus, there are enough credentials to place Abbas on the pedestal of socially committed but politically unbiased writer. A close study of his literary works will reveal the fact that Abbas has never allowed his ideology neither to get distorted nor to be palpably propagated through his novels. His early novels like *Tomorrow is Ours* (1943), *And One Did Not Come Back* (1944) show the major social trends in Indian society and his propagandist zeal is quite obvious and manifest. In

*Tomorrow is Ours* through the character of Parvathi, the educated and refined dancer, Abbas shows the superiority of Indian culture and way of life. In a sense, Parvathi becomes the symbol of Indian womanhood and a champion of feminism. Dr. Shrikant, a great admirer of the dancer, becomes her husband. But her mother-in-law, an orthodox woman shows intolerance to her participation in a dancing festivity of the Harijans which finally leads to estrangement between Shrikant and Parvathi. But at last, they get reconciled following the Japanese air attack and both getting wounded and brought to the same hospital in Calcutta. Finally, Shrikant goes on his medical mission to China. This novel also carries the messages of Nationalism, Leftism, denunciation of Fascism and Untouchability. Similarly *And One Did Not Come Back* is the story of the Indian National Congress Medical Mission to China during the Japanese attack.

*Inquilab* is the story of the great revolution that ultimately brought independence to India. It contains several soul-stirring characters young in mind and spirit who poured their bubbling youth to twist and break the heavy chains of imperialisms. “It represents a magnificent cross-section of the entire Indian nation during its most critical period” (Mehta 111). The national and historical events from Khilafat Movement up to early 1930’s form the background to *Inquilab*. The landmarks of Indian Independence struggle like Jallianwala Bagh, Dandi March, the Civil Disobedience Movement are graphically portrayed in the pages of the novel. The threads of this historical – political novel are woven round the figure of an imaginary nationalist Muslim youth named ‘Anwar’. Critics are unanimous in their view that *Inquilab* is the most representative work of fiction dealing with turbulent period of struggle for independence. As P.P.Mehta remarks:

“It is a powerful realistic documentary novel, which makes contemporary history come alive. It is an astonishingly tour-de-force putting and great struggle in its proper perspective” (P 143).

It is through this novel that Abbas asserted himself as a novelist of great caliber. Rightly evaluating the greatness of this novel, Ahmad Hasib compares it to Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*:

“*Inquilab* depicts life in Indian society at a time when a momentous struggle was going on to throw of the yoke of foreign rule, somewhat as Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* depicts the life in Russia during the invasion of Napoleon. *War and Peace* differs from *Inquilab* in many respects, both the novels depict the life of a nation in the hour of crisis on epic scale.” (P 36)

Abbas left the story of Anwar and the Independence struggle incomplete to be consummated in *The World is My Village*. Though he wrote *Maria* (1970) followed by *Inquilab*, dealing with the social and cultural post-independence scenario, it is in *The World is My Village*, Abbas has accomplished a much larger and ambitious portrayal of human destiny. As the title suggests, it is the tale of the great resistance of human soul against the dark forces which stood for Fascism, Imperialism and Communalism. In fact, this independent sequel to his early classic, brings to focus all major world events starting with Munich crisis upto the attainment of Indian freedom. Through the chronicle of Anwar, the chronicle of an entire generation not only belonging to one nation but also that of the whole humanity is completed and brought alive by Abbas. This novel focuses on documentary realism and imaginative recreation.

The journalistic impulse fuses with the creative instinct and we have an amalgam of political propaganda and fictional recreation. The two dimensions do not run at cross purposes but merge into a unified vision.

In *Inquilab* and *The World is my Village* Abbas present the human struggle against the political and historical forces represented by Fascism, Imperialism and Communalism. To conclude, closer scrutiny of some of the significant novels of Abbas makes a good case for establishing the political and social dimensions of his works.

Abbas as a writer and visionary stands in separable from his works. But all his political and social objectives have been happily fused into the requirements of art. The author seems to be often in danger of losing his aesthetic detachment that is required of art. Propagandist enthusiasm stifles the sophistications and nuances demanded of art. But Abbas should be looked upon as the moral conscience of humanity caught up in the throes of socio-political trauma.

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