

For the Urdu Poet Jaun Elia, Religion and Marxism were Compatible

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In his poetry, Elia points out that the enmity between religious people and communists is not innate but a later invention of elites to discredit Marxist ideas.

During the past few years, Jaun Elia has taken Urdu poetry circles in cyberspace by storm. A well-known name among aficionados of Urdu literature during his lifetime, it is only after his death in 2002 that his work gained popularity. Today, Jaun Elia is perhaps one of the most googled Urdu poets. Moreover, his face adorns merchandise that is sold at upmarket stores in Delhi and at various literary festivals.

What made him immensely popular was his distinct style of reciting poems at *mushairas* (poetry symposia). The poet-turned-politician [Kumar Vishwas has said](#) that Elia's poetry is full of pain, suffering and disarray. Reputed Urdu critics and writers have [talked about](#) the influence of Sufi elements and spirituality in his works. A few have pointed out the influence of *Ganga-Jamuni* traditions on his writings. But one important aspect of his poetry that has been thoroughly neglected while writing about him is its progressive nature.

Facebook pages which share Elia's poetry have [lakhs of followers](#). People read his poetry in specially organised literary gatherings. Writers write about his poetry. Still, for some strange reason, everybody has overlooked the important fact that Elia was a Marxist poet whose poetry was highly influenced by communist ideals.

Born and raised in Amroha in western Uttar Pradesh, Elia shifted to Karachi 10 years after Partition. For him, the idea of Pakistan was not that of an Islamic country. He writes in *Shayad*, the only book published in his lifetime, "If Pakistan was formed in the name of Islam, then at least the Communist Party would never have supported its demand." In a poem 'Sarzameen-e-khwab-o-khayal' (Land of dreams and imaginations) he addresses Pakistan on its foundation day:

Khush badan! Perahan ho surkh tera

Dilbara! Baankpan ho surkh tera

(O beauty! Here's hoping your apparel is coloured red

Beloved! Here's hoping your adolescence is coloured red)

In this long poem, Elia hopes that Pakistan witnesses a communist revolution, one that would give rise to an egalitarian society.

As most of us see it today, Marxism and religion are antithetical to each other, but Elia does not find any contradiction between them. He writes:

We never feel threatened in admiring Dante. Though he had written offensively against Prophet Muhammad and his son-in-law Hazrat Ali. We are not afraid while writing and teaching the ideas of Lamarck and Darwin. Their ideas are in contradiction to any religion. Discussing Freud and his ideas never make us feel unsafe while his ideas on sexual nature of humans are derogatory to any religion. Whether these ideas and writings are correct or not, political establishments of America and other capitalist countries had never targeted them in the name of religion. But, when a poor and destitute German philosopher, who was unable to pay for the treatment of his son and did not have money for his last rites, tried to identify the social and economic problems of the society scientifically in order to solve them capitalist societies charged him as a traitor of religions and morality. This person was Marx. In a state of half-starvation this person used to think of the solutions of the miseries of humankind and one day died while lamenting the same. When we talk about the ideas of this great philosopher and wise old man of history, that is, when we talk of communism and try to solve the misery of the masses through communist ideals, neo-imperialist and capitalist countries along with their local pimps brand us traitors of the nation and the religion.

He writes further, "The existence of an imperialist and capitalist US and west Europe is a disgrace to the 21st century modern society."

In his view, philosophers, poets, writers and thinkers of every age have had a common dream - they have dreamt of an egalitarian society, and he hopes that one day 'we' will reach our goal.

Interestingly, he writes that the antagonism between the *ulema* (Islamic scholars) and young Marxist/atheists is a recent phenomenon. In the 1940s, the *ulema* did not stoop to name-calling where young rebellious minds were concerned. Instead, the *ulema* used to say that this Marxist youth's rejection of religion was due to the kind of vast readings that the youngsters were indulging in, and given the opportunity of reading more scholarly material, they would revert to Islam.

Elia clarifies that it was not the case that the *ulema* were leading society in the right direction - they were full of class and caste biases. In his view, they were unable to gauge the social churn which ultimately left them bereft of influence in the mainstream. Commenting on the inability of orthodoxy to change with time, he writes:

Thhey ajab dhyan ke dar-o-divar

Girte girte bhi apne dhyan me the

(So self-absorbed were they that even as the walls and doors crumbled around them,
they remained wrapped up in themselves)

Elia points out that the enmity between religious people and communists is not innate but a later invention of the defenders of capitalism to discredit Marxist ideas.

Elia's poetry is full of references to communist revolution and class consciousness. Unfortunately, most of these couplets and poems are not shared much on social media. His most popular poems are those in which people get a whiff of heartbreak. On the tendency of some of his own fraternity to sell their art rather than use it to bring about social change, he wrote:

Kal ek qasr-e-aish me bazm-e-sukhan thi Jaun

Jo kuch bhi tha wahan wo ghareebo ka maal tha

(Yesterday there was a poetry symposium at a royal palace

Everything there belonged to the poor)

And

Kya mil gaya zameer-e-hunar bech kar mujhe

Itna ke sirf kaam chalata raha hu main

(What have I attained by selling my conscience

Only that I am just getting by)

These couplets bring out the rebel in Elia who refuses to compromise his artistic ability to earn money. As he sees it, literature and art are important vehicles to bring social change and writers cannot shun their responsibility towards society.

Elia's poetry was deeply shaped through his Marxist reading of class consciousness. For him, beauty and love cannot be treated in isolation from the economic and social condition of the people. He writes:

Jo ra'anaai nigaaho ke liye firdaus-e-jalva hai

Libas-e-muflisi me kitni be-qimat nazar aati

Yaha to jaazbiyat bhi hai daulat hi ki parvarda

Ye ladki faqa-kash hoti to badsurat nazar aati

(The beauty that is the splendour of paradise for sight

Would have looked worthless wearing a pauper's attire

Here attraction is also fostered with money

If starving, this girl would have looked ugly)

Elia laments the fact that money has cleaved society in a way that basic human instincts like sexual desires too are being shaped by economic status. While his poetry is not limited to ruminations on class consciousness, he indeed called the masses and thinkers to usher in a social and political revolution. To quote him:

Tareekh ne qaumo ko diya hai yahi paigham

Haq mangna tauheen hai haq cheen liya jaye

(History has taught only one lesson to the people

Begging for one's rights is an insult, it is better to seize them)

And,

Ye to badhti hi chali jati hai miyaad-e-sitam

Juz hareefan-e-sitam kis ko pukara jaye

Waqt ne ek hi nukta to kiya hai ta'leem

Haakim-e-waqt ko masnad se utara jaye

(This duration of injustice keeps on extending

Except the opponents of tyranny who should be called

Time has taught us only one lesson

Those who rule over time should be dethroned)

These are just a few examples where the progressive nature of Elia's poetry comes through clearly. A finer reading reveals that even the 'love' poems about 'heartbreak' are actually conveying social messages resonating with Marxist ideas. It is high time that Jaun Elia is recognised as the Communist poet that he was.

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