

KHWAJA AHMAD ABBAS AS A POSTCOLONIAL WRITER IN HIS SPIRITUAL VISION

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Abstract

Khwaja Ahmed Abbas is a distinguished novelist in Indian English writing. The novel 'Inquilab' presents the picture of Independence Movement of India, it has all the potentialities of post-colonialism, postcolonialism which speaks of release from Eurocentricity, and of shifting the center to the Indian perspective, Since Indian consciousness is essentially the spiritual consciousness, the novelist visualizes the evolution of such a spiritual conscious as the pinnacle of India's independence as Sri Aurobindo did. Roots of his mind are found in the spiritual consciousness wherein, according to Sri Aurobindo, we have the true knowledge and realization of the One Divine, or there is an awakening into our Divine Self in the constitution of our being. While showing the divisive consciousness in the name of religion, caste, etc. He appears to lay emphasis on the evolution of spiritual consciousness while he shows the intimacy between Kaka Rameshwar Dayal and Akbar Ali who projects the former's illegitimate child as is son. Anwar's voice against the misuse of Islam goes to make it more emphatic as his own. The very purpose of India's freedom will be defeated if the consciousness does not rise to its spiritual planes, says the novelist in the inmost being of his consciousness.

An author of repute of 73 books in English, Hindi and Urdu Khwaja Ahmad Abbas has received less admiration and critical attention than he deserved. He has earned a great reputation as a film director and screenwriter. He has made several important Hindi films like, 'Awara (1951), 'Shree 420' (1955), 'Saat Hindustani' (1969), 'Mera Naam Jokar' (1970), 'Do Boond Pani' (1972), 'Bobby' (1973), 'Heena' (1991). He had emerged as a reputed journalist who interviewed several renowned personalities in literary and non-literary fields, including the Russian Prime Minister Khrushov, American President Roosevelt, Charlie Chaplin, Mao-Tse-Tsungand Yuri Gagarin. Unfortunately, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas is one of the under-discussed 20th century men of letters. He is one of those writers who are in dire need of being re-discovered by the present generation of readers. Suresh Kohli, a poet, writer, translator, editor, literary critic and film historian, has made an attempt to do so by editing 'An Evening in Lucknow', a collection of short stories, written by K. A. Abbas. In it, Suresh Kohli himself says:

"K.A. Abbas's work has received little critical attention. His handful of insightful novels, considerable repertoire of seemingly simple yet intense short stories, his record-breaking crusading journalism, a number of films inspired by the neo-realist school, all seem to have been confined to the dark abyss of history. Sadly, the credit for the success of the professed ideals of Nehruvian secularism that he infused in the screenplays of some of his memorable films has gone to directors

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like V. Shantaram, Raj Kapoor, and Gulzar. That, of the more than a dozen of his own productions, only Saat Hindustani is remembered today is primarily because one of the most successful actors of the Indian screen, Amitabh Bachchan, featured in its credits as a debutant, and not because of the message of unity in diversity that is sought to convey. His two major novels, *Inquilab* and *The world is My Village*, dealing with the freedom and partition, are rarely discussed and analyzed when one talks of fiction in that genre. Even his brilliant autobiography, *I Am Not an Island* – the story of his fascinating journey in life does not appear even in the footnotes of dissertations on autobiographies.

Abbas's attempts at creative communication were devoid of any sound and fury; his was the quintessential loneliness of the long-distance runner. He was an unabashed admirer of Ernest Hemingway's style of combining fact with fiction to tell some simple, direct humanistic stories without being moralistic or judgmental. There is nothing epic about his narratives, which are generally full of pathos, dealing with everyday mundane experiences, and characterized by an understatement. And even though some of them have seemingly been culled out of journalistic reports, they are apolitical, but reflective of the times. That's why Mahatma Gandhi and the freedom movement inadvertently find their way into his narratives. If one scans through the pages of his autobiography, or his monumental novels dealing with the freedom movement, one cannot escape Hemingway's adventurous trait resonating through the narratives."¹

Khwaja Ahmad Abbas was born in Panipat in the home of celebrated Urdu poet Khwaja Altaf Hussain Hali, a student of Mirza Ghalib. His grandfather Khwaja Ghulam Abbas was one of the chief rebels of the 1857 Rebellion movement and the first martyr of Panipat to be blown from the mouth of a canon. Abbas's father Ghulam-us-Sittain was a tutor of a prince who modernized the preparation of Unani medicine.

Khwaja Ahmad Abbas was a prolific political commentator, short story writer, novelist, scriptwriter and a film-maker who preferred to call himself a communicator. He began his professional life as a journalist in 1935. His column 'Last Page' holds the distinction of being the longest-running column in the history of Indian journalism. The column began in 1935, at Bombay Chronicle, and when it closed, it moved to the Blitz, where it continued till his death in 1987. He was awarded the Padma Shri in 1969 by the Government of India. Suresh Kohli's write-up entitled 'Man with a message' in the Deccan Herald shows light on the personality of Khwaja Ahmad Abbas.

"Reassessing the work of her estranged husband, the late Uma Anand described Khwaja Ahmad Abbas, in her book Chetan Anand; The Poetics of Film – "Abbas was a valuable friend and a patron to innumerable young hopefuls during these years (1944- 45) of hectic activity." He brother-in-law, the famous star producer Dev Anand, who enjoyed Abbas's hospitality for six months after landing in Bombay from Lahore, reluctantly acknowledges it in his autobiography Romancing with Life – "Abbas was a very famous journalist...and later, my association with him was a matter of great pride

for me...(he) had good contacts with some important film folks.” It was Abbas who had given him a break in his play Zubeida and opened doors for his entry into the big bad world of Bollywood.

Abbas is known today for having given Amitabh Bachchan a break in his Saat Hindustani. Bachchan has confessed elsewhere that he would have gone back to Calcutta and restarted work in his old company had he not got that break. In his foreword to the new edition of Abbas’ autobiography, I am Not an Island, Bachchan observed: “Abbas saheb was a principled individual forthright and honest. He was never tempted by great commercial expectations or desires. He existed in his minimum requirements and never craved for more, or deliberately worked towards it. He was one who would sacrifice his own to assist the other... he was also one who would give freely without asking for anything in return. If he had it, he would give, if he wanted, he would never ask.”

No book on Indian cinema, especially Hindi cinema, can be complete without a reference to the man who came to be recognized as an island by himself. Yves Thoraval, a Paris-based curator-cum-writer, observed in his book *The Cinemas of India*: “Khwaja Ahmad Abbas was a major influence in the film industry... The first great Indian realistic film was K A Abbas and his film *Dharti ke Lal* which was acclaimed in the Pravada by Pudovkin... the first cinematographic ‘manifesto’ of Indian ‘realism’.” B D Garga, one of the country’s most eminent film scholars and founder-member of the National Film Archives, and almost a devotee of Abbas, observed in *The Art of Cinema*; “Abbas’s faith in the final victory of man is undying. He is an inveterate optimist who believes that come what may, ‘We shall overcome’. His cinematic credo is closer to that of John Grierson than Godard and, like Grierson, he uses cinema as a pulpit to project his vision and propagate his ideas.”

Abbas had been more successful as a script-and-dialogue writer than a filmmaker, and even though many of his productions won national and international awards, none of them were as successful at the box office as the ones he wrote for other directors, notably V Shantaram and Raj Kapoor. In fact, the later went on record and said, “Abbas sahib taught me how to use my voice.” Together, they worked magic in films like *Awara*, *Shree 420*, *Boot Polish*, *Jagtey Raho*, *Mera Naam Joker*, *Bobby* and partially in *Ram Teri Ganga Maili* and *Heena*. Filmmaker M S Sathyu emphatically stated that “the credit for meaningful films coming out of certain political and ideological leaning goes to Abbas sahib who could be dubbed somewhat as a pioneer.”

Kishore Valicha wrote in *Dadamoni*, the only authorized biography of Ashok Kumar, who was also, at one time, a partner in Bombay Talkies: “A 1940s war-effort film which caught everyone’s attention was the clever work of an astute journalist named Khwaja Ahmad Abbas. K. A. Abbas, as he was better known, was a journalist attached to the *Bombay Chronicle*. He had scripted *Naya Sansar* (this later became the banner under which he made his neo-realist films) for Bombay Talkies in 1941, which had attracted attention. It was seen as one of the first progressive films to come from

the commercial film world. Abbas got an image overnight. He was seen as a new revolutionary with mild leanings.”

Abbas liked to describe himself as a communicator – of ideas– and, perhaps, therefore, deployed – with reasonable success – all means of expression. As a journalist, short story writer and a novelist, he drew inspiration from Ernest Hemingway; his films were influenced by the Russian neo-realist directors and inadvertently got incorporated in the kind of screenplays he went on to author for himself and others. He was a great human being, helpful and generous to a fault. He seldom compromised on his social or political thinking which, at times, made him a crusader of sorts. He liked to take these little battles to the bitter end. “My motivation (despite commercial failure of films) remains the same. To communicate my thoughts to as large a public as possible,” he told this writer from his sick bed, when *Ek Aadmi* was nearing completion; his last interview, published posthumously in *Filmfare*.

His was a curious case. He would often joke that the hardcore scribes would describe him as a better short story writer than a crusading journalist; the filmmakers found him to be a better scriptwriter than a filmmaker, and the creative writers found him to be better at everything except producing creative fiction. But he did not mind any of these labels. He said his purpose was to communicate and he used every medium to convey his message. Carol J Slingo, bemoaning Abbas’s death, wrote in *Jump Cut* (USA): “Politically, Abbas was part of a generation who were cultured in socialist and communist thought and organizations, and who had to make sense of the vast changes taking place in their own lifetime, most dramatically focused before, during and after national independence.”

“Khwaja Ahmad Abbas is an island whose shores and earth have been touched and used and defiled by numerous people at some stage of their lives and careers or the other: the travelers who lost their way in the vast sea of humanity; the adventurers and vagabonds who needed a place to rest their tired limbs; the sinners who needed a hideout; the struggling, the starving, the ambitious and the opportunists who used it as a launching ground for their future activities and for the firing of the missiles of their success; the genuine lovers of the sea, nature, landscape and freedom who in reality are the only ones who have continued to frequently visit the island and found solace for their restless souls from the traumatic and hectic experiences in their bizarre daily lives.”³

(*The Sunday Statesman*, 10 April 1977)

“The very vision that Khwaja Ahmad Abbas is an island whose shores and earth have been touched and used and defiled by numerous people” reveals that a higher consciousness has descended into his being from the plane of Timelessness and Spacelessness. In an in-depth examination of the consciousness which has come down in his being we find Divine Truth in it. We discover that his literary works especially his novel ‘*Inquilab*’ yearns to attain and realise the plane of the Divine Truth.

Though the novel 'Inquilab' was published in 1942 and presents the picture of independence movement of India, it can very well be called a post-colonial novel. Post-colonialism speaks of release from Eurocentricity and of shifting the centre into the essential Indian consciousness. Post-colonialism is not simply the 'changes in power structures after the official end of colonialism as well as colonialism's effects'.⁴ It has not to be simply seen as 'an umbrella term that covers different critical approaches which deconstruct European thought in areas as wide ranging as philosophy, history, literary studies, anthropology and political science.'⁵ It has to be seen as the rise of the essential Indian consciousness which was not allowed to emerge in the colonial era. The essential Indian consciousness is the spiritual consciousness wherein one discovers one's Divine origin. The novelist visualizes the evolution of such a spiritual consciousness as the pinnacle of India's independence as does Sri Aurobindo. Sri Aurobindo is a yogi and literary figure of a very high plane of consciousness. He took part in the Indian independence movement very actively. To him India's independence was not only an essential requirement for the Indians but also for the entire world.

It is an admitted truth that India leads world in man's spiritual progress. The highest spiritual realisation has taken place in India as it is evident from the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Gita. On his yogic plane of consciousness Sri Aurobindo discovered that India has to go higher in Divine realisation for which her political independence is a must. Sri Aurobindo left politics after realizing the truth that some higher Divine powers are required to be invoked not only for India's independence but for shaping the destiny of the world also. In fact, it is in the destiny of India on which the future of the world is depended. Therefore, he left for Pondicherry which was then a French colony to undertake his yoga for the Divine transformation of India and the world. Though Khwaja Ahmad Abbas is not a man of such a high plane of yogic consciousness, he had a clear vision of the One Integral Divine Consciousness. Such a consciousness he tries to embody in Anwar. We find it in the intimate relationship between Kaka Rameshwar Dayal and Akbar Ali too. Akbar Ali projects the Kaka Rameshwar Dayal's illegitimate child as his own. Anwar's voice against the misuse of Islam goes to make it more emphatic. The very purpose of India's freedom will be defeated if the consciousness does not rise to its spiritual planes, says the novelist in his inmost being of consciousness.

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