

Muhammad Nasir\*

Shahzeb Khan\*\*

### Indigenizing Marxism: Resistance, Poetry and Bonded Labour in Pakistan

#### Abstract

This article offers a seminal study of hitherto uncompiled poetry which is rooted in the struggle against bonded labour in Pakistan. At the theoretical level, this study attempts to engage with Muhammad Azeem's attempt to connect Marxism to Pakistani realities, an effort we call 'Indigenizing Marxism' here. Azeem's effort is probably the first of its kind which is available in print. The paper uses his insights to offer a reading of the resistance poetry of Manzoor Niazi who has used his poetic prowess to highlight the plight of labourers—children, men and women—who work under the shackles of debt bondage. The paper argues that Niazi's poetry foresaw Azeem's theorization as he attempted to bring together in his poetry the revolutionary socialist fervour but with a style that was inclusive of indigeneity.

**Keywords:** Bonded labour, Debt-bondage, Indigenizing Marxism, Pakistan, Manzoor Niazi, Decoloniality

#### Progressive Writers Association and their Resistance Literature

The resistance literature of Pakistan is mostly seen through the writings of Progressive Writers Association<sup>1</sup> as the scholarly studies of Rukhshanda Jalil deals with the historical study of the literature produced by progressive writers whereas Ali Husain Mir and Raza Mir have analyzed progressive literature through the theme of resistance in their scholarly work *Anthems of Resistance* (Mir & Mir, 2006). In Pakistan, Progressive Writers Association (PWA) claims to be representative of resistance literature and the voice of subalterns in Pakistani society. The manifesto of PWA states that the "new literature must deal with the basic problems of our existence of today..." This approach to verbal creativity has enriched resistance literature in Pakistan (Ansari, 2016, p. 163) as "...had first and foremost to be concerned with the realities of life and it had to be the product and servant of life" (Ansari, pp. 163, 191). However, PWA, despite its claims to represent the issues pertaining to poor masses, has not been very successful when it comes to the portrayal of the lowest segments of society. Writers associated with this movement have produced very powerful poetry and literature in Urdu which highlights the plight of the working class but they have done it at a generic level. Also, as scholars on the subject highlight, the writers themselves were not part of the precariat, the most vulnerable class. Many of the writers affiliated with the PWA, especially those who have been more prominent, like Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911-1984) were from the affluent class and they became the mouthpiece of the socialist cause. Critiquing this, Muhammad Azeem writes:

...those who are affiliated with the left idealize progressive intellectuals. Like Faiz Ahmed Faiz, sitting with a cup of tea and making rings out of a cigarette's smoke. [Genuine] Leaders of labourers and farmers did not desire to become intellectuals, neither they had a complex [to become one], nor was it [ever] necessary that the intellectuals must lead labourers and farmers. ...in every seminar, intellectuals have to be brought from Gulberg and Model Town<sup>2</sup>. (Azeem, 2017, p. 22).

While Progressive writers are praised for adopting a mass style to convey the message of socialism to the poor masses. For example, Ansari mentions Faridabadi who wrote "*dihati shairi*" (rural poetry) to encourage the village people to participate more emphatically for their rights. But this too was a top-down approach where the poet wanted to convey to the rural masses what ought to be done and perhaps lacked the requisite empathy which comes from a poet who is

---

\* Muhammad Nasir, Lecturer, Government College, Chunian [mnasir.ss@hotmail.com](mailto:mnasir.ss@hotmail.com)

\*\* Dr Shahzeb Khan [Corresponding] Assistant Professor, Institute of English Studies, University of the Punjab, [Shahzeb.english@pu.edu.pk](mailto:Shahzeb.english@pu.edu.pk)

<sup>1</sup> PWA was established in 1936.

<sup>2</sup> Both are considered upper class localities of Lahore.

himself a labourer or a worker. In this way the rural dialect became popular among the masses and “a peasant and worker style began to develop in Urdu poetry” (Ansari, 2016, p. 201). Azeem, however, calls this ‘tokenism.’ He states that after 1990, in the analyses of the old Left parties, labourers and farmers are only found as tokenism. One can understand the discontent expressed by Azeem as this again reinforces our comment that the resistance poetry of those affiliated with Socialist parties were not sufficiently rooted in the actual struggles of the people (Azeem, 2017, p. 48).

Similarly, most of the writers associated with the PWA were based in cities. Talat Ahmad writes that at the time of Pakistan’s creation

There had always been a ‘progressive’ presence in the cities of what became Pakistan. So there were PWA units in the cities of Karachi, Multan, Lahore, Rawalpindi and Peshawar. Lahore had been one of the main centres of PWA activity (Ahmed, 2006).

So one can discern an inherent, unconscious, bias against the rural areas. So much of resistance poetry that has been celebrated by the PWA or histories mention urban struggles. Like for instance, “Quli Naama” (Diary of a Coolie). This book was written in the socio-political context of the struggle of coolies for their rights against their employers and contractors. In this poetry, the poet had described the conditions of struggle and how in adverse conditions the coolies had gone for a strike and how some selfish and opportunists betrayed their struggle and broke the strike by dealing secretly with employers. (Ansari, 2016).

Owing to these important observations, this paper attempts to decenter the discourse at two levels: at the level of resistance poetry, that buoyant accounts mention PWA writers, and second on the level of the locale. Regarding resistance poetry, this paper, instead of connecting it with the urban situation, moves to the rural space which created such poetry, and regarding what that poetry aims against, it goes further down the pecking order and discusses themes of resistance which are rooted in the day to day struggles of those who have been bonded in labour due to debts they accrue in the name of advance, (paishgee).

Although much of poetry categorized as coming from progressive writers was rooted in political happenings, it seemed to aim dictators. For example, the poetry of Habib Jalib revolves around larger issues as he challenged the then promulgated constitution during Ayub Khan’s regime in his poem “Dastoor”. According to Sadia Toor, Habib Jalib became prominent after his poem *Dastoor* (“Constitution”)<sup>3</sup>, a poem written in response to the recently promulgated Constitution of Ayub’s regime. This, in the critique of Azeem, would be equated with the politics of the liberal left which indulges in liberal activism instead of focusing on people and focusing on matters about organizing (Azeem, 2017, p. 53).

### **The Discontents of Marxism in Pakistan**

Muhammad Azeem in his work cited above has written an incisive critique of Marxist Revolutionary theory and praxis in the context of Pakistan. In this unprecedented study, Azeem highlights the twin challenges, the revolutionary theory has faced in Pakistan, namely from conservative and liberal leanings of Marxism (Azeem, 2017, pp. 53-4). Both, in his opinion, have failed to appreciate the situation on the ground and have dealt with the issue of revolution or change not from an empiricist perspective, but by following Marxism either in its brittle, classical form or in its liberal form propagated by Pakistanis educated in the West. It is due to this unique perspective of Azeem that we call his effort Indigenizing Marxism. Indigeneity has been defined in the Pakistani context as

the state of being loyal to the immediate human contexts—regardless of differences in religions, ethnicities, caste, or gender—of which one is a part. ... without compromising on the essential human-ness or human connection that one shares with people living in other territories anywhere in the world” (Khan, 2020).

Indigenization would thus be a process to localize ( an idea, phenomenon, philosophy, religion which does not naturally belong to the region but is brought from elsewhere, like Marxism in this case). There is a strong theological basis, though not yet explored in contemporary scholarship, of such theorization in the context of Islam (Waliullah, 1762), at greater length by Ubaidullah Sindhi (Sindhi, 1939 [2016]). Similarly, Marxism, since it is a grand philosophy that did not originate in the local, Indian context, must also undergo the process of indigenization, like Islam. Azeem, in his work cited in this study, the paper argues, has tried to indigenize Marxism quite boldly. The paper proceeds

---

<sup>3</sup> English translations, wherever need are provided in parentheses.

with citations of his work and at the same time collates his insights with excerpts from Niazi's poetry of resistance against bonded labour.

Much of what Azeem has presented as discontents of Marxist revolutionary theory, particularly, literary theory, can be found addressed in the resistance poetry of Manzoor Niazi and other poets who have written against bonded labour. For example, it is poetry that comes from people who are part of the struggle themselves. They do not *represent* the precariat from the snug surroundings of Gulberg and Model Town, rather they are with them through thick and thin. Niazi, for instance, is Manzoor Niazi served in Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) as a line-man but after joining Mazdoor Kisan Party<sup>4</sup>, MKP, he left his job and became a full-time worker of MKP. At the party, Manzoor Niazi worked in the Pakistan Dehati Mazdoor Tanzeem, PDMT, a peasant wing of MKP. On February 9, 1989, the PDMT of Malik Agha Khan Sahotra and Bhatta Mazdoor Muhaaz of Ihsan Ullah Khan merged to form a new organization for the liberation and emancipation of bonded labourers in Pakistan as Bonded Labor Liberation Front (BLLF). Manzoor Niazi caught the imagination of these slave labourers and reflected their pain in his poetry.

Manzoor Niazi's poetry critically exposes the exploitation of the oppressed by their oppressors. Much of the imagery of his poetry is derived from religions—mainly Islam, but from Christianity too—and the common life of the indigent wage earners. Debt bondage and slavery are major themes of his poetry. He depicts the miserable life of working-class people in his poetry. In most of his poems, he has exposed how debt-bondage leads to miserable working conditions and how the 'advance' (paishgee) materially oppresses and, even becomes a metaphor of exploitation.

Bonded labour is the modern form of slavery and debt-bondage is characterized as servile status by Article 7(b) of the Supplementary Convention of ILO (International Labour Organization, 2004). A Bonded labourer is someone enslaved by a debt-bondage—an amount which a labourer takes from his employer as an advance and loses his/her freedom to work as a free labourer. The wages of a bonded labourer are always less than a free labourer because of debt-bondage and in this way it becomes impossible for a bonded labourer to pay back his debt to his owner and win back his freedom. According to the brochure of Bonded Labour Liberation Front (BLLF): "These bonded labourers and their families are sold and purchased like commodities. Their daughters and wives are often sold for *Paishgee*" (Brochure of Bonded Labour Liberation Front, p. 3) This modern form of slavery exists in various shades even though slavery in all its forms and manifestations is banned in Pakistan according to the constitution.

In one of the most powerful of his poems "The radiant blood of my children is in these colourful carpets" (1993), (Radiant Blood), a poem exposing the cruelty of child labour in the carpet industry, he writes:

The advance amount has enslaved my children

But for you, the colour of dollars is in carpets<sup>5</sup> (Niazi, "Radiant Blood" Lines 8-9)

He goes on to mention it again towards the end of the poem where he writes

For which the marriages of daughters are postponed

The curse of that debt bondage is present in these ugly carpets. (Niazi, "Radiant Blood" Lines 20-21)

In an interview, Ghulam Rasool Shakir narrated how the children who worked in the carpet industry got themselves injured. "The fingers of their hands became deformed because of work and their hands were injured by using small knives called Rambia(n) in weaving carpets. Their legs became weak and vulnerable" (Shakir, 2017). Shakir revealed a tragic incident of a minor girl in Kasur who died in her early age as she was a bonded labourer in Looms in Kasur. Her mother came to the Bonded Labor Liberation Front (BLLF) for help and that is how Niazi got to know about the plight and hence wrote this poem, "The radiant blood of my children is in your carpets."

The debt bondage which led to the death of a young girl in Kasur becomes the subject of a whole poem entitled "Paishgee" (Debt Bondage) in which he highlights the plight of those who are victims of debt bondage, tracks the impotence of the religious order in protecting the indigent, otherizes the moneyed class, indicts the global Capitalist network in the plight of the poor, and ends on hope utilizing the metaphor of changing weather. The poem begins with a lamentation that despite prayers in mosques, churches and despite bathing in the Ganges, the chains of bandage have not been broken. While initially, the poem seems to be criticizing religion itself, by the fourteenth line, we realize that the demand for a New Bible reveals that religion may still offer a promise of hope. The moneyed class is then otherized

They are not followers of the Quran,

Nor they have any faith in the Bible.

---

<sup>4</sup> Founded in 1968.

<sup>5</sup> All translations of poetry done by authors of the present paper.

---

They are cruel and oppressive people,  
And their only faith is money. (Niazi, "Debt-Bondage" Lines 17-20)

Although, Muhammad Azeem has shied away from directly mentioning the revolutionary potential of religion in revolutionary theory and praxis, yet, perhaps, he understands it as a cultural factor and his hope from the culture of the people, can be equated with his hidden desire to use religion's revolutionary potential. He writes "The question is where is Marxism's theory which is based on the culture of people?". Culture, he writes, is not something artificial that could be replaced, rather it is a "life process which has organic connections with its past and environment like the roots like a tree" (Azeem, 2017, p. 92). In the poetry of Niazi, we find religious metaphors scattered all over. And just as Azeem has argued in favor of an inclusive conception of the plurinational identity of Pakistan (Azeem, 2017, p. 74), the poetry too resists the religious-national, or 'Two-Nation theory' of Pakistan and presents a more inclusive conception.

We offered our prayers,  
In the churches and the mosques.  
We are propertyless people,  
And we are always considered as wretched.  
We have kissed the Bible,  
We have recited the Holy Quran.  
We have drunk the *ZamZam* (water of life)  
We have bathed in the Ganges.  
But our chains are never broken,  
And the evening of our sorrows is never ended. (Niazi, "Debt-Bondage" Lines 1-10)

In the above-mentioned lines, the poet has exposed the role of religion as part of the status quo. And in this suffering, the Hindus and Muslim labourers and peasants are common. The song Debt-bondage was the cultural production of the bonded labour movement and it was sung by folk singers associated with BLLF and MKP. At the beginning of the song, the poet is lamenting the miserable situation of bonded labourers that they are oppressed and excluded from the mainstream society because they are "propertyless" people and own nothing other than to sell their labour. The poet exposes the cross-religion impact of exploitation by the employers as both Muslims and Christians are working as bonded labourers and despite their prayers to God they are exploited and repressed. The poet then equates the exploiting owners as people who worship profit and thus cannot be accepted as Muslims or Christians who subscribe to certain ethical norms. Niazi also offers compares the bonded labourers of Pakistan with the debt-shackled third world countries. Just as a bonded labourer is enslaved by rich owners through debt-bondage, in the same way the rich countries exploit the poor countries through debt-trap design of IMF and World Bank. He elaborates further that if some poor country shows some resistance against Imperialistic exploitation then

The thunderbolt of her cannons  
[...] destroyed our hopes and courage.  
Her warships roam in the seas,  
So, we never breathe loudly.  
Her debt-trap is spread everywhere,  
And she has entangled the whole third world. (Niazi, "Debt Bondage" Lines 47-50, 53-4)

The flip side of the debt-trap of IMF and World Bank, the rhetoric of modernity and human rights has also been amply critiqued by Azeem. The liberal left which indulges in solidarity politics, according to him, is actually based on intellectuals who have been educated in the west and hence support the imperial efforts against terrorism, forgetting that even if that terrorism is defeated, the system of exploitation of labour and debt bondage will remain in place. In his theorization, the aim of the struggle must be to uproot and replace the capitalist system which is the root cause of all evils that impact that indigent wage earner. Azeem thinks that neither conservative Marxists nor the liberal variety is looking at the grand causal factor which leads to the ills pertaining to lack of true democracy or being part of exploitative capitalist wars and its resultant Frankenstein in the name of Taliban (Azeem, 2017, pp. 53-4), rather the aim should be the system itself and for which organization of the labourers and peasants should be prioritized. Niazi, in one of his poems, seems to be highlighting the same in his short poem entitled "The System."

What you consider the apple of your eyes, this System  
It thrives on our blood every day, this System

---

Poverty, disease and joblessness are in this System  
But you say it is the best System.  
Neither a man nor a woman is safe here  
Let us unite and break this System. (Niazi, "The System" )

Most interesting is Niazi's use of the genre of Na'at which is as old as Islam since in it Muslim express their devotion to Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) and sing his praises. The most prominent Urdu critic of our times, Nasir Abbas Nayyar writes, "There might be many motivations for a naat, however, in it, reverence and love (ishq) are most prominent" (Nayyar, 2018). Although Nayyar points out at the end of the essay that the subjects of Na'at, like other poetic genres of Urdu, have not remained limited and with time variety has come, yet he stops short of mentioning other varieties. Here in Niazi's Na'at we find a unique improvisation as it merges the love of ordinary people for the Prophet of Islam with their desire for change. The poem begins with addressing Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) with reverence and asking him when will capitalism end. It mentions the status of the persona movingly as someone who does not own anything as property, are enslaved, dying without medicine, and cannot afford to marry off their Fatimas.<sup>6</sup>

When, O! Prophet of God! Will this Capitalism End?  
When, O! Prophet of God! Will this Capitalism End?  
And when will labourers begin to rule?  
My lord when will my hapless journey end?  
O! Prophet of God! When there will be a cottage or house for me? (Niazi, Naat, 1994) (Niazi, "When O Prophet" Line 1 - 5)

What Niazi has done here in this Na'at is remarkable as he has done something unprecedented in the history of Urdu literature. While the Quranic text has been weaved into the fabric of revolutionary poetry by Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi and Faiz Ahmed Faiz, yet using the medium of Na'at for presenting socialist fervour is a unique hallmark of Niazi's resistance poetry. It reads like a very forceful complaint, an indictment which is presented before the Prophet of Islam whose popular construction has been that of a person who had been a saviour of the poor. Thus, understanding religion as a cultural factor and not taking culture as "a part of religion and thus making it static in religious texts" (Azeem, 2017, p. 92), Niazi harnesses its cultural power and uses it in favor of resistance against the exploitative class. Earlier the progressive writers "deeply influenced by their socialist outlook, the western emphasis on rational thinking and secular ideas of democracy and freedom, considered that religion stood as a major obstacle in the path of human progress" (Ansari, 2016, p. 204). Here one may find an alignment in Azeem's theorization and Niazi's creativity as the latter roots his critique of capitalism in the genre of Na'at, a remarkable feat in the context of the struggle for the precariat.

The seminal work of Muhammad Azeem highlighting the discontents of revolutionary theory and praxis in Pakistan is a seminal attempt at pushing the political theory of Marxism which has hitherto remained fossilized in the past and in western contexts to address local, indigenous concerns. While Manzoor Niazi's works have remained forgotten and unread, this study has shown that he has addressed local issues at length in his poetry and not only has he actually participated in the workerist struggle of bonded labourers but he has also sung their songs and has called for organizing their power, a vision that Azeem presents in his theorization: "...there is only one solution that again, gradually, ideological work is initiated cautiously and clandestinely among labourers. And then ideological labourers work for organizing other labourers" (Azeem, 2017, p. 53). In many of Niazi's other poems which had remained in very limited circulation address various other facets of exploitation the way, the wretched of the earth experience them. For example, the perennial issue of cartelization which leads to shortage or inflation of a necessary item like flour is highlighted by Niazi in his poem 'Raise the price further, for the flour is still affordable'. The poem is a sarcastic take on hoarders and capitalists who store the flour to increase its price regardless of the impact it will have on the poorest of the poor.

Raise the price further, for the flour is still cheap  
You moneybags earn more profit! For the flour is still cheap  
Flour is still available in our surroundings

---

<sup>6</sup> Prophet Muhammad's (P.B.U.H) most beloved daughter was Fatima, and after her, many muslims name their daughters as Fatima.

---

You should make it disappear! The flour is cheap.  
If you have no food, you should not make a noise  
Enjoy the baton of police, for flour is cheap.  
Mother, daughters and sisters of nation  
Line up! For the flour is still cheap

(Niazi, "Raise the Price Further")

All of Niazi's poems which were published in the magazine of MKP, *Morcha*, can be read as an indigenized version of socialist fervour. Thus, whether it is his poetic effort to call labourers of debt bondage and peasants to unite in a revolutionary struggle as in clarion call, 'O! Farmer: Industrial Worker is calling you' or whether it is his effort to merge the overt socialist agenda of the MKP, with the ground reality of theistic masses, as in 'I am Hussain and No One should write my Elegy' (1992), we find this powerful poet practically foreseeing Azeem's theorization of Indigenizing Marxism.

### Conclusion

There are yet many poets of bonded labour in Pakistan like Manzoor Niazi, Malik Agha Khan Sahotra, Baba Muhammad Ali, Chanan Maseeh, Milkha Maseeh and Inayat Ali Pardesi. Unfortunately, almost all of them have been forgotten. This paper is an attempt to make their poetry visible and through it see the everyday heroism of the powerless from the lowest rungs of society. Such an approach to social, and revolutionary struggles would enable us to see different perspectives from the ones that come from various affluent creative and academic settings.

### References

- Ahmed, T. (2006, July). Literature and Politics in the Age of Nationalism: The Progressive Writers' Movement in South Asia, 1932-1956. *PhD Dissertation*. Retrieved from <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/33736/1/11010508.pdf>
- Ansari, K. H. (2016). *Emergence of Socialist Thoughts Among North Indian Muslims*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Azeem, S. (2017). *Pakistan Mein Inqlabi Theory aur Marxi Nazrayay ko Darpaesh Challenges*. Lahore: Saanjh. Brochure of Bonded Labour Liberation Front. (n.d.).
- International Labour Organization. (2004). *Labour, Debt and Bondage in Brick Kilns*. Rapid.
- Khan, S. (2020, September 1). Indigeneity and Indigenization. *Indigeneity and Indigenization/Shahzeb Khan*. Lahore: YouTube. Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u\\_1-HR-3P6s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_1-HR-3P6s)
- Mir, A. H., & Mir, R. (2006). *Anthems of Resistance*. New Delhi: Roli Books.
- Nayyar, N. A. (2018, June 4). Na'at: Kuch Riwayat or Ghair Rivayati Muharikaat. *Jasarat*(27).
- Niazi, M. (1992, July 28). I am Hussain and no one should write mt Elegy. *Morcha*, p. 40.
- Niazi, M. (1993, March 07). Mere Bachoon Ka Rang Khush Rang Kaleenon Mein Hai. *Morcha*, p. 2.
- Niazi, M. (1994, March 13). Naat. *Morcha*, p. 2.
- Shakir, G. R. (2017, December 7). Socio-political situation of Manzoor Niazi's poetry. (M. Nasir, Interviewer)
- Sindhi, U. (1939 [2016]). *Bar-e-Sagheer mein Tajdeed-e-Deen ki Tareekh*. (M. A. Raipuri, Trans.) Lahore: Rahimia Publications.
- Waliullah, S. (1762). *Hujjatullahil Baligha*. (M. C. Hermansen, Trans.) Islamic Research Institute.