

The Pakistan Movement and the Bangla Poetry of the Islamic Trend: An Evaluation from Postcolonial Perspective

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Abstract

The Pakistan Movement was a political movement that took place during the dying stage of the British colonial rule and demanded for a separate homeland for the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent. Some of the Bengali Muslim poets saw this Movement as a great opportunity to overcome the servitude of colonization. They thought a separate homeland for the Muslims would enable them to establish an ideal state based on Islamic nationalism. Moreover, the prospect of developing a distinct literary tradition for the Muslims also motivated them to support the Movement. This is why they regarded it their holy duty to uphold the ideologies of the Pakistan Movement in their poetry. This effort had become so pervasive that it led to the emergence of a distinct poetic trend in Bangla literature, that is, the Islamic trend. The poets of this trend, in the process of disseminating the ideologies of the Movement, showed strong resistance against the oppressive colonial rule by expressing tremendous concern for freedom in their poetry. But they emphasized Islamic nationalism and culture so much that, sometimes, they could not avoid being communal in their attitude. And all these issues are very significant from a postcolonial perspective. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to examine the poetry of this trend in the historical context of the Pakistan Movement and British colonization to address its postcolonial significance by focusing on its themes of resistance, independence, culture, nationalism, and communalism.

The creation of Pakistan as a separate homeland for the Muslims of the Indian

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subcontinent was, on the one hand, a result of the Pakistan Movement and, on the other, the insidious impact of the British colonial policy of “divide and rule” that maneuvered the relationship between Hindus and Muslims of British India into hostility and distrust. The Pakistan Movement was inspired by the controversial “two-nation theory” devised by the Muslim intellectuals and political leaders like Muhammad Iqbal and Muhammad Ali Jinnah that defined the national identity of the people of the Indian subcontinent on the basis of religion disregarding some of the basic components of identity formation like language, culture, and ethnicity. Consequently, the communal basis of this theory, though it had a long historical background, culminated in the demand for a separate homeland for the Muslims of India which was formally proposed in a meeting of All India Muslim League in 1940 – known as the Lahore Resolution. So the Pakistan Movement, which sought independence from the British colonial rule to form a new independent nation state for the Muslims of India, gained momentum after the Lahore Resolution. This situation inspired some of the Bengali Muslim poets so strongly that they wholeheartedly dedicated themselves to upholding the ideologies of the Movement by exclusively depending on Islam as the subject matter for their poetry. It resulted in the emergence of a distinct trend in Bangla poetry – the Islamic trend, of which some of the notable poets are Shahadat Hossain (1893-1953), Golam Mostafa (1895-1964), Sufi Zulfiqar Haider (1899-1987), Raushan Yazdani (1917-1967), Farrukh Ahmad (1918-1974), and Talim Husain (1918-1999). In the course of propagating the ideologies of the Movement, the poets of this trend expressed strong resistance against the colonial rule in their poetry. Their resistance was so subversive and critical of the colonial relationship that their poetry can easily be identified with postcolonial literature because, in general definition, postcolonial literature is that “which critically or subversively scrutinizes the colonial relationship” (Boehmer 3). The following quotation from Sufi Zulfiqar Haider’s poem “Koifiot” (“Demanding an Answer”) of *Bhanga Tolwar* [The Broken Sword] (1945) exemplifies the overall attitude of the poets of this trend towards colonization: “I want to know: in this ill-fated land, how long this inhuman oppression / of the native and of the overseas oppressors will continue in the guise of protection?” (1-2). The poet holds the colonizers and their native collaborators responsible for the inhuman condition of the people of his land. He is aware of the oppressive nature of colonial rule which exercises its evil power upon the native people deceptively in the name of doing good for them. Therefore, like Sufi Zulfiqar Haider, the poets of this trend expressed their experience of oppression, exploitation, and subordination in a form of resistance against colonization in their poetry. And thus their poetry becomes fiercely anti-colonial which is an important feature of post colonial literature because

texts which are anti-colonial, which reject the premises of colonialist intervention (the civilizing mission, the rejuvenation of stagnant cultures)

¹ Author’s translation from Bangla. All such references from Bangla texts used in this paper are translated by the author except those which are otherwise specified in the Works Cited page.

might be regarded as post-colonial insofar as they have 'got beyond' colonialism and its ideologies, broken free of its lures to a point from which to mount a critique or counter-attack. (Childs, Peter, and Patrick Williams 4).

This is why the poets of the Islamic trend, rejecting the grounds of colonialist intervention and going beyond its ideologies, attempted to rejuvenate Islamic culture in their poetry which became stagnant during the colonial rule.

Though the tradition of writing poetry on Islamic themes has a much older history in Bangla literature than that of the poetry of the Islamic trend fueled by the Pakistan Movement, what made this trend truly distinct is the fact that the poets of this time fused Islamic elements with the political situation of their time in a way that had never been done before. In the following extract from Azharul Islam's "Hazrat Muhammad" in *Chhayapath [The Galaxy]* (1966), the poet perfectly blends his Islamic consciousness with his awareness of the political situation of his time which has placed him in a wretched condition: "Remembering you, O Prophet, the great and sober / Bring the new tide in the dead bank of life's river" (1-2). Under the colonial system, the speaker's life has become as lifeless as a dead river and to revitalize it, he remembers Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, whose ideals can bring flow to it again. The poets of this trend, therefore, opted for Islam as a solution to overcoming their colonial situation. So their choice of Islam is no less a political decision as much as it is religious. Thus the Islamic trend in Bangla poetry, "being nourished by the Pakistan Movement, succeeded in establishing a distinct and narrow space in Bangla literature whose flavor persisted for many days" (Das 19). Therefore, though the poets of this trend are normally slighted and evaluated very negatively in the poetic history of Bangla literature for their somewhat communal position and lack of artistic or literary merit, the themes of resistance and protest against the oppressive colonial rule and of culture, nationalism, and independence movement that they expressed in their poetry are very significant from a postcolonial perspective. But, as the very creation of Pakistan by partitioning India is itself an extremely contentious issue, the Pakistan Movement and its offshoot, the Islamic trend in Bangla poetry, are held responsible for encouraging communalism in the Indian subcontinent, particularly in today's Bangladesh that gained independence from Pakistan in 1971. However, the emphasis on Islamic nationalism by the poets of the Islamic trend deserves special attention in postcolonial studies because "throughout the imperial world during the decolonizing period, protest, resistance, and independence movements were fuelled by one or another nationalism" (Said 261). So it is not unusual that the Pakistan Movement, which occurred during the decolonizing period of British colonial rule, was fueled by Islamic nationalism which was reflected in the poetry of the Islamic trend.

During the colonial period, majority of the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent had this feeling that they were the worst victims of colonization, for before the inception

of the colonial rule in India, Muslims were the rulers of this land, though, ironically, all the Muslim rulers like the Mughals or the Sultans had come to India from Persia, Turkey, and the Afghan region. Therefore, in spite of their rulers' foreign origins, the Muslims used to feel an affinity with them, perhaps believing in the universal brotherhood of Muslims. As a result, an Islamic way of life – observing its traditions, culture, rules, and regulations was very strongly prevalent during the pre-colonial period. At that time, the official language of the Mughals was Persian; and Arabic, being the language of the Qur'an, the holy book of the Muslims, used to enjoy a highly honored status. Education was, for the Muslims, primarily confined to the study of the Arabic-Persian language and the tenets of Islam. This kind of education would enable them to find moderate jobs in different sectors. Besides, “(d)uring that long Muslim rule in India, the migrant Muslims from Arab-Turkey-Persia had the absolute priority in the top positions of army, court and administrative services. They were the centre of the elite class of that period” (Das 25). This situation must have hurt the Hindus and the people of other communities of India, and a sense of discrimination and deprivation definitely worked in their minds for they became marginalized during the Muslim rule. For that reason, when the British came to India, new opportunities opened up for these deprived groups, especially for the Hindus. They warmly accepted English education and collaborated with the British to change their social position. Gradually, due to western education, these marginalized people attained better positions under the British Raj in contrast with their Muslim counterparts who showed a strong reluctance to western education and indulged in romanticizing the pride and glory of the old days when they used to be the rulers of India. This had made the situation very complicated for the Muslims with the passage of time, especially at a stage when they found themselves ineligible for any good job because of not having an English education. Under these circumstances, the Muslims failed to keep pace with the Hindus and lagged behind them in almost every sector. Hence, during the latter part of the nineteenth century, some of the educated Muslim elites like Syed Ahmad Khan (1817-1898), Abdul Latif (1828-1893) and Syed Ameer Ali (1849-1928) stepped forward with the mission of upgrading the status of the Muslims. The British government, as a part of their own policy, encouraged and patronized this venture. Accordingly, the Muslims started to receive English education and, consequently, a new Muslim middle class emerged who became “involved in competition with the Hindu middle class for their development” (Das 26). This situation widened the gap between these two communities and deepened the sense of insecurity and inferiority among the Muslims for their lower position in the social structure. Later on, Sadruddin, one of the poets of the Islamic trend, emphasized in his poem “14th August” that the distance between these two communities had reached an unbridgeable position:

Hindus and Muslims
Are never the same nations –
They are two – having millions of difference.

Their progress is in separation, ruin is in union.
So
For the Muslims I want
The separate homeland – holy Pakistan. (qtd. in Das 118)

Such an utterance was typical of the adherents of Pakistanism. However, gradually the newly emerged Muslim middle class started to form various political, cultural, and literary organizations to work for the betterment of the Muslims of India, maintaining a strong alliance with the British government. They believed that “the interest of the Muslims will not be preserved by Congress” (qtd. in Das 26). As a consequence, a separate political party for the Muslims, All India Muslim League, was formed in 1906. This was the time when Bengal had already been partitioned (1905) by the Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, and the whole Bengal, mainly the West Bengal, was fuming in protest at this decision. But the educated Muslim middle class, particularly of East Bengal, considered the partition highly beneficial to them, and in the founding assembly of the All India Muslim League, they expressed their support for partition: “That this meeting considers that partition is sure to prove beneficial to the community which constitute the majority of the population and that all such methods of agitation boycotting shall be firmly condemned and discouraged” (qtd. in Das 27). So it is evident that the educated or elite Muslims had wanted partition even before the commencement of the Pakistan Movement. The sense of insecurity due to their fallen status in the colonial period, and their feeling of inferiority because of their backwardness in comparison with the Hindus in almost every sector including education, art, literature, and science made them believe a separate homeland would guarantee their security, respect, peace, and prosperity. But there were also certain political reasons which were very subtly manipulated by the politicians of the two communities and also the policy-makers of the British Raj who led to the ultimate partition of India in 1947. However, the Pakistan Movement progressed in parallel with the Indian Independence Movement led by Congress.

In this situation, the Bengali poets of the Islamic trend, who also belonged to that Muslim middle class, considered it their sacred duty to support the Movement. Apart from political reasons, some of them had literary considerations to seek for a separate homeland for the Muslims because that would give them the opportunity to produce a distinct literary tradition which did not develop very notably during the colonial period. They believed that it would give them the opportunity to portray the life of the Muslims in their own literature which remained almost ignored by the Hindu writers. At the prospect of the emergence of Pakistan, the poets of this trend felt that “perhaps such an opportunity is coming for us when we will be able to speak of ourselves, when our poetry will contain our history, when the accounts of our society, our desires, pride and sorrows will be portrayed in our poetry” (Ahsan 52). To promote the ideology of the Movement, “Purbo-Pakistan Renaissance Society (East-Pakistan Renaissance Society) was established in Kolkata in 1942” and to

materialize the vision of the poets and writers “Purbo-Pakistan Shahitto Sangsad (East-Pakistan Literary Society) was founded in Dhaka in 1943” (Azad 12) under the leadership of Syed Sazzad Husain (1920-1995) and Syed Ali Ahsan (1922-2002). The mission of the literary society was to work for the progress of a distinct stream in Bangla literature (Pakistani literature) based on Islamic tradition as Syed Ali Ahsan declared:

In the present circumstances, we cannot afford to ignore our political feelings. Great literature does not exhaust itself in aesthetic creation alone. In the field of literature our heritage lies in the current traditions of Islam, in the innumerable unpolished *punthis*, folk-ballads and songs. Some narrative poems based on them have already been written. We expect many more in the future. Even if they come through conscious efforts, they are welcome, because genuine literature will emerge out of them. (qtd. in Al-Azad)

Therefore, to produce a literature of their own, the poets of this trend culled the materials for their poetry from Islamic tradition, myths, history, legends, and the *punthi* literature of the mediaeval age. To create a new type of language for the emerging Pakistani literature, they made very careful choice of their diction by using Arabic and Persian words in their work by consciously avoiding Sanskrit-based words in Bangla language which was deemed to be the language of the Hindus by these poets. In this context, it is imperative to note their choice of language because language is not only “a means of communication” but also “a carrier of culture” (Thiong’o 13). So it can be assumed that by making conscious use of Arabic and Persian words in their language, the poets of this trend wanted to uplift the Islamic culture that remained occluded during the colonial period. Moreover, “(l)anguage as culture is the collective memory bank of a people’s experience in history” (Thiong’o 15). In that sense, the Islamic poets wanted to bring forth the experience of their own history through the collective memory of the people of their community by their special choice of language. They were driven by a spontaneous and sincere enthusiasm to create something new. And, most importantly, they hoped that “Pakistan will be formed as an ideal religious state (*dharmarajya*) where the Islamic egalitarianism will be established, and there will be no place for the oppressors” (Das 68). This is imperative to note that almost all the poets of this trend identified the British rulers as oppressors, and the sense of being oppressed in their own homeland by the foreign rulers made them extremely charged to show resistance.

So the Islamic trend in Bangla poetry foregrounded itself with the themes that are common in resistance literature under any colonial rule. Generally, the writers of resistance literature express their yearning for freedom, as Edward W. Said asserts, “being conscious of themselves as prisoners in their own land” (258). Similarly, the poets of the Islamic trend in Bangla literature, having the same consciousness of being prisoners, resorted to Islam as the basis for their identity

envisaging the revival of the golden days of Islam of Prophet Muhammad's era that would ensure a society absolutely human in nature and free from all sorts of tyranny and oppression in contrast to their prevailing situation under the colonial regime. Farrukh Ahmad is the most prominent poet of this trend who is famously known as the poet of Islamic Renaissance. "Pakistaner Kobi Allama Iqbal" ("The Poet of Pakistan Allama Iqbal") of his second volume of poems *Azad Koro Pakistan [Let's Free Pakistan]* (1945) is a remarkable example of such poetry where the poet takes refuge in Islam expressing his longing for freedom: "In all the imprisoned minds there is now only one yearning – Let's free Pakistan / ... All the hearts of the devotees are Mustafa's unyielding edifice" (qtd. in Rahman 165). The poet puts his experience of colonization vis-à-vis his faith in Islam. As Ngūgī wa Thiong'o opines, "To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others" (16), so it can be said that the poet is trying to recover the most important tool of his self-definition, that is, Islam which used to be controlled by the colonial power as a process of the control of his whole culture during the colonial period, for he affirms that he can define himself better in the light of Islam. This attempt by the poet can be regarded as "a theoretical resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath" (Gandhi 4) which gives more meaning to the very title of this volume *Let's Free Pakistan*. It has double signification. On the one hand, it refers to the poet's desire for freedom, and on the other, his demand for a separate homeland for the Muslims – Pakistan. The poet believes that freedom would remain incomplete or impossible without the creation of Pakistan where he would establish an ideal state on the basis of Islamic egalitarianism. In the introduction to this volume, Farrukh Ahmad explained his view of freedom by declaring that freedom is the birth right of mankind which had been snatched away from them by the colonial rulers. Therefore, in "Punjeri" ("The Navigator"), a famous poem of his first poetry collection, *Shat Shagorer Majhi [The Sailor of the Seven Seas]* (1944), the poet is seen to wait passionately for the break of a new dawn that will put an end to this dark period of imprisonment:

When will the night end, punjeri?

After this long night's weary voyage
 What sea's dark horizon beckons us?
 Is it the dim life's gate wailing
 On the strife-torn dream of the painful heart?
 Life's triumphant sound recedes and dies slowly.
 You on mast and I row blindfold;
 Endless mist exists before me.

When will the night end, punjeri? (6-14)

Farrukh Ahmad showed tremendous enthusiasm in the poems of this collection expressing his earnest desire for freedom. The sailor of the title poem "The Sailor of

the Seven Seas” symbolizes a revolutionary leader, who alludes to the leader of the Pakistan Movement, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, to whom the poet appeals to start his revolutionary journey to reinstate the golden days of Islam (though it is not necessarily the pre-colonial Islam) by defeating the evil power of colonization:

I don't know how many black curtains had to be raised to bring this morning.

The green leaves shiver in the orange grove.
The seven seas' tide has brought foam on your door-steps.
O Sailor of the seven seas, see, your ship calls at your door,
A still-life, like a picture it stands there.
No water reaches the helm, its sails do not flutter,
O Sailor, I entreat you, rise up,
Rise up and join the seamen,
You will find your ship sailing again in the seas,
Like a full-moon in the blue seas
Braving cloudy waves and crossing all obstacles. (1-11)

Farrukh Ahmad used to play with words by using different symbols and metaphors in his poetry. The above excerpt is no exception to this. Though the English translation cannot fully contain his artistic talent in using Arabic and Persian words, it is not difficult to understand the overall atmosphere of the poem where the speaker is alluding to his existence of colonization as covered by black curtains which the morning sun cannot penetrate. But the speaker has the feeling that day is not very far when the evil period will come to an end. The time has become ripe to start the revolution for which the sailor, the leader, should take immediate action because the speaker, along with his fellow people, is completely prepared and only waiting for his command. Here the speaker refers to the time of the Pakistan Movement when the Muslims were eagerly waiting to welcome Pakistan and bid farewell to the British colonial system. But he is also aware of the fact that it will not be an easy job, because for an eternally long period of time they have not experienced freedom. Therefore, to achieve freedom, they have to overcome all the obstacles. Like Farrukh Ahmad, all the poets of the Islamic trend expressed their concern for freedom along with their protest against the colonial oppression. In their poetry, therefore, their consciousness of being prisoners repeatedly appears. This type of consciousness is a common feature of the “literature of the imperialized world” (Said 258). Besides, as post colonialism “foregrounds a politics of opposition and struggle, and problematizes the key relationship between centre and periphery” (Mishra and Hodge 276), their poetry, in that sense, belongs to post colonial literature because they also put themselves in a conflicting relationship with the colonizers through their extreme concern for freedom.

The poets of the Islamic trend initiated ideological and cultural resistance against the colonial power to reform their community. According to Said, resistance in the imperial world “in turn makes possible the establishment of new and independent

states” (253). So it is not surprising that a new and independent state Pakistan was established in 1947 as a result of the resistance in which the poets of the Islamic trend participated though many of them gradually fell into disillusionment by finding their dream country a far cry from their expectation because of the oppressive and discriminatory rule of the West Pakistani rulers. And, after the Language Movement of 1952 that sprouted the seed of Bengali nationalism among the people of East Pakistan rejecting the communal ideology of Pakistanism, the trend started to dissipate because of the gaining prominence of the overpowering secular and liberal-humanistic trends in Bangla poetry. Since then, the poets of the Islamic trend are normally treated as anti-progressive and communal. Many of them are not even recognized as poets. And it cannot be denied that some of them had become so obsessed with the ideology of the Pakistan Movement that “(t)hey often resorted to blind communal feelings instead of appealing to the humanistic and peace-loving aspects of Islam” (Hossain 90). At this juncture, it is of high importance to consider the fact that the type of nationalism they supported or the communal attitude they expressed was the result of their tension loaded relationship with the empire. This sort of radical nationalism is, as Said explains in a different context, like the choice of “a Caliban who sheds his current servitude and physical disfigurements in the process of discovering his essential, pre-colonial self” (258). And Said states further that “this Caliban is behind the nativist and radical nationalisms that produced concepts of Négritude, Islamic fundamentalism, Arabianism, and the like” (258). So it is not unusual to see the Bengali poets of the Islamic trend to take refuge in their essential, pre-colonial self of Islam by which they attempted to consolidate their identity to continue their resistance against the colonial forces. But, in some cases, they failed to make a balance between their ideology and the traditional Bengali culture of secularism that normally does not appreciate communal attitude. Moreover, they were somewhat deceived by the beneficiaries of the Pakistan Movement whose political propaganda blurred their vision from reality, for the later events in the history of Pakistan bear testimony to the shortcomings of the Movement. This is why the Islamic trend in Bangla poetry, so far, failed to contribute any strong legacy in Bangla literature, but its study from a post colonial point of view is immensely important in the present context of the world which is always haunted by the ghosts of colonialism and the demons of neocolonialism.

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