
TEXT TO SCREEN, JOURNEY OF KHWAJA AHMAD ABBAS

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ABSTRACT

Khwaja Ahmad Abbas was a journalist and writer, activist and filmmaker, scenarist, scriptwriter, thinker, and philosopher all rolled into one, a man whose pen inked not merely words but rather a vision of human awakening. Last week saw the release of a book celebrating the life and work of a man who eluded all labels, a book fittingly as eclectic as the subject himself. Published by the Khwaja Ahmad Abbas Memorial Trust (KAAMT) in association with Tulika Books, Bread Beauty Revolution — Khwaja Ahmad Abbas (1914-1987), is edited by filmmaker Iffat Fatima and chairperson of KAAMT, Syeda Saiyidain Hameed. Together they have attempted to capture the spirit of a ‘committed social reformer’, whose sole mission in life was to communicate his unstinting ideal of a more humane world.

KEY WORDS: Adaption, Nationalism, Socialist

Adaption is a form of criticism and recreation as well as translation .A film adaptation is the transfer of a written work, in whole or in part , to a feature film. This paper endeavors to study Khwaja Ahmad Abbas as a novelist to film-maker. His text and films upheld his ideas of Secularism, Socialism and Nationalism. He explored extensively subject like Discrimination, Exploitation, Rape, Acid attacks and other atrocities meted out to women in our society and dreamt of their ‘empowerment’ in the time when even the world was not coined, just as he made meaningful ‘Art film’ much before the concept was born K.A. Abbas’s adaptations in films are Naya Sansar(1941),Neecha Nagar, Anhonee, Munna, Saat Hindustानी (Amitabh Bachchan’s debut film),Do Boond Paani. Achanak (1973),based on a story K.A.Abbas. Khwaja Ahmad abbas focused the taste of Indian youth in his writings and films .This is seen in his post- independence novels. Some of his novels like ‘Bobby’, Boy Meets a Girl, Four Friends and Mera Naam Joker have been made films .Apart from this, he wrote best of Raj Kapoor’s films , Awaara, Shri 420, Mera Naam joker, and Henna.He got Nargis Dutt award for the best feature film on National Integration: Saat Hindustानी in 1970 and Do Boond paani, in 1972.

Abbas’s ideas and beliefs form an integral part of his socialistic vision expressed comprehensively and competently in his writings and films .The content and the tonality of Abbas’s texts are drawn from his real life experiences and vision seems from Indian villages, Gaun life style, Bombay, Delhi, the circus, The film-studios etc. are depicted in his writings and adaptations in a very convincing manner . These are the basic facts experiences .His characters are mobilized by stress and strains of the perspires of the social milieu. His characters are images from the real life with their hopes, notions, fears and hatreds. They appear to be most natural and true to life.

Naya sansar (“New World) is a 1940 Hindi film on radical journalism, directed by reporter turned director, N.R Acharya and written by a journalist himself, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas,who started his career with this film. He used his journalistic background to create a story about the rising radicalism in Indian society and journalism. The story addressed the conflict between a dynamic young reporter and his cautions, yet

idealistic, editor of the fictional progressive newspaper, 'Sansar'. The story line revolved around the editor, Premchand (Mubarak), who is in love with a beautiful orphan named Asha (Renuka Devi), whom his family has raised from an infant. Soon after Asha starts working for a paper, she falls in love with Sansar's star reporter and dedicated radical – journalist, Puran (Ashok Kumar). Asha, however, still feels indebted to Premchand's family.

When Premchand starts to hedge on his radicalism by dealing with the evil Dhaniram, Puran quits, and starts his own newspaper, "Naya Sansar". Premchand quickly sees the error of his ways, and not only returns to the paper's previous left – wing stance, but also condones the marriage of Asha and Puran.

The film adaptation of Anhonee deals with the story of two sisters – Monini and Roop- both played by Nargis- the legal one raised by a courtesan and the illegal child. As time passes by, Roop falls in love with Rajkumar Saxena (played by Raj Kapoor), an advocate- who is a tenant- comes to pay the house rent to her father, but instead meets Roop. Soon they involve in a deeper romantic relationship, and Roop convinces her father of their marriage.

As the family plan to organize a party to formally announce the wedding, Rajkumar runs into Mohini, Roop's twin sister and comes to know that Mohini is the real daughter. Unable to bear this, Mohini gets into an unpleasant situation, and gets angry over Rajkumar. In the meanwhile, Roop comes to know about the truth, and tries to save Mohini by deciding to swap the position of both of them. During this the marriage happens where Rajkumar unknowingly weds Mohini. When Roop's father comes to know about the reality he dies.

Abbas Sahab, as he was fondly called, played several roles in his life. Yet, he was refreshingly self-deprecating of his own abilities. At the book launch, actress Shabana Azmi, who fondly referred to him as Abbas Chacha, chose to read an excerpt from the book which clearly showed this side of him: "Maybe I'm a non-writer, an unredeemed journalist and columnist masquerading as a writer of fiction."

If anything, the truth would seem quite the opposite, for his writings were unsparing about the harsh realities of an 'emerging' India. The book's editors refer to him as a 'Prophet Tiresias of modern India', an apt comparison with the mythical, blind Greek seer, who is said to have mediated the realms between the divine and the human.

In many ways, he embodied the legacy of his great-grandfather, Maulana Khwaja Altaf Hussain Hali, hailed as one of Urdu literature's most significant writers and an influential social reformer. Abbas's life seemed to be modelled along the lines of Hali's famous couplet, "Farishte se behtar hain insaan banna/Magar ismein lagti hai mehnat zyaada (It is better to be a human being rather than an angel/But it requires greater effort). The task of "resurrecting" such a man's work required great effort, for although Abbas was highly prolific, with 74 books, 40 films (of which 23 were his own screenplays), 89 short stories and 3000 articles to his credit, very little of this material remains today. The editors managed to unearth about half a dozen books from private collections; they located a few scholars of Abbas's works who gave them some leads; and they traced some of his Urdu writings anthologised by the Haryana Urdu Academy. The state of many of the films that he had produced under the banner of Naya Sansar was even worse, as the editors discovered while attempting to organise his centenary celebrations last year.

At the event Syeda Hameed shared the questions that had arisen in her mind when she initiated the project of reviving the legacy of Abbas – questions about his relevance in our times: As she mulled over his writings and discovered the "many-facetedness" and the "many-splendidness" of K.A. Abbas, who happened to be her uncle, the answer came to her in the words of John Keats, "And then I felt like some watcher of the skies/When a new planet swims into his ken." The relevance of a man whose pen touched upon every social

issue the people of this country faced post-Independence, many of which we are still grappling with, became crystal clear.

Just a few examples of the films made under his 'Naya Sansar' banner show his wide-ranging concerns: Dharti Ke Lal(1945) about the Great Bengal famine, Rahi (1953) depicting the exploitation of tea workers, Shehar Aur Sapna (1964) on the travails of urbanisation, Do Boond Pani (1971) on a scarce resource such as water in arid regions, among others.

Similarly, his short stories, such as Sardarji, Panchi, Pinjra aur Udaan, Aasman Mehel and Bholi, just to name a few, explored the themes of communalism, suppression of dissent, caste prejudices, and gender discrimination. His restless soul was always intent on expressing his desire for a more egalitarian India.

While speaking about her journey of discovering Abbas' work, Iffat Fatima said one of the most commendable qualities of Abbas Sahab was his self-reflexivity – the fact that his critical lens was as unsparing of himself as it was of others. He was unafraid to express his opinions even if it meant challenging the actions of an individual of the stature of Jawaharlal Nehru, a man Abbas Sahab greatly admired and considered a friend. Fatima first discovered K.A. Abbas through his book, I Am Not an Island: An Experiment in Autobiography (1977), which fascinated her. "He had almost a Sufi idea of transformation. Just as Sufis aspire for personal transformation, he aspired for social transformation. He was engaged with everything that was happening around him, moment to moment, and I think that is what motivated me to edit this book with Dr. Hameed," she said.

This sensitivity to things around him was what made Abbas's work so immediate, visceral and path-breaking. Actor Atul Tiwari, emcee for the evening, enumerated his various pioneering achievements – he started one of the first regular weekly student magazines called Aligarh Opinion while studying at Aligarh Muslim University; he was closely associated with two of India's most significant cultural movements, the Progressive Writers' Association and the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association (IPTA), and his debut film Dharti Ke Lal, produced by IPTA, was India's first 'crowd-sourced' film; he is considered to be one the pioneers of Indian parallel or neo-realistic cinema – the film Neecha Nagar (1946), scripted by him and Hayatullah Ansari, became the first Indian film to win the Grand Prix at the Cannes Film Festival the same year; his film Munna (1954) is cited as the first Indian film without any song and dance routine; his column 'Last Page', holds the distinction of being one of the longest-running columns in the history of Indian journalism (it began in 1935 in the Bombay Chronicle, and moved to Blitz after the Chronicle's closure, where it continued until his death in 1987); and the list goes on.

While Indian cinema owes a lot to Abbas' gaze and labours, one of the most significant gifts he left behind for the creative community at large was made possible by a case that he fought in the Supreme Court challenging the censorship of his film Char Shehar Ek Kahani (1968) on the grounds that pre-censorship of cinema was a violation of Article 19 (1)(a) guaranteeing freedom of speech and expression.

The case, K.A. Abbas vs. Union of India, 1971, which marked the first instance of a film being viewed inside the Supreme Court, resulted in a landmark judgement which – while acknowledging the power of the cinematic medium – stated that the depiction of a social ill in itself could not be the basis of the censor's snip; how the subject was treated should be the criterion. The precedent set by the judgment continues to be used in the fight against censorship to this day.

Today though, most people will remember K.A. Abbas as the man who launched the career of Amitabh Bachchan in his film Saat Hindustani (1969). And it was Amitabh Bachchan's presence at the book launch which proved to be the main attraction and point of discussion, something that the actor himself politely

expressed his discomfort about. His poignant tribute brought the spotlight firmly back on to his ‘Mamujaan’, someone he also referred to as a ‘farishta’ (angel).

He vividly described the atmosphere during the making of Saat Hindustani with the entire crew sleeping in the same space: “Many times I saw him working on the floor next to me with a lantern, writing the dialogues for the next day’s shoot...His entire thinking was of equality. I do not know what the exact meaning of communism is, I do not know what the exact meaning of socialism is but I would like to read to you his last page for the Blitz in which he has written his will. I think that this aptly describes what K.A. Abbas was and what he stood for.”

In this will Abbas Sahab shares his credo with his readers: “I’m still an agnostic, that is, I don’t know about religion. I believe in one God. I may be a Muslim but I believe that all religion believes in one divinity. I think the whole of humanity is one and believes in one god who has no shape or form; therefore I am inclined to believe that nature is God.” He goes on to express his desire for an all-religious meeting to celebrate, not mourn, his life and requests to be buried along with the pages of his columns.

In a luminous short film made by Fatima, screened at the beginning of the book launch, Abbas jokes that if someone were to ask him what he had done, he would reply, “Jhak maara (idled my time away)!” However, the opening song of classical musician Rene Singh encapsulated the essence of Abbas’ work, his ideas and his life: “Itni aasaan nahin ae dost mohabbat meri/tu ne samjhi hi nahi kya hai haqeeqat meri (Dear friend, my love is not that easy/you haven’t really understood its true meaning).

As the spirit of Abbas’ work in Bread Beauty Revolution bears out, speaking truth to all forms of power is not easy, but it is imperative nonetheless. It also serves as a timely reminder to us that love — whether for a person, country or ideology — is not about conformity and intolerance but rather about creative engagement, playful dialogue, and respect for difference.

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