

Islamic Personalities(05 Sep 2011 NewAgeIslam.Com)

The Rationalist and the Romantic: Niaz Fatehpuri
By Intizar Husain

SAHITYA Akademi of India has brought out a book on one of Urdu's leading literary figures, Niaz Fatehpuri, who is also known as an outspoken rationalist ever ready to fight for the cause of reason, more particularly in the domain of religion.

The compiler of this book, F.S. Ejaz, is widely known as a writer and editor of the influential literary journal Insha, published from Kolkata. In 1997, he brought out a special issue of Insha on Niaz. In later years he chose to make a study of the life and works of this versatile personality who was involved in multifarious subjects ranging from literature to religion. Now after painstaking research Ejaz has been able to compile an account of the writer.

Niaz's first love was poetry. He soon developed a strong liking for Mir but at the same time also betrayed signs of growing into a rebel. Even during his early years, when he was learning Arabic and Diniyat, he started giving voice to his dissension from the clerics' interpretation of Islam and its teachings. When he grew up and started publishing his own journal under the name of Nigar he saw to it that it was not just a literary journal.

Of course, Nigar had originally come out as a literary monthly journal meant for readers who possessed a sophisticated literary taste. The highbrow editor attached little importance to the literary likes and dislikes of the common readers. The outright dismissal of Josh and Jigar speaks of his bluntness in expressing his literary opinions. Their popularity mattered very little to him. He was a classicist and had no respect for the new trends of the 1930s and 40s, least of all for free verse.

Ejaz also discusses Niaz's poetry but is careful not to quote even a single line from his verses. This is because he was better known as a fiction writer than a poet and is credited to be among the initiators of the romantic trend in Urdu fiction. He translated Tagore's Gitanjali in Urdu, and this translation turned out to be a great influence in contemporary Urdu literature.

It led to a romantic mode of expression both in prose and poetry. Niaz's short stories and novels stand as leading examples of this mode of expression.

Ejaz has tried his best to uphold the romantic expression as adopted by Niaz in his fiction. However, the popularity of the romantic trend was short-lived. The age of realism had already started in Urdu and soon fiction, progressive as well as non-progressive, was under the sway of the realistic mode of expression. In fact, it was in this domain of thought that Niaz emerged as a leading figure with the torch of rationalism in his hands. In this capacity he stood unrivalled. Ejaz has bracketed him with scholars such as Maulana Shibli, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Maulana Abul Ala Maududi, a classification with which I disagree. Only a reference to Sir Syed Ahmad as his predecessor is valid. In fact, Sir Syed was the first to make a rationalist approach to our social and religious problems. Niaz came next, and well armed with rationalist thinking, waged a war with full force against obscurantism.

As expected, the clerics unanimously criticised him. But he stood undaunted against all opposition. He declared his journal Nigar as "an organ of rationalists [and] free-thinkers" and fought the battle single-handedly. What went in favour of Niaz was that he had studied Islam. What distinguished him from the traditional Islamic scholar was his attempt to understand and interpret the teachings in rationalist terms. And he did this with perfect ease. This was what provoked the clerics.

They had already rejected Sir Syed's rationalist interpretations of Islamic teachings and once again the clerics rose in defence of Islamic teachings as interpreted by them. They came out with fatwas of apostasy against Niaz. But he stuck to his guns and chose to be aggressive rather than defensive in this fight. He got his courage from his beliefs in the basic teachings of Islam. It was only the clerics' version that he had rejected. Ejaz has quoted a number of writers who insist that Niaz was deeply involved in religion: he studied it a lot and tried to gain access to the truth underlying the teachings.

Now a few words about his migration to Pakistan

Niaz appeared well settled in India but in July 1962 he quietly left Lucknow and came to Karachi. He requested his friends not to give undue publicity to his migration. The literary quarters in India wondered at his sudden departure and reacted against it. Niaz never explained the reason for his belated decision to come to Pakistan.

Ejaz has brought to light the reason, which, according to him, was very personal. He tells us that after the death of his daughter, his son-in-law remarried with his blessings. But soon problems arose and the only way Niaz saw out was to say good-bye to them and move away. Under these circumstances he decided to leave Lucknow and migrate to Pakistan and join his estranged family members in Karachi. Here he died in 1966.

Source: The Dawn, Karachi

URL: http://www.newageislam.com/NewAgeIslamIslamicPersonalities_1.aspx?ArticleID=5409