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IDEOLOGY/POLITICS AND LITERATURE IN AFGHANISTAN: ASSADULLAH HABIB AND HIS NARRATIVE WORKS

One of the features of modern fiction in Afghanistan, particularly since the mid-1960s, is its direct connection with socio-political conditions of the country. Ideology linked Afghanistani fiction to the outside world in terms of literary methods, as well as to internal socio-cultural, political and economic circumstances. This enhanced the position of fiction, as an imported genre, in modern Afghanistani literature, as well as in contemporary political discourse. One of the authors who contributed to the politicization of fiction from the 1960s was Assadullah Habib. In this article, I will examine the literary and ideological/political significance of his narrative works in the contexts of Afghanistani literature and socio-politics, as well as Western poetics, and how they contributed to the emergence and development of a type of fiction, socialist realism, which has dominated Afghanistani literature over the past three decades.¹

Assadullah Habib contributed greatly to the development of modern fiction in Afghanistan. His real contribution is to socialist realist fiction in the 1960s and 1980s. Habib turned to writing fiction in the mid-1960s, a very critical period in the modern history of Afghanistan. In his works social reality and politics played important roles. He is not the only author whose fiction was moulded by ideology and politics. Indeed in the early 1960s, with dramatic changes in the politics in Afghanistan, this type of literature dominated. Habib is significant among his peers in terms of the quality, quantity and diversity of his works. In order to explore the significance of his works one should study them in the socio-political and cultural context of Afghanistan at the time of their publication.

From a historical viewpoint, after a lengthy intermission of socio-political suffocation (1929-64), Afghanistan entered a relatively relaxed period. The period 1965-73, which is known as the “constitutional decade,” was characterized by the ratification of a new constitution, the emergence of political parties and an independent press. Although the politically re-

1. Roger Garaudy calls socialist realism “an attitude towards reality and not a method” (quoted in J.E. Flower, “Socialist Realism without a Socialist Revolution,” in *European Socialist Realism*, eds. M. Scriven and D. Tate [Oxford and New York: Berg, 1988], p. 109).

laxed environment ended in 1973 with a “royal coup” orchestrated by Muhammad Daud, the socio-cultural developments continued for at least another five years. With the Leftist coup in 1978, the whole socio-political and cultural condition of the country changed dramatically.

From another angle, the 1960s and early 1970s also influenced the overall cultural conditions of Afghanistan. In this period, Afghanistan’s relationship with the outside world (from the neighboring region to Western and Socialist countries) reached a peak and witnessed the highest degree of cultural exchange. Feature films, books, magazines and journals, music and other cultural goods flooded into the country, some in their original forms and others through translated versions made in Iran. A relatively large number of students were sent overseas for higher education and a relatively large number of foreign experts were employed. It was also the most thriving period in terms of visits to Afghanistan by foreign tourists. In addition, by organising cultural activities such as conferences, seminars, exhibitions, concerts, and theatrical performances and language courses, cultural institutions run by foreign embassies (mainly Western) were very active in Afghanistan.

In literature, the search for innovation and change in literary forms and conventions, which had commenced at the beginning of the twentieth century, finally produced fruit. With regard to prose, from the early twentieth century the search for new narrative discourses started with the translation of Western works, and this was followed by imitation. However, Afghanistani works were greatly influenced by traditional storytelling poetics. This resulted in the introduction of new literary forms, such as the novel, the short story and plays. This was a significant and major literary development in a culture historically and traditionally dominated by verse.

In the 1960s and early 1970s Afghanistan witnessed one of its greatest periods of politicization in modern history. With the emergence of political parties and an independent press, heated debates on social, economic and cultural issues were conducted by members of the parties and individuals in the parliament, via public demonstrations, and through the press. One of the areas which manifested these debates was literature. A relatively large number of people turned to writing fiction not purely for its aesthetic value but as a forum in which they could express their political and ideological viewpoints. Among them could be found even some of the so-called future “good authors,” who later stood against the use of fiction in the service of politics and ideology. One of the writers who regarded literature as a forum for political/ideological struggle and devoted all his works to this objective was Assadullah Habib. Prior to the 1960s, realist works of fiction made up a substantial portion of modern literature in Afghanistan. However, what differentiates Habib’s and other authors’ works in the 1960s from previous

works is not only the so-called reflection of reality but also dealing with the roots of problem as well as conveying a dire need for change. At the same time, while previously realities were portrayed only as reality, the later works such as Habib's were connected with class struggle.

Habib is a poet, translator, literary scholar and author, as well as the holder of a PhD in literature from the former Soviet Union. He was a lecturer, Dean of the University of Kabul and the first president of the Afghanistan Writers' Association. Habib was born in 1941 in the town of Maimana in the north of the country, and he spent his childhood there. This environment had a considerable impact on his works of fiction. It is the setting for almost all of his works, in particular the works which he created in the 1960s.²

Habib is widely considered as representative of the socialist realist method. While he is not the first author in Afghanistan to employ ideology in fiction, he is the most recognized and influential practitioner of it. He made a diverse contribution to the type of literature and art in which ideology and politics played important roles. He wrote short stories, novelettes, dramas, screen scripts, academic works in defence of socialist realism and its importance, as well as translated works in the same line.³ His works of fiction are divided into two groups: those he wrote between 1965 and 1978, and those he wrote after the 1978 leftist coup. Although both groups follow the socialist realist method, they are different in their themes and presentation. While in the first group class struggle makes up the backbone of the works, in the second the main objective is defending the revolution against the reactionary mujahideen powers. The first group of works undermines the authority and fairness of the monarchist government in the 1960s, while the second group were written in support of the leftist regime that ruled Afghanistan between 1978 and 1992. Thus, in the first group of works, the peasants reach class consciousness through their own hard experiences, whilst in the latter they have already reached an ideological consciousness of what they are living for, learning from their education and books. In addition, the second group of his works is more faithful to socialist realism than the first group.

Among Habib's first group of works, *Sapedandām* (A Fair One), a novelette, and *Seh Mazdour* (The Three Servants), a collection of short stories, are significant. Much of his fame is due to these two works.

2. Habib has been living in Germany since the mid-1990s.

3. Habib's revolutionary dramas, *Khashm-i Khalq* [People's Anger] and *Shab wa Shalāq* [Night and the Lash] were staged in Kabul theatre as early as 1978.

Ideology/politics and fiction

Habib is not the first writer to apply ideology to works of fiction. There is a strong relationship between ideology and literature in the West. According to Gayatri C. Spivak, ideology is unavoidable and cannot “step out of” literary works.⁴ Allan Sinfield argues that “ideology produces, makes plausible, concepts and systems to explain who we are, who the others are, how the world works.”⁵ Ideology offers some intriguing interpretive possibilities for literary works. As Terry Eagleton observes, the very idea of “literature” is ideological,⁶ but, as he earlier asserts, the “literary text is not the ‘expression’ of social class. The text, rather, is a certain *production* of ideology.”⁷ Catherin Zuckert summarizes the contribution of narrative literature to political thought thus:

Fiction is imaginative creation, projective thought. . . . The concreteness of literary images seems to obscure the fundamentally thoughtful character of fiction. Yet it is just the combination of the particularistic, concrete character of the novel’s [and the short story’s] presentation of human life with its inventiveness that enables it to make a distinctive contribution to political thought.⁸

According to John Horton and Andrea Baumesister, political issues are in some significant part about a particular time and place, which gives fiction an advantage over theories which strive at universal validity:

It is in developing a richer, more nuanced and realistic understanding of political deliberation that imaginative literature may have an especially valuable role to play. Novels and plays [and short stories], for example, seem much better at exhibiting the complexities of political

4. Gayatri C. Spivak, “The Politics of Interpretations,” *Critical Inquiry*, 9 (1982), pp. 259-78.

5. Allan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1992), p. 32.

6. See Terry Eagleton, *Introduction to Literary Theory*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996).

7. Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London: Verso, 1978), p. 64.

8. C. Zuckert, “The Novel as a Form of American Political Thought,” in *Reading Political Stories: Representations of Politics in Novels and Pictures*, M. Whitebrook, ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1992), p. 139.

experience and the open-textured and necessarily incomplete character of real political argument.⁹

In the case of Afghanistan during the periods 1965-73 and 1978 to the present, literature has become extremely politicized and ideologically oriented. The politicization of literature happened in the mid-1960s with the ratification of the new constitution. At the time, the process was due to the efforts of the newly established leftist political parties, and individual writers; after the 1978 coup the government used all its weight to promote the politicization of literature. Both the government and the mujahideen used every means to fight each other, and literature was one of those mediums. The politicians encouraged, supported and even bought writers to produce works that supported their political and ideological goals.¹⁰ The traits that they appreciated in a writer were not only “a voice that speaks to a wider audience” and the “simplifying [of the voice] to attain immediate goals,” but also “a privileged technical expression, [that] is capable of communicating the weight, color, historical dimension, perspectives, the very emotion of reality.”¹¹ Commenting on the connection between literature and politics in respect of the emotional component of choice, Joel Kassiola says:

Given the undeniable emotional nature of actual political experience where life and death are often at stake (or at least the quality of life with regard to its most important dimensions), why not extend the literary capabilities of expressing and illuminating human emotions and behavior relevant to political life, especially when political value choices need to be made?¹²

For the politicians as well as the authors who were politically-minded, works of fiction designed to influence party members and rally mass support were very important. In a literary tradition in which works are often read, recited and performed on public and private occasions, Afghanistani

9. J. Horton and A. Baumesister, “Literature, Philosophy and Political Theory,” in *Literature and the Political Imagination*, John Horton and Andrea T. Baumeister, eds. (London; New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 13.

10. On the difference between politics and ideology, Eagleton argues that “politics refers to the power processes by which social orders are sustained or challenged, whereas ideology denotes the ways in which these power processes get caught up in the realism of signification” (*Ideology: An Introduction* [London; New York: Verso, 1991], p. 11).

11. Antonio Skarmeta, “The Book Show,” in *The Writer in Politics*, W. H. Gass and L. Cuoco, eds. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1996), p. 41.

12. Joel Kassiola, “Political Values and Literature: The Contribution of Virtual Experience,” *ibid.*, p. 59.

fiction at this time played a powerful role in social mobilization and political legitimacy. This situation resulted in the emergence of political fiction, which according to Irving Howe is one “in which political ideas play a dominant role or in which the political milieu is the dominant.”¹³ The literary style that most suited these ends was socialist realism.

Socialist realism

As a literary method, socialist realism was established in the 1920s and 1930s in the Soviet Union as a result of the 1917 revolution, and was adopted as the official and only literary method to be used there and later throughout the socialist bloc. Its formula was propounded by Andrei Zhdanov in a speech at the opening of the Soviet Writers Union in 1934.¹⁴ According to him, Socialist Realism is:

. . . knowing life so as to be able to depict it truthfully in the works of arts . . . to depict reality in its revolutionary development.

In addition to this, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic portrayal should be combined with the ideological remoulding and education of the toiling people in the spirit of socialism.¹⁵

After this proclamation a work of Soviet “socialist realism had to contain impeccable ideological commitment, be infused with ‘Party spirit,’ and true to the interest of ‘the people’.”¹⁶ The socialist realist works revolved around a central “positive hero” who in the course of his life graduates from a state of ideological ignorance to political commitment and devotion to the party’s cause.¹⁷ They had to be “optimistic,” accessible to the masses, and “party-minded.”¹⁸ However, these features of socialist realism evolved within a complex historical process and have regularly been subjected to interpretative debate, both before and after 1934. They need to be understood, as Geoffrey Hosking argues, as “capaciously ambiguous” and

13. Irving Howe, *Politics and the Novel* (New York: Horizon Press, 1957), p. 19.

14. Andrei Zhdanov (1896-1948) was a Secretary of the Communist Party for most of the 1930s and 1940s.

15. A. Zhdanov, “Soviet Literature – The Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature,” in Maxim Gorky *et al.*, *Soviet Writers’ Congress 1934: the Debate on Socialist Realism and Modernism in the Soviet Union*, H. G. Scott, ed., trans. from the Russian (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), p. 21.

16. David Gillespie, *The Twentieth-Century Russian Novel: An Introduction* (Oxford and Washington, D.C.: Berg, 1996), p. 64.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 63.

18. Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History As Ritual*, 3rd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2000), p. 3.

“open to considerable modification and reinterpretation.”¹⁹ These features found their ways to socialist realist literature throughout socialist bloc and to other countries, including Afghanistan.

Projecting realism in literature was one of the main trends in modern Afghanistani fiction from the very beginning of the emergence of modern fiction in the early twentieth century. As early as the 1940s and 1950s, writers such as Ali Ahmad Naimi and Maga Ramani in the short story, and Salmanali Joghori, A.H. Atefi and I. Alemshai in the novelette, put emphasis on social reality in their works, but it was Habib and his generation in the 1960s who adopted the socialist realism method in their works. However, socialist realist fiction originating in Afghanistan had its own characteristics. Its authors were able to accommodate national identity and local conditions, as can be clearly seen in Habib’s works.

Habib had adopted the socialist realism method since his early career to address the political and ideological needs of the time. While it was a borrowed method, in the way he applied it, it lost its foreignness. Geoffrey Hosking suggests that in the former Soviet Union:

The official doctrine was essentially non-committal, a more or less empty shell whose content was to be provided by the writers themselves. Socialist Realism may have been imposed by politicians, but it was *created* by writers.²⁰

In the case of Afghanistan, while some politicians in the 1960s and early 1970s emphasised socialist realism,²¹ it was the authors themselves who adopted the method, such as K. Misaq, Sulaiman Laeq and Habib. At the official level, most politicians did not favor it. In the 1960s until the mid-1970s, the government even considered it anti-government as it was associated with leftist politics. Thus, the emergence of socialist realism was due to the politicization of the society in the mid-1960s with the ratification of the new constitution and the establishment of political parties.

At the time of publishing his socialist realism short stories and novelette in the 1960s, Habib was not a member of any political party. While one cannot ignore the general political environment of the mid-1960s which attracted most intellectuals towards the Left and engendered heated political and ideological discussions among them (especially at the University of

19. Geoffrey Hosking, *Beyond Socialist Realism: Soviet Fiction Since 'Ivan Denisovich'* (London: Granada, 1980), p. 4.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

21. However, until the early 1980s the term socialist realism was not used in Afghanistan.

Kabul), it was Habib's own choice to write socialist realist fiction, rather than it being imposed on him by the politicians or a political party.²²

While in the 1960s socialist realism was promoted mainly by individual writers, especially those associated with the Leftist parties, after the 1978 coup it was endorsed as the official cultural policy of the new regime. After the coup and the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in 1979, literature underwent significant changes, not only because initially some leaders of the coup were litterateurs,²³ but also because literature became the most important cultural tool in the political and ideological fight between the government and the mujahideen. The first nationwide association of writers was founded in 1980 and the first professional publications, *Zhwandoon* (1981) and *Qalam* (1987) were established.²⁴ The association had a leading role in shaping Afghanistani literature. Though some leaders of the association were not members of the ruling party, and its publications covered a variety of views, its official policy was to promote socialist realism. All the most important elements, including partiality, the typical and positive hero, national orientation, and the objective reflection of reality,²⁵ can be found in Afghanistani socialist realist novels and short stories.

In the Soviet Union, socialist realist fiction displayed a wide range of types, whereas in Afghanistan there was only one type of fiction, namely revolution and war fiction, which had been common in Russia in the first years after the 1917 revolution. The main reason for this difference was that Afghanistan was not a communist country. Politically there was no strict control on social groups, including authors. In addition, the leftist regime in Afghanistan did not last long enough for different types of socialist realist fiction to emerge. So it is not correct to call these works of fiction fully-fledged, successful socialist realist stories.

In Afghanistan socialist realist fiction, especially the novel, follows a unified or "master" plot. According to this master plot there is a revolutionary hero (a member of the party or of the laboring or farming classes) who for the sake of implementing the revolution and bringing peace to the country fights against the anti-revolutionary elements backed by the West and other Islamic states. The hero achieves his/her goals in the end. Thus the characters, including the protagonists, are one-dimensional characters

22. However, the case in the 1980s was different, because it coincided with the establishment of a leftist regime and the invasion of Afghanistan by Soviet troops. Now, socialist realism was officially supported by the new regime.

23. The leader of the coup, Nur Muhammad Taraki, was a translator and author of modern Pashtu fiction.

24. The first association, the Kabul Literary Association, was founded in 1930.

25. See George Buehler, *The Death of Socialist Realism in the Novels of Christa Wolf* (Frankfurt am Main and New York: P. Lang, 1984), pp. 158-72.

and are dealt with only externally, without any attempt to probe their psychology.

At the individual level, Habib chose to turn his works of fiction into a weapon in the service of politics and ideology. Through his fictional works, Habib encouraged his reader to understand the political situation and make a choice.

Habib's short stories

Habib began writing fiction with the short story as early as 1963.²⁶ His stories were gathered in a collection, *Seh Mazdour* (The Three Servants) in 1967.²⁷ This collection and his earlier novelette *Sapedandām*, are considered the manifestation of socialist realist fiction in Afghanistan.²⁸ Habib's introduction states his position:

Gone are the days of telling the story of our deceptive loves; or of crying in front of people who are striving for bread; or weeping at the feet of an imagined beloved. . . . The right thing is to widen [the themes] of our works of fiction; [and] to collect our art from its real source, namely from social life and put it in its real place in order to improve social life. It is our duty. . . . What are you going to say? Do our lives have to be improved? To improve them, should our lives be well understood? If you say yes, I am also a partisan and I have written these stories for you, only for you.²⁹

Habib's themes and characters relate mainly to peasants and their life. He deals with issues that deeply concern villagers, such as relationships between landlords and peasants, relationships among peasants, failed loves, forced marriages and village customs. However, according to Habib, his readers are members of the educated class, not the peasants:

I have written many stories which are read only by a handful of people among the educated class who are make up just half a percent of the total population of the country. Unfortunately, the remaining ninety-nine and half percent of the population, who should read my stories, cannot read.³⁰

26. His first story *Āftābgrftagi* [The Eclipse] appeared in *Anis* in 1963.

27. This collection was reprinted in 1987 in Kabul. All references to the stories are from this reprint.

28. The works had already appeared in various newspapers.

29. Assadullah Habib, *Seh Mazdour* [The Three Servants] (Kabul: Riyāst-i Nasharāt, rep. 1989), pp. ii-iii.

30. *Ibid.*, p. ii.

In *Seh Mazdour*,³¹ a young peasant girl whose father “borrowed 140 kilograms of wheat from the landlord in a famine year” is raped by the landlord’s son but is accused of having sex with another peasant. She and her brother manage to escape to a nearby village and join a group of armed men that attacks landlords.

In *Zan-i Diwāna* (The Madwoman) a woman is expelled from her house when her addicted husband overhears Purdil (once a member of the parliament) speaking to her lustfully. One day, passing the woman begging in the street,

Purdil was discussing with a school teacher the roots of poverty and claiming that begging “is a hobby”. . . . Remembering his lustful words which were like drops of acid in her mind, the woman turned and picked up a piece of stone.³²

The position of women received considerable attention in Habib’s works. *Fālbīn* (The Fortune-teller) is the story of Kaftar Jat (literally, the gypsy pigeon) a fortune-teller woman who married to a donkey-driver.³³ She tells the fortune of villagers by looking at their hands and saying good things about their present and future lives. Everybody is happy. However, when she tells the fortune of men, her husband gets angry and beats her. One day he beats her and throws her out of the house. From that moment on, whatever she foretells about the fortunes of the villagers is sad and dark. In this way:

The village lost momentum. After the day Mukhti – the donkey-driver – cast her out home, the village changed completely. The villagers did not know that Kaftar Jat read her own life in their palms. The villagers did not know that in their palms was written Kaftar Jat’s life. The villagers did not know that the fortune of the village was Kaftar’s fortune and Kafatr’s that of the village.³⁴

In the above works, it is class which marks a person. Indeed being a member of a particular class is not a matter of birth but occurs in the course

31. This is the title story of the collection.

32. Habib, *Seh Mazdour*, p. 28.

33. This story is not included in *Seh Mazdour*, but in *Ākhrin Ārezo*.

34. Assadullah Habib, *Ākhrin Ārezo* [The Last Wish] (Kabul: Anjuman-i Nawesendagani-i Afghanistan, 1985), p. 45.

of personal development.³⁵ When his father dies, Akram, in *Dehqānān* (The Peasants), borrows some money from his uncle to spend for the funeral; however, to pay it back he has to work on his uncle's land for five years without a wage. Akram happens to be in love with his cousin, Delaram. His suit after many negotiations is accepted, but he has to "work for nothing for ten years on his uncle's land before marrying his daughter, because he has nothing else [to pay off the bride price]."³⁶ But before finishing the ten years Akram is drafted into military service in the capital for two years, and when he returns he discovers that Delaram has been forced to marry a sixty-year-old married man. What marks the life of peasants in such conditions? One peasant, Gulak, replies: "to be in the service of the landlords like an animal."³⁷

This motif of class membership, which marks the behavior of people, is reflected in another short story in a different way. In *Khojaeen* (The Rich Man), a man who is a furrier when his father-in-law dies becomes a brutal and capricious figure after inheriting his wealth.³⁸

Habib moves class struggle from the rural areas to the city in *Kashfe Buzorg* (A Great Discovery), where the municipality destroys a traditional street in order to replace it with a complex of buildings belonging to Hajji Ghulam Raza, a loan shark. The main idea of modernizing the city is to transfer ownership of assets from many to a few individuals. In this work the author talks with sorrow about the destruction of the traditional streets.³⁹

In the above works, the government is a tool in the hands of the landlords and powerful men, and serves only their interests. Conversely, ordinary people are the target of mistreatment both by the landlords and the government. Therefore, whoever rebels against the existing conditions or takes revenge undermines government authority, but at the same time is received with much appreciation by his fellow villagers, as the case with Sulaiman in *Sapedandām*, and Shamard and Bori in *Seh Mazdour*. In these works anyone who rebels against the government is a hero. This is a sharp contrast to Habib's works written after 1978. In these works, whoever stands against the government represents reactionary and evil forces, not the ordinary people.

35. See Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, R. Livingstone, trans. (London, Merlin Press, 1971), p. 51

36. Habib, *Seh Mazdour*, p. 39.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

38. This story appeared in Ali Razawi, ed., *Nasre Māsere Dari Afghanistan: Si Qisa* [Persian Modern Prose in Afghanistan: Thirty Stories] (Tehran: Bonyād-i Farhang, 1978), pp. 252-59.

39. *Ibid.*, pp. 251-59.

In his pre-1978 short stories Habib disapproves of any individual solution for the peasants, because individual problems are representative of those of the whole community. They usually come to recognize their social position and the nature of the laws that operate in the world around them, and which cause their oppression. This awareness of their situation and the social structure affects their behavior. They consciously revolt against the social structure, but their efforts do not result in changing the system. This is the case with the madwoman in *Zan Diwāna*, Shahmard in *Seh Mazdour*, Akram and Gulak in *Dehqānān* and Shams in *Kashfe Buzorg* who all, to quote Maxim Gorky: “evoke a vengeful shame and ardent desire to create other forms of existence.”⁴⁰ These characters, as typical of socialist realism, embody “the idea the author wants to represent” and convey his ideology.⁴¹ Therefore, in Habib’s works spontaneity and consciousness synthesize, enabling the characters to convey a socio-political perception, though he does not mind if his characters are rather stereotyped.

Among the most important elements of socialist realism – partiality, national orientation, the objective reflection of reality, the typical hero and the positive hero⁴² – the last three are more evident in Habib’s works in the 1960s and the early 1970s. Thus his works do not contain all the characteristics of socialist realism. This is probably because socialist realism as a method was fully founded on a socialist society, so some of its characteristics could not be applied to the Afghanistani socio-cultural situation, including “partiality.” In addition Habib at that stage had only a limited knowledge of the method, which came from translated works. Later, however, Habib obtained a PhD in literature from the former Soviet Union (1968-73), and so became better acquainted with the theory and literary works of socialist realism. As a result in the period 1978-89 Habib’s works contained all the elements of socialist realism.⁴³ Although some of Habib’s early works suffer from structural weaknesses, he gradually develops his skill in presenting his short stories. He even translated some Western works on the technique of the short story.

In the 1960s, Habib’s works of fiction depicted the socio-cultural aspects of northern Afghanistan, which are of considerable importance. These works vividly portray the relationships between landlord and the

40. Maxim Gorky, *Collected Works in Ten Volumes: Selected Stories* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1982), 1: 342.

41. George Biztray, *Marxist Models of Literary Realism* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1978), p. 78.

42. See Buehler, *The Death of Socialist Realism*, pp. 158-72.

43. In 1978-1990 he not only followed the method in creative works, but also translated and wrote many theoretical works on the subject, including *Didār bā Sapeda* [Meeting with the Dawn], and *Rāhe Gorky* [Gorky’s Style].

peasants, between the peasants, between men and women, peasants and their cultural beliefs and desires, and everyday lives in the north of the country.

***Sapedandām* (The Fair One)**

Sapedandām was published as his first separate work, when the author was only 24 years old and had just graduated from the University of Kabul.⁴⁴ It is considered Habib's major work of fiction.

In order to overcome poverty, the poor and old magician, Jelan, accepts proposals for his beautiful daughter, Iden who is already engaged to Sulaiman, an orphan and Jelan's former employee. Naim, the married headman of the village, wants to marry her, but ultimately Jelan rejects his suit. Jelan also rejects the suit of his married nephew, Rashid. The magician dies and soon after Naim secretly rapes the girl and then marries her in order to "prevent people from saying that a two-bit magician's daughter would not consider him."⁴⁵ Sulaiman returns to the village after completing his military service and discovers what has happened. He struggles to free his former fiancée. Naim abandons the pregnant Iden and she marries Sulaiman. However, after the baby is born Naim kills Iden with the help of the midwife. Sulaiman succeeds in taking revenge by killing Naim, and then escapes to the mountains.

The theme of *Sapedandām* is class struggle between members of the upper and lower classes in a feudal society. According to the work, in a class-dominated society everything, including love and marriage, is nothing but a means of self-indulgence for members of the upper class. To depict this, Habib presents the fate of a beautiful but poor woman. She is portrayed in connection with the two men, as representatives of two social classes. The work looks at the position of women in a rural area, and describes some of the problems, conditions and customs concerning women in such a society, including their inferior social position, their lack of a voice regarding their fate, unfair marriages and the practice of superstitious customs. This situation is shaped in the context of the social structure. Nevertheless, Habib manages skilfully to develop the novelette free from any explicit political slogans (which became prominent in his works in the 1980s).

Sapedandām is considered as one of the most important works of fiction in Afghanistan in the 1960s.⁴⁶ D. Wilson is so excited about the work that

44. Assadullah Habib, *Sapedandām* (Kabul: Matb'a Dawlati, 1965).

45. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

46. Jiri Becka, "Young Afghan Prose in Dari," *Afghanistan Journal*, 5, no. 3 (1978), p. 103; Khodainazar Aseov, *Formirovani Zhanrovoy Systemi Prozi Afghanistanana na Yazike Dari* [The Formation of the Genre System of Prose in Afghanistan in the Dari Language] (Dushanbe:

he comments, although incorrectly, that it is “the first indigenous novel... [with] depth and skilful construction.”⁴⁷

Habib deals skilfully with characterisation in *Sapedandām*. Its main characters, in the words of Morgan Forster, are “round.” Among them, Jelan is more rounded than other characters.⁴⁸ Jelan achieves depth and individuality as a character because, in contrast to other characters (such as Naim the headman or even Iden), he displays a more extensive and changing array of traits and actions. These range from performing magic and telling people’s fortunes, to extorting money from the village headman and from his nephew, Rashid; from his shameful isolation as a man who makes money from married men by falsely promising to marry his daughter to them, to his honesty in keeping his word once he has promised to give the hand of his daughter to a poor orphaned man who once worked for him as a servant; and despite all his hardship and poverty he keeps this promise until his death. Jelan as a round character possesses a variety of traits, some of them conflicting. His behavior is partly predictable and partly unpredictable. He is capable of changing and of surprising us, as he does his relatives and other villagers. Jelan, with the above traits, inspires a strong sense of intimacy, despite the fact that he does not quite add up. We remember him as a real person. Like a real-life friend or enemy it is hard to describe exactly what he is like. By making money through extortion, in particular from Naim the headman, Jelan paves the way for the calamity for his family. So Jelan the magician is a complicated character who not only guides events during his lifetime, but also causes later incidents.

The character of Naim the headman, on the other hand, remains consistent. As a married man he proposes to the engaged Iden, and once his proposal is rejected and other means of pressure do not work, he rapes her. He marries Iden just to dismiss her after the return of her ex-fiancé and then organises her murder. So in contrast to Jelan, Naim appears as less of an individual and much more of a particular social type.

In *Sapedandām* three characters represent three social classes. Iden represents the Afghanistani women of her time. It is the others who make decisions for her. Whatever happens to her she accepts as her destiny. She does not rebel.

Sulaiman is representative of the landless farmers (or lower classes), an honest and zealous person who has just completed his military service. But

Danish Publications, 1988), pp. 64-70; Dupree, “The Conscription of Afghan Writers,” *Central Asian Survey*, 4 (1989), pp. 69-87.

47. D. Wilson, “Afghan Literature: A Perspective,” in *Afghanistan: Some New Approaches*, L.W Adamec *et al.*, eds. (Ann Arbor: Center for Near Eastern and North African Studies, Univ. of Michigan, 1969), pp. 95-96.

48. Morgan Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (London: Arnold, 1962), p. 75.

while he was engaged in protecting the nation, his reputation and honour are destroyed by the headman of the village. He works very hard. He obeys orders, and even when he discovers that his fiancée has been married to the headman he does not rebel. Gradually he changes and realizes his actual situation, and when the headman kills his wife he retaliates and kills the headman. Naim the headman, as a landowner, is representative of the upper class. In everything he sees only his own interest, personal pleasure and pride, including raping an engaged woman and marrying a poor girl like Iden.

Sapedandām is the setting for confrontation between these representatives of different social classes. Here their fates are revealed. Ultimately Iden is poisoned. She dies in silence without any resistance. This portrays the status and destiny of women in such a society. Naim is killed by Sulaiman, and although the government demands Sulaiman's arrest and even offers a reward, he remains free.

The ways these characters die has a close connection with their historical social positions. Iden passes away in silence and ignorance, without any resistance. Naim the village headman and landowner is killed by a farmer. Habib believes in class struggle and that in this struggle ultimately the lower classes, farmers and peasants, will succeed. By killing the headman Sulaiman takes revenge not only for his wife, but also all the oppressed people in the village.

The main characters have logical and realistic growth. Referring to the growth of characters in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (and this applies equally to *Sapedandām*) Perry Lubbock says: "They grow as we all do, they change in the only possible direction, that which results from the clash between themselves and their conditions."⁴⁹ Therefore, the main characters grow hand-in-hand with their circumstances. Jelan, as an old man incapable of doing any physical work, including performing in his profession, extorts money in order to overcome his poverty, but even poverty cannot annihilate his promise. After confrontation with the headman who had forcefully married his ex-fiancée and then abandoned her and killed her, Sulaiman has no other choice but to kill him. He is certain, as the circumstances prove, that the government is incapable of bringing justice.

Confrontation between the characters on the surface seem to be personal conflicts, but in fact they derive from a broader conflict, which according to this work is rooted in their class struggle. Here not only the nature of the conflict and the contrasting forces, but also the progress of the clash and its effect, are very important to *Sapedandām*. How can this end? It apparently ends with the death of the headman who has caused the death of Iden and

49. Perry Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1957), p. 51.

her newborn baby, and Sulaiman's escape into the mountains. However, in a broader picture it concludes with a rejection of the social structure. Sulaiman is the only person who survives the conflict and manages to escape official prosecution (as a tool in the hands of the upper classes). The tacit agreement of the landless farmers with his action at the end of the story proves the broad application of his action. The mullah reads to the villagers an official notice for the capture of Sulaiman.

Students who had just been released from the village school suddenly laughed. The mullah laughed and the villagers also laughed. . . . One of the villagers buried the notice in the snow with the tip of his shoe.⁵⁰

This means that the villagers (the students, villagers, and even the mullah) agree that the government is unable to capture Sulaiman, and they support him. So one may claim that the novelette has a happy ending. At least it concludes happily for Sulaiman and the villagers, and perhaps the reader. By killing the headman, Sulaiman succeeds not only in taking revenge for so many innocent people (who otherwise would never receive justice) but also in escaping prosecution. In a broader sense, he succeeds in destroying not only a social structure but also a political one, in which the landless farmers and peasants keep silent despite the harsh physical, emotional, social and economic exploitation imposed on them by the upper classes.

With respect to characterisation, one of the striking points is that this work does not deal with people with great power. It deals with the small and personal, and the petty struggles of everyday life. About the novel *R.* Alter writes:

The greatness of the genre . . . has to present to us . . . lives that might seem like our lives, minds like our minds, desires like our own desires. That has been what most novelists quite clearly have tried to accomplish in their writing, and that is what still makes the reading of novels for most people, intellectuals included, one of the perennially absorbing activities of modern culture.⁵¹

Habib pays keen attention to measuring, identifying and opposing the individuals. Just as the characters are individualised, so too are their circumstances, as is found in the Western novel, which is "surely distin-

50. Habib, *Sapedandām*, p. 68.

51. R. Alter, *Motives of Fiction* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984), p. 21.

guished . . . by the amounts of attention it habitually accords both to the individualization of its characters and the detailed presentation of their environment.”⁵² In fact, the individualization of the characters and the particularization of environment are co-dependent. According to Watt, “the characters of the novel can only be individualized if they are set in a background of particularized time and place.”⁵³

In *Sapedandām* the setting receives special attention. Though the author does not provide a name for the village in which the events take place, through the detailed description of its various aspects he presents a living village from the north of the country. This is a village with a landscape, sky and seasons, and people in everyday life with their customs, traditions, problems and wishes. This way of dealing with the setting is not only absent in traditional Persian storytelling, but also has rarely received similar attention in other works of modern Afghanistani fiction. The general setting, historical time (the early 1960s) and social circumstances in which the novelette and its actions take place are given great stress. The events happen in the village where all the characters belong.

The setting of the story has a tight relationship with its action. The author first gives a description of the scene and then brings about the action. By describing a setting (locality and time), Habib always provides a suitable backdrop and atmosphere for the action which then takes place. For example, at the time when the midwife poisons Iden, “The heat of the day had turned the colour of the herbs blackish and all the plants and the grasses seemed depressed.”⁵⁴

The presentation of the characters and the setting provides *Sapedandām* with an admirable verisimilitude, a technique by which “the reader ‘fills in’ gaps in the text, adjusts events and existence to a coherent whole,”⁵⁵ something entirely absent in traditional Persian storytelling. With verisimilitude, according to Boulton, the following conditions may be considered:

Details of the external world will be made as accurate as possible. There is a world of nature: seasons, climates, flora, fauna, sickness and health, seas, skies, woods, hills, gardens; the world of man-made objects: costume, food, houses, furniture, equipment, transport, weapon, apparatus, shops and their contents; the world of society: social de-

52. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1967), pp. 17-18.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

54. Habib, *Sapedandām*, p. 60.

55. Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1978), p. 49.

dependencies and activities, manners and customs, organizations, politics, law committees, religious institutions, education, class relationships.⁵⁶

The striking point is that all the matters which Boulton counts as relating to the novel in general receive considerable attention in *Sapedandām*. This is a significant achievement when we recall the relatively small size of the work (only 69 pages).

The achievement of providing the work with a striking plausibility as well as dealing sufficiently with a deep characterization and the setting comes at the cost of compressing the work. This is a characteristic of *Sapedandām*. For example, in the following relatively short paragraph, the author conveys many important points:

She [Iden] had heard with her own ears from her father that, "Iden has a fiancé." It was a pleasant and melodious phrase for her. She occasionally prided herself upon it. She imagined her fiancé as a figure she liked and in clothes she liked. In the middle of the night she slept with his dream. In the early mornings her body became hot and suddenly jumped and woke up. After repenting a few times, she rushed for hot water [to clean herself].⁵⁷

In this paragraph the author uses admirably economical language to convey some points which are very important in the novelette, among them the position of women in society, where a woman's fate, including her marriage, is decided by her father. Iden is engaged, but she knows nothing about the man, not even his name. However, she is not unhappy with the situation, nor does she question it. This also depicts the sexual life of a young woman who only in her dreams makes love with her unknown fiancé, though with shame. In addition, with respect to the process of the novelette, this lays the foundation for the major conflict and also contains a tacit indication that she will remain beside her fiancé in any conflict.

However, compressing the work does not always benefit it. In fact the main problem with *Sapedandām* is its compact size. By economizing, the author prevents the proper development of the characters and events. It seems that he is in a rush to end the work as soon as possible, so in some parts, particularly in part five and the last part, he gets more impatient and excited, and this is a blow to its progress. For example, one can see this in the most complicated and important character, Jelan the magician. The author could have created a character to be compared with that of Zorba the

56. Marjorie Boulton, *The Anatomy of the Novel* (London; Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 21.

57. Habib, *Sapedandām*, p. 11.

Greek or Chelkash, who were probably the models in creating this character. Until his death Jelan refuses to reveal the name of his daughter's fiancé. According to his testament he has kept the name secret, because

I could not reveal his name in the past. I was scared that people would laugh at me for engaging my daughter to my servant and dishonouring my family and clan. I was scared that people would misguide my daughter and I was even scared that people would say something that I would regret and make me break my promise. Sulaiman is enlisted in military service. If Iden is my daughter and if she looks for my approval she should wait for him and marry him.⁵⁸

Sapedandām is narrated through the third-person omniscient. Through this narrator we find out some valuable information about the characters as well as getting subtle descriptions of the setting. While occasionally he enters into the mind of the characters, most of the time he is only a witness. Most parts of the inner world of the characters are revealed through the dialogue and monologue, as is the case with the Western novel. On this method, concerning the novel, Norman Friedman writes:

The special genius of the novel as a genre is its ability to depict not only the exterior world of action, but the interior world of the characters – and one crucial thing more, the relationship between them.⁵⁹

This omniscient narrator, unlike the ones in traditional Persian storytelling, is a cautious person, as if he is a character in the work. Sometimes he has doubts, as when he says: "I do not remember exactly, one day or two days passed. . . ."⁶⁰ He enters into the body of the story and sometimes explains and interprets and gives his opinion.

She [Iden] thought perhaps it was her destiny that she and the headman [Naim] together should take this worn out and heavy coffin of life to the grave. . . . There are people whose lives are not like the coffin. For them life is perhaps something like a basket of flowers or a sweet dream, or perhaps something that I have no words for, except to

58. *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

59. Norman Friedman, "Recent Short Story Theories: Problems in Definition," in *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*, S. Lohafer and J.E. Clarey, eds. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 13-31.

60. Habib, *Sapedandām*, p. 33.

say something pleasant. While my life is not a coffin, it is also not a pleasant dream at all.⁶¹

With respect to language, Habib uses a rich, flexible and poetic language throughout *Sapedandām*. His poetic tastes greatly influence him to provide the work with beautiful descriptions of the village, gardens, the morning, people, the sun, the sky, the season and so on. Dialogue also has a major role. The author not only attempts to reveal the traits of his characters through the omniscient narrator, but most of the time he uses dialogue to fulfil this function. However, he is not consistent with the dialogue, some of which is in the official language while some is colloquial.

Sapedandām is a work devoted to life in rural Afghanistan. Although there are a few early works which deal with rural Afghanistan, such as *Begum* by Salam Ali Jaghori (1939), they do not successfully portray this aspect of life in Afghanistan. The significance of *Sapedandām* is that it is a pioneering work depicting the social issues, cultural mores and landscape of rural Afghanistan. However, this type of literature was not developed further in either the novel or the novelette, although it was to some extent in the short story.

Habib's works in the 1980s

Habib's works from the 1980s are shot through with propaganda. Although they are not successful works of fiction and suffer many shortcomings, historically they represent a type of literature which appeared in 1978 and died in 1986. During this period socialist realism moulded with propaganda was the dominant type of literature. Afghanistani fiction at this time portrayed incidents that were very common, but which were hidden from the media outside Afghanistan, particularly in the West. These works present a different account of the Afghan war, that of the government side. They provide the regime's perception of its self and the enemy's conduct of war. Although these works may have little artistic merit, from an historical point of view they are important, especially in the study of the Afghan war. These works exhibit the literature of a country struggling for survival in the midst of the Cold War, caught between two superpowers.

Habib was the first author to respond to the new demand for socialist realist works of fiction after the 1978 Leftist coup. At this time literature was made a political tool for the propagation of the new regime's socio-political and cultural policies, as well as for fighting its enemies. Habib's short story *Pāyān-i Gham-i Buzorg* (The End of the Great Sorrow), as its title suggests, considers the coup as a liberating incident for the lower

61. *Ibid.*, p. 8.

classes.⁶² In works he wrote after the coup, there is little mention of class struggle in the sense conveyed in his earlier works. Instead, the struggle was now between the revolutionaries (members of the ruling party and the army officers) and the mujahideen, a reactionary Islamic force. Therefore, these works were called “revolutionary fiction.” The issue of class struggle was not important to Habib any more, as most of the mujahideen were from the lower classes. But they fought a regime which itself had come to power to change to the socio-political and economic system in the interest and favour of the lower classes. It was the leftist government which promoted the interests of the lower classes – the peasants – against the oppression of the landlords, including distributing their lands to the peasants, as depicted in *Sadā-hā dar Kohistan* (Voices from the Mountains). In *Sadā-hā dar Kohistan* the landlord retaliates against the government by using his position, customs and religion to provoke the peasants into defying the government. And this division of the village is a metaphor for the division of the country into two opposing sides.

However, in Habib’s works in the 1980s the real struggle was transformed from class to politics and ideology. In his novelettes and short stories written during this time, Habib depicted the struggle between the revolutionary forces – who according to him are in search of peace and progress – and the mujahideen, who want the opposite. Indeed, he is the first author to write works of fiction in which such ideas are reflected. Among his works, *Dās-hā wa Dast-hā* (The Sickle and the Hands) (1983) was the first novelette to carry a pro-government theme, and it was the earliest example of this type of novelette. His short stories, a drama and a screen script later appeared in a collection, *Ākhrin Ārezo* (The Last Wish) in 1985.

Dās-hā wa Dast-hā -ha is the story of the first revolutionary corps, which under the leadership of Rahim, a student and member of the ruling party, goes to a village where life is disturbed by the activities of the mujahideen. Their main tasks are “fighting the enemy and enlightening people about the revolution.”⁶³ When Rahim is on his way to the capital, the bus in which he is travelling is stopped by a group of mujahideen; all the passengers are killed except for Rahim and Saraj, the driver. The two survivors become friends. Saraj becomes a member of the ruling party and joins the revolutionary corps to fight the mujahideen. The novel has two parallel story lines. In the first, an illiterate and simple driver, by becoming friends with a member of the ruling party, becomes a revolutionary, joins the army and arranges his personal life including marriage. In the second, the revo-

62. Habib, *Ākhrin Ārezo*, pp. 10-20.

63. Habib, *Dās-hā wa Dast-hā*, p. 45.

lutionary corps, through hard and honest endeavor, brings peace, order and prosperity to the village.

While *Dās-hā wa Dast-hā* has a happy ending and all the “positive” characters attain their goals, *Nazargul* (1984), has a different ending. It is the story of an honest, educated peasant who through his own experience as well as education learns how to defend the peasants against the landlords, and after the revolution against the mujahideen. He is a member of the youth organisation, and then the ruling party, who actively fights the enemy. He defends people from oppression and fights for the party and revolution until his heroic death.⁶⁴

Habib’s short stories in the 1980s were written in the same political/ideological line as his novelettes. Here also the revolutionaries stand against the mujahideen. In *Ākhrin Ārezo*, in order to defend a school that has frequently been set alight by the mujahideen, a small group of revolutionaries from the capital, among them a doctor – Sarwar – goes to the village. The group protects the school until one day, in a final assault, the mujahideen either injure or kill many of the group and burn down the school. Sarwar, who is severely injured, nevertheless expresses a wish to be buried close to the school rather than in the capital.

Heroism is not limited to the revolutionary corps or army officers, nor always to men; ordinary women also make their mark, as in the case of *Dokhtar-i bā Perahan-i Safed* (A Girl in a White Dress). This is the story of a village girl – Sheenkay – whose father refuses to accept a proposal of marriage from Walizar – a very bad and uncouth man and a mujahid. The reaction of Walizar to this refusal is:

If you do not marry your daughter to me you’ll be killed. We are fighting for the sake of the religion but you refuse to marry this daughter of a bitch to me. For whom have you kept her, for an infidel, for a communist?⁶⁵

Walizar’s abuse never ends. On another occasion he states:

If you want to stay alive you have to marry your daughter to me. Your problem is you have the most beautiful girl in the village in your home.

For the first time the father looks carefully at his daughter, is she really the most beautiful girl? In the village all women wear black

64. Assadullah Habib, *Nazargul* (Kabul: Sazmani Jawanan Afghanistan, 1984).

65. Habib, *Ākhrin Ārezo*, p. 96.

dresses, but Sheenkay is the only one who wears white because she believes black is the symbol of grief.⁶⁶

Eventually Walizar, with the help of his group of mujahideen, kills the father and abducts Sheenkay and takes her to his encampment. However, fighting breaks out among the group about who will be the first to have her. In the meantime, Sheenkay manages to steal some grenades and deliberately detonates them. Both she and the mujahideen are killed.⁶⁷ Thus Habib manages to combine the two themes of the cruelty of the mujahideen with the portrayal of women as active agents in their own destiny.

Conclusion

Habib's works are important for the study of modern literature in Afghanistan. His works of fiction represent a time when literature became deeply politicized. They reflect the major political/ideological trends in modern Afghanistan. From the mid-1960s, when a new constitution was ratified, Afghanistan entered a new era of socio-political development. Literature became a medium for socio-political and cultural reform. In the 1980s, literature was further politicized and transformed into a weapon, both by the leftist government and the opposition mujahideen. Habib's works of fiction – short stories and novelettes – not only reflect the developments, but also are the pioneering works of these times. While some of his works may appear dated, such as his stories from the 1980s, others, especially those he wrote in the 1960s, are significant both for their literary merit and the themes they depicted. Even the 1980s group of works, whilst influenced by government propaganda, provide a contemporary account of the Afghan war. In order to promote the idea of class struggle in the 1960s, and to depict the political and ideological policies of the warring parties and the way they conducted the war in the 1980s, Habib employed all genres of fiction, including the short story, the novelette, film and the play. For all these genres his works are pioneering, and were further developed by a new generation of the writers.

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66. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

67. *Ibid.*, pp. 93-102.