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-

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