[Dr Naazir Mahmood](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/dr-naazir-mahmood)

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**A renaissance man**

The way we have seen our intellectual assets deplete in 2020 is devastating. Ahfaz ur Rehman, Saleem Asmi, Qazi Javed, and now Ashfaq Saleem Mirza have left us much poorer. In a country where good scholarship is in short supply, losing such people in quick succession is no less than a tragedy.

Ashfaq Saleem Mirza, born in Jalandhar in 1944, was not one to give up easily. Just a couple of days before his death in Islamabad he called me to share the good news that his Urdu translation of Homer’s ‘Iliad’ had been published and he wanted to give me the book. I promised to visit him but then had to come to Karachi, so sent him a message that on my return I would collect the book. My friend Khayyam Mushir called me early in the morning on November 23 and shared the bad news.

A S Mirza was a liberal to the core. Though he spent a greater part of his life in Lahore, studying philosophy and working for various organizations, most of his productive work he did in Islamabad. He had a Master’s degree in philosophy but never taught it formally at a college or university. In his formative years in the 1960s and 70s, he was active in left-wing politics in Pakistan. From the National Awami Party (NAP) to the Mazdoor Kissan Party (MKP) led by Afzal Bangash, he was an eyewitness to most of the upheavals in progressive politics in the country.

In the 1980s and 90s, with the unravelling of the communist movement around the world and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, leftist politics in Pakistan lost steam. In fact, it was never allowed to take roots especially in West Pakistan right from the inception of the country. Mirza withdrew from active politics and chose for himself a challenging and enlightening path of reading and writing. The last 20 years of his life he devoted exclusively to producing scholarly work in English and Urdu. He started contributing regularly to journals such as ‘Pakistan Perspective’ in English and Urdu magazines especially to the quarterlies ‘Irtiqa’ and ‘Tareekh’.

One of his first essays that I came across was ‘The Civil Society – a reexamination’ published in ‘Pakistan Perspective’ in 2002 (Vol 7, No 2). At that time, I had left my teaching job at IBA Karachi and joined a project of the Aga Khan Foundation led by Qadeer Baig. We were involved in the training of NGOs, and civil society was becoming a buzzword in Pakistan. Mirza’s essay gave me a detailed insight into the concept of civil society with references from Hegel and Marx to Gramsci, and I still occasionally refer to that essay.

Just like Ahmed Saleem and Dr Mubarak Ali, Mirza realized – and rightly so – that writing in Urdu in Pakistan gets a much wider readership. He was particularly interested in the development of the various streams of thought in philosophy from the ancient to the modern. His book ‘Falsafa: aik nai taabeer’ (Philosophy: a new interpretation) is a brief and compact introduction to philosophy in Urdu. Mirza refused to consider any metaphysical school of thought having anything to do with philosophy. He was of the firm opinion that metaphysics may be part of some pseudointellectual thinking patterns but not philosophy.

I tended to disagree with him, and we occasionally sparred on this subject but his reading was so vast it was difficult to challenge him and be able to stand your ground. He was well-versed in ancient texts of political, philosophical, and even religious nature. For example, his reading of the Vedas was extensive and he had multiple translations of the Vedas in his collection. He could elaborate on Indian philosophy as well as dilate upon Machiavelli and Marx. But perhaps his all-time favourite was Fredrick Hegel whose philosophy of history Mirza found intensely appealing.

A S Mirza was interested in explaining to his readers how Europe got rid of age-old thinking patterns and embarked on a journey to enlightenment right before the French Revolution of the late 18th century. In a series of articles published variously in ‘Irtiqa’ and ‘Tareekh’, Mirza rendered in Urdu the thoughts of enlightenment philosophers and thinkers. His detailed essay ‘Fikr-e-Jadeed ki Dehleez Par’ (On the threshold of modern thinking) published in the 37th issue of Irtiqa in 2004 is a treat to read. Mirza explains how some critical thinkers altered the course of Europe.

He is careful in discussing not only the intellectual developments of those decades but also the material conditions that precipitated a rapid evolution of ideas across Europe. Aristotelian and Ptolemaic worldview, that was enwrapped in metaphysical and theological interpretations. had to give way to a materialist and secular worldview. Analytical and empirical thinking took roots and a rational breed of scientists challenged the medieval obscurantism. Mirza discusses Copernicus and Galileo and even exposes Calvin and Luther who challenged the Catholic Church but were staunch opponents of rational thinking and a secular approach to life.

In his book, ‘Machiavelli se Marx Tak’ (From Machiavelli to Marx) Mirza discussed extensively the political philosophies of the past five centuries. It is arguably the best book on this subject in Urdu as most other books written by university professors of political science are simple translations of some Western textbooks and rarely give an original analysis of the subject at hand. Moreover, Mirza has a clearly progressive and secular approach to discussing politics and philosophy, making him one of the finest writers in the category of Ahmed Saleem, Ali Abbas Jalalpuri, Dr Mubarak Ali, Qazi Javed, Syed Sibte Hasan and just a couple more such writers in Urdu.

When I moved with my family to Islamabad in 2005, I had the first opportunity to meet him in person. He welcomed us into his fold and my daughters became regular visitors to the SAFMA (South Asia Free Media Association) office in Islamabad where A S Mirza, Sirmed Manzoor and Mustansir Javed organized frequent get-togethers of activists, journalists, and intellectuals. It is sad that the SAFMA office is no longer functional in Islamabad. Mirza was keen to interact with young people and was always willing to impart his knowledge and understanding to anyone he found interested.

He was also a good translator with multiple books to his credit. His translations of ancient Greek plays to Urdu elicited wide appreciation and that encouraged him to undertake the monumental task of translating ‘Iliad’ into Urdu. I remember last year he called me to confirm if ‘Iliad’ had been translated into Urdu, to which I expressed my ignorance of any such translation. I told him that I had Saleem ur Rahman’s translation of ‘Odyssey’ but not seen Iliad in Urdu. He plunged into it and within a year he was able to complete this task.

Mirza’s wife, Imtiaz, and his son Yasir made sure that A S Mirza had all the peace of mind required for his intellectual endeavors. He had an enormous collection of books and took pride in showing his library to anyone who visited him. He also loved to present books to his friends, the last one I received from him was Althusser’s ‘On Marx’. His home was always welcoming and he loved to share photos of his visitors on Facebook. He was active on social media too, and posted not only his poems but also vintage photos of beautiful actresses of yore.

Just a couple of weeks before his death, his family had moved home from one sector to another and he was still busy with his grandchildren to reset his library in the new abode. Now he has moved his abode for good.

The writer holds a PhD from the University of Birmingham, UK and works in Islamabad.

Email: mnazir1964@yahoo.co.uk