

Faiz Ahmed Faiz: The Voice of Progressive Poetics

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Abstract:

*Mata e loh o qalam chin gayi to kya gham hai
Ke khon e dil main dubo li hain ungliya'n maine
-Faiz*

متاع لوح و قلم چین گئی تو کیا غم ہے
کھون دل میں ڈبو لی ہیں انگلیاں مینے

What if you have snatched away the pen from me? I will write with my blood.

Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911- 1984) belongs to the category of poets with a strong sense of freedom, expression, and reform. This is what makes Faiz a very avowed Marxist, a socialist, a rebel, a secularist, a humanist, a romantic, a social reformer, a revolutionary, and a universal voice of the oppressed. This paper examines the two sides of Faiz's poetry concerning the romantic and revolutionary spirit. His romanticism is deeply rooted in classical Urdu traditions, yet it evolves to reflect modern struggles and aspirations. Faiz's revolutionary voice emerges as a beacon of hope, using poetic imagery to inspire resistance and solidarity. By intertwining personal emotions with collective struggles, Faiz redefines the role of poetry in social transformation.

The study delves into iconic works such as "Bol" and "Mujh Se Pehli Si Mohabbat", highlighting their enduring relevance. Faiz's poetry exemplifies the power of art to challenge oppression and envision a just world. This analysis situates Faiz's contributions within the broader socio-political context of the 20th century, affirming his legacy as a revolutionary poet of timeless significance.

Keywords: Resistance, Dissent, Progress, Revolution And Poetry.

According to Professor Javed Majeed, Faiz's poetry raises three important questions. First, how do you recover hope or create spaces from political disillusionment? Secondly, how do you write politically committed poetry that is not propaganda? Thirdly, how does a poet work with the tradition he or she has inherited to produce original and new poetry? While answering these questions Majeed states that Faiz's first collection of poetry titled *Naqsh e Faryadi* is a representative of progressive poetry. *Dast e Saba* is his second collection of poems. In the poems like 'Zindan ki aik sham' (A Prison Evening), 'Zindan ki Aik Subha' (A Prison Morning), published in *Dast e Saba* Faiz explores issues of freedom and restrictions, and how hope is created from hopelessness and turmoil. The very first thing to discuss about these poems is that these poems were written in prison. The act of writing in prison is itself a challenge to the state, it is one kind of dissent. Faiz uses the prison cell creatively and effectively. During his imprisonment, Faiz

finds solace in the moonlight illuminating his cell. The imagery used by him in his poems reflects an inner freedom that defies physical captivity.

After reading the ghazal ‘Zindan Ki Aik Sham’ (A Prison Evening) one finds that the poet has found peace and inner freedom in prison. He observes and then describes in the poem the approaching evening and the shifting nature of light in his prison cell, which he expresses using a series of images such as:

Shana-e bam par damakta hai Mehrban chandni ka dast-e jamil

On the crest of the roof is glittering the beautiful hand of the gracious moonlight (Mir 5).

Boldly, Faiz describes the beauty of nightfall in prison, night is sweet because of the soothing effect of the moonlight, and because he has survived another day in prison. Through this poem, one gets to know the optimistic, the hopeful Faiz. He is trying to tell us that the power of tyranny, and oppression is very limited, the tyrants can control him, and they can put him behind bars but they cannot control the moon which gives Faiz light or hope. Faiz found solace in solitude; Faiz is not unhappy but he is making the best of the time he has to spend in jail.

In Urdu poetry the moon (*Mehtab*) represents the beauty of the beloved and while describing the *hijr* that is the separation of the lover from the beloved attention is paid on the mood of the lover which keeps on changing. Like other poems in this poem also Faiz represents the elements of Progressive writing wherein the writers use the traditional or classical symbols but they write about the modern time or the present time. In this poem Faiz uses the language of separation of the lover from the beloved to describe the changing colours of the sky like the poets of the older generation his focus is not on the changing mood of the lover.

Nur mein ghul gaya hai arsh ka neel Sabz goshon men nilgun saaye Lahlahate hain jis tarah dil men Mauj e dard e firaq e yar aaye.

The blue of the sky has dissolved into the light, and dark blue shadows in green corners waver as if waves of the pain of separation from my beloved had stolen into my heart.

Mohammed Zakir presents the analyses of these couplets that “where the older generation poets were busy lamenting their separation from the beloved, one finds Faiz who is observing the changing light in the prison cell and the pain of separation from the beloved gives him hope and inspiration” (Zakir 5).

In his other poem ‘Zindan Ki Eik Subh’, (A Morning in Prison), again Faiz describes the arrival of dawn and the light which brightens his cell and connects this with the sorrow of lost lovers. He imagines his friends being united in their “grief of country, their sorrow at their separation from the face of their beloved” (des ka dard, firaq-e rukh-e mehbub ka gham). But more importantly, the poet also imagines that the guards themselves might be oppressed by prison, as they too are poor and hungry. Remarkably, then, the imprisoned poet sympathizes with the oppressed condition not only of his comrades but the guards themselves, whom he describes as “yellow, tyrannized by hunger” (zard, faqon ke sata’e hu’e).

For Sufi poets, the abode of non-existence refers to the unreal existence separated from God, who for them is the only real existent being in the Universe. For Faiz, this abode is likened to his solitary confinement in his prison cell, where one quickly loses any sense of concrete reality. In this way he secularizes this image from Sufi poetry. But what revives him is his imagined glimpse of the beloved, for Sufis this would be God, for Urdu poets the woman or man one is in love with. Faiz works with the history of these meanings, to create a figure of the beloved as the scent, the melody, and the countenance of freedom. All these create what he calls the “anxiety of hope”. In this poem Faiz also uses the imagery of wine and the saqi or wine pourer, to describe his sense of solidarity with his comrades.

Urdu poets often celebrated the wine drinking assembly, where the poet and his rivals were imagined to

sit around the beloved, their glasses filled by the wine pourer as they recited their poetry in praise of her or him. In Sufi poetry, the *saqi* becomes the spiritual leader, the wine the truths the disciple imbibes, and different levels and kinds of drunkenness represented different stages of closeness to God. Faiz inherits these two senses of the assembly and drunkenness. The wine drinking and poetry-reciting assembly becomes an image of solidarity in a worldwide political movement whose bonds are created by drinking, as it were, from the same glass of politics.

There is a lot more that one could say about Faiz's poetry, such as the measured pace of his couplets that strike a note of sorrowful reflection, and his use of the grammatical properties of Urdu and Persian to create compounds of meaning and shades of subtlety that evoke the complex energies of political commitment. First, it is generous in its empathy for the suffering of others, including the guards in his prison, and in other poems, for the politically subjugated, the economically exploited and the sexually oppressed, and this empathy becomes the basis for solidarity across cultures and nationalities in a kind of radical humanism grounded in an acute awareness of human suffering. Secondly, in many of his poems Faiz expresses his inner turmoil and confusion, and his doubts and anxieties openly. He doesn't try to hide or disguise these, and he gives of himself generously in his poetry. Thirdly, his poetry is generous in that he takes a risk with it by working within the traditions of classical Urdu poetry and its polished culture to create new meanings for an Indian and Pakistani socialist poetry (Majeed 14). A. Sean Pue in his article "Rethinking Modernism and Progressivism in Urdu Poetry: Faiz Ahmed Faiz and N. M. Rashed" writes about Faiz that, "Faiz gains an approach to his readers on two levels simultaneously. The first is "the level of the ordinary lyrical poet, with a direct emotional appeal." The second level is that of "a socially conscious poet, in terms of a political metaphor" (14).

Poetry or for that matter has always been a powerful weapon or tool to write against the injustices of society. It has always had a potential to bring about changes or revolution in the society. Whenever a society suffers from the injustices or inequalities it is the writer or the poet who stands up and writes against such injustices. This is the reason that poets are always feared by the cruel oppressive rulers/system of society. Poetry has the power to ridicule the dogma and question the belief. Generally, there are poets of two types some poets choose to work on a realm of pure fantasy. The sweat, toil and tears of the real world rarely find their way into the world of such poets. The second type of poet is the one whose works inspire revolution for example Pablo Neruda, Faiz Ahmed Faiz. Faiz believed that meaningful poetry plays an important role in the development of a society. Art to him was a tool for social change, a hammer with which society could be forged. Faiz was an active member of Progressive Writer's Movement.

Urdu as a language has a rich tradition of poetry. The PWM (the writers who belonged to this movement) and Faiz, interestingly chose not to have a radical break from these traditions. Instead, they chose to use the vehicles of classical Urdu poetry such as the *ghazal* and the *nazm* to spread their dreams and ideals. Faiz was born in Sialkot, British India on the 13th of February 1911. During the course of his formal education, he obtained Master of Arts degrees in both English and Arabic; but it was Urdu that became his medium to express his feelings and the common women and men and their problems became the subject of his ghazals. Faiz generally writes in the classical metres of Urdu poetry. Using the couplet, he combines tightness of form with expansiveness of meaning. Carlo Coppola described Faiz as "a spokesperson for the world's voiceless and suffering peoples whether Indians oppressed by the British in the '40s, freedom fighters in Africa, the Rosenbergs during the Cold War America in the '50s, Vietnamese peasants fleeing American napalm in the '60s, or Palestinian children in the 1970s" (126).

Faiz was a wizard with words and had absolute control over the content of his poetry. This coupled with the universality of his works has helped Faiz survive even after his death demise in 1984. It is easy to see that Faiz and his ideas are as relevant today as they were five decades back. Faiz's poetry needs to be interpreted against the background of the political upheavals of the twentieth century. His life spanned the two world wars, the rise of fascism in Europe, the growth of religious nationalism in the Indian subcontinent, decolonization and the partition of India, and the uncertainties of postcolonial nationhood, most vividly brought home by the breakup of Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971.

After the period of pure romantic poetry, Faiz progresses into a socialist poet. He creates the real images of the society, images in which lies the cry of the oppressed. Faiz tells his beloved: *Mujh se pehli si mohabbat mere mehboob na maang* is his famous poem. This poem published in *Naqsh e Faryadi* marks Faiz's transition from romantic poetry to poems of social concern. In this poem Faiz declares that he can no longer let his beloved consume his whole being or love her the way he used to do. He still loves her and he is dedicated to her but his love for her is now to be divided: his concern for the oppressed people and common man claims its share. He is a poet and being a poet, it becomes his responsibility to write about the suffering and exploitation of the common people. This ghazal was Faiz's first experiment with merging love for the 'beloved' into the love for mankind and humanity at large, the pain of separation from the beloved turns into the pain of all those who suffered the atrocities of the time/ system. In this ghazal Faiz declares ruefully:

Aur bhi dukh hain zamaane mein mohabbat ke siva

Raahaten aur bhi hain vasl ki raahat ke siva

There are other griefs in this world apart from that of love, And other pleasures apart from that of union. Rakshanda Jalil believes that "Faiz juxtaposes the beloved's beauty against the miseries and ugliness of the world, a world which has hunger, disease and deprivation, a world that can never let him love her as he once did" (Jalil 274). The same meaning can be found in the following couplet written by Majrooh Sultanpuri:

Ab ahl e dard yeh jeene ka ehtamam karain

Use bhula ke ghume zindagi ka naam karain

Let the lovers prepare to face the world, forget their beloveds, focus on the sorrows of life (Mir 30).

As an Urdu poet, Faiz began writing on the conventional themes of love and beauty, which is a common tradition in Urdu Shayri but soon these conventional themes changed into the larger social and political issues of the day. The traditional grief of love got combined with the problems and sufferings of humanity, and Faiz used his poetry to defend the cause of socialistic humanism.

Another poem, 'Chand Roz aur Meri Jan' (A Few Days More, My Dear), again has the poet addressing his beloved and comforting her that the days of cruelty, and helplessness are about to end. The humiliations inflicted by strange hands (the British), he assures her, shall be short lived:

Zulm ki chahon main dum lene pe majboor hain hum Aur kuch der sitam seh lain, tarap lain, ro lain Apne ajdad ki meeras hain mazoor hain hum

Chand roz aur meri jan faqat chand hi roz

We are constrained to breathe in the shade of tyranny Bear it just a little longer, endure thus oppression This suffering that is our inheritance, and we are helpless But now the days of cruelty are numbered (Jalil 275).

In the ghazal *Mauzoo e Sukhan* also Faiz in his favorite way uses the love of his beloved to emphasize the pain and misery of people around him. This ghazal with its enchanting music and rhythm draws our

attention to the hunger, social injustice, oppression and the extreme sufferings of the common people (Ganaie 157).

The dominant theme in Faiz's poetry is a longing for social justice and equality expressed in the metaphor of a lover's longing for his beloved, "the country plays the role of the beloved in his ghazals in the format of the classical ghazal and the poet weaves in the pain of separation with the pain of injustice and tyranny" (Steele 14). The loneliness and separation becomes representative of lost dreams and unachieved goals. Faiz used his pen to defend the rights of the people, after the partition (like other progressive writers he was also not happy with the partition) of the subcontinent also he continued the same task. When Faiz used both his pen and activism to defend the rights of the people in Pakistan he was repeatedly sent to prison and exiled for his opposition. But this did not stop him on the other hand it encouraged him to write more and more against the injustices of the society. From behind bars and in solitary confinements he wrote some of his most moving *ghazals* in which emerges the metaphor of the beloved through which he addresses his people and his country. Because of this his poetry was banned in Pakistan by dictators for decades. Faiz's *ghazals* address issues of a new emerging nation and its internal conflicts. Human dispossession runs like a common thread throughout his *ghazals*, his *ghazals* become an emotive response to tyranny, oppression, injustice, inequality.

Faiz's most strong declaration of his allegiance to the ideas of social justice, equality and opposition to exploitation and injustice is his poem 'Bol' (Speak). It is a call-to-arms for all writers and artists. This ghazal was written immediately upon his return from the first PWA conference held in Lucknow in 1936. In it, Faiz captured beautifully the yearning of the oppressed people ready at last to face their British rulers in a fight to the end:

Bol, ke lab aazaad hain tere

Bol zabaan ab tak teri hai

Bol ke sach zinda hai ab tak

Bol, jo kuchh kehna hai keh le

Speak, your lips are free Speak; your tongue is your own still Speak, Truth still lives Speak, say what you must!

In 'Bol', Faiz points to 'the cruelty of nature and the wailing of the children of the poor', the 'oppression of poor section of society and the rising tide of the independence struggle'. In this *ghazal* Faiz is wondering how an artist or a writer could ignore concrete realities and cruelties of the world. Faiz laments the fact that some artists termed writings about the harsh realities of life and society as 'propaganda', refusing to consider such writings as art. Faiz tries to understand how can one sing praises to the beauty and fragrance of the rose while ignoring entirely the careworn hands of the gardener? Henceforth, Faiz's life and poetry would be dedicated to:

Aaj ke naam aur aaj ke gham ke naam

Zard patton ka ban jo mera des Hai,

Dard ka anjuman jo mera des hai

This day and the anguish of this day, For this wilderness of yellowing leaves which is my homeland For this carnival of suffering which is my homeland.

His poetry was a forceful rejection of 'art for art's sake', and a commitment to challenging injustice. In another poem, Chand Roz Aur Meri Jaan (A few more days, my dear), published in Naqsh e Faryadi again one finds Faiz addressing his beloved, he comforts her and tells her that the days of cruelty, inequality, oppression, injustice, hopelessness and helplessness are few and they are going to end very soon. He is

trying to assure her the British Government will end and we will be free and independent. We are constrained to breathe in the shade of tyranny Bear it just a little longer, endure thus oppression This suffering that is our inheritance, and we are helpless But now the days of cruelty are numbered. In another poem from Naqsh e Faryadi titled Mauzoo-e-sukhan, Faiz comments on the function of the poet and the question of what should concern a poet. Faiz wonders, should a writer or a poet write only about the darkness of beloved's tresses, her beauty, the delicate tracery of henna on her pale hands; or should a writer write about the things that has happened to the common man. For him, the duty of a poet or a writer is to write about the tragedies and misfortunes that happen to a common man. Faiz is steeped in the classical traditions of the Urdu ghazal or love lyric, its symbols, images, and characters. These characters include the lover (ashiq), the beloved (mashuq), the rival (raqib), the friend who gives the lover useless advice (nasih), the cup-bearer at the wine party (saqi), and the strict religious moraliser (sheikh). Faiz draws on these symbolic figures and the history of their subtle descriptions in Urdu poetry to produce political verse. He also draws on the imagined places of the Urdu ghazal, such as the wine tavern or meh khana, the street of the beloved, the gathering (Mehfil), the mosque, the temple, and the garden. In his poetry, without sacrificing the history of their meanings, these places become spaces of political oppression and hope (Yaqin 14).

Faiz started his writing career as a romantic, and then he turned into a socialist, after that, he matured into a communist, became a progressive and ended up as a revolutionary and rebel. No matter what is the subject of his poems, whether they are about love or revolution his voice is always of dissent. The canvas of Faiz's poetry is very vast and his poems have something to offer to everyone, "his ghazals teach a lover the meaning of true love, a common man gets to know the meaning of citizenship through his ghazals, and his ghazals are an inspiration for youth (Ahmed 30). His ghazals revolve around oppression, suppression, inequality and injustice and he becomes an active participant in the struggle for equality and freedom. When the long-awaited freedom for India and Pakistan comes, he is disheartened and disturbed because freedom comes but with the chaos, destruction and tragedy of Partition. He believes that the promise has been broken. He says that is not the freedom we were looking for.

Yeh daag daag ujaala, yeh shab gaziidaa sehar Woh intzaar tha jisaka yeh woh sehar toh nahin

Faiz is disheartened and disturbed but he has not lost hope. This is why he says:

*Abhi chiraage sar-e- raah ko kuchh khabar hi nahi Abhi Giraani yeh shab mein kabhi kami nahi aayi
Nijaate dido dil ki ghadi nahi aayi*

Chale chalo ki woh manjil abhi nahi aayi.

He asks its fellowman to continue the struggle. Freedom for Faiz was not freedom from British Raj only but freedom from all kinds of injustices and inequalities.

In the years following the partition of India, the theme of national disintegration became important in the ghazals of Faiz. The broader theme of a partitioned self is already present in his pre-partition ghazals but it gets a new color and a new image in his post-partition ghazals. Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poetry epitomizes the fusion of romanticism and revolution. By intertwining personal emotions with collective struggles, he created a voice that speaks to both the individual and society. His poetic imagery, steeped in classical traditions and revolutionary zeal, challenges oppression while offering hope and solidarity. Faiz's works remain a powerful lens to understand the complexities of identity, freedom, and social justice in a rapidly changing world. His legacy endures as a beacon for those striving for equality, making him a poet of both his time and the future.

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