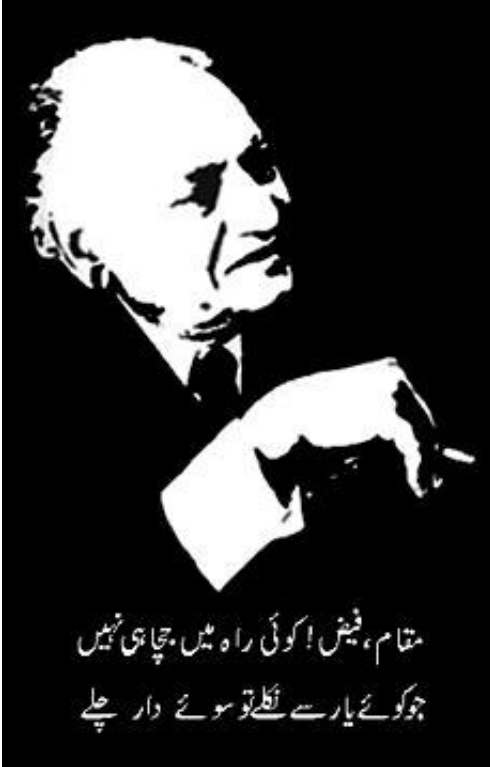


Remembrance of Things Past

The following is an English translation of some taped reminiscences which Faiz recorded for Mirza Zafrul Hasan on the occasion of his 65th birthday, on February 13, 1976



Our poets have always complained that the world hasn't cared for them enough. Indifference to poets on part of the culture at large has been a stock theme of our poetry. My complaint, if any, has been that I have received so much affection and kindness, from friends, from acquaintances, and even from those who hardly knew me, that I constantly feel that I have done much less than I should have done to earn all that love.

This too is nothing new. I have had this impression since I was a child. When I was very young and still at school, I had this same relationship with classmates and school fellows. For no reason that I could fathom, they had somehow decided to treat me as some kind of a leader, though I must admit I lacked all qualities of leadership. Normally, one has to be very rough and tough, or at least very formidable at ones studies, to occupy that sort of position in school. I was good in my studies as well as at the games, but by no means outstanding, and there was no apparent reason why anyone should have paid any attention to me.

When I think of my childhood, what stands out moisten my memory is that our household had a large number of women. We were three brothers, and both the younger (Inayat) and the older one (Tufail) had broken away from the women and used to occupy themselves mostly with various games. I

was the only one these women could get hold of. That had both negative and positive effects. The positive effect was that these women forced me to live a decorous life, so that I hardly did or said anything uncouth through all those years. And that has since become a habit for life. The negative effect, which I often regret, was that I missed the normal playfulness and irresponsible life of a child. There were those who would go fly a kite, or would: play with marbles spinning tops in the alleyways. I need to watch other children do all that, but I would myself remain aloof. I would watch, and watch, and watch, but would partake of none of it, because all that seemed to run counter to the decorum of life that I had learned.

Even the teachers were extraordinarily kind to me. I don't know about these days, but in our time it was common for school-children to get thrashed by their teachers, those teachers used to be quite cruel. In my case, however, not only did they never touch me but also appointed me the monitor in all my classes and even assigned me the task of actually punishing my own classmates. I was being constantly ordered to slap this one or hit that one. I found these duties embarrassing and painful, so that I would always *try* to hand out the punishments in such a way that my poor victim would feel as little hurt as possible. In stead of slapping around, I would merely tap the fellows cheek or pull his ear ever so softly. Sometimes of course, the teacher would see that I was falling short of the required standards of roughness would order me to hit harder.

I have, in short, two strong memories. One, that I was deprived of the normal interests of a child. Second, that I received from friend, classmates and even teachers much the same degree of kindness and that I subsequently got, and still get, Contemporaries.

In the morning, I would go with my father to the mosque for pre-dawn prayers. The routine was that I would wake up with the prayer-call, would accompany him to the mosque, and then would go for the Quranic lesson with Maulvi Ibrahim Meer Sialkoti, who was a great scholar of his time. Then I would go for a walk with my father for an hour and a half or two hours, before going to school. At night, Father would call me to write letters for him. Those days it was hard for him to write his own letters, so I worked as a kind of secretary for him, which included reading the newspapers aloud to him while he listened. I benefited much from these childhood activities. Writing letters and reading newspapers in both English and Urdu added much to my knowledge of these languages.

There is something else I remember. There was a shop next to our house, which was a sort of lending library. You could get a book for two paisas from there. A gentleman worked there whom everyone used to call 'Bhai'. Bhai Sahib's shop was a treasure-house of Urdu literature. The kind of books that were common among students of sixth and seventh classes in our time are now very rare. These included Tilism-e-Hosh-Ruba, Fasana-e-Azad, the novels of Abdul Haleem Sharar, and so on. I read them all. Then I launched on the reading of poetry. I read Daagh, and I read Meer;

Ghalib I did not much understand at that age. Even others I could only half understand. But the reading of poetry had an intense effect on me, as if the breath had been caught in my throat. That reading gave me a special liking for poetry, and I started getting interested in literature.

My father's assistant also doubled as a manager for our household. I had an argument with him about something or the other, so he got angry and said that he was going to tell my father that I was reading novels and other useless things, instead of the books in the syllabus. I got very frightened, and I begged him to, please, do no such thing, but he remained adamant and did in fact tell my father all about my reading habits. So, he called for me and asked me if it was true that I read novels. I had to confess. But he merely said that I should rather read English novels because Urdu ones were simply inferior. He admonished me to go and get books from the library in the city fort.

I started reading English novels: Dickens, Hardy, and God knows what else. That too I understood only partially, but my knowledge of English improved nonetheless. By the time I reached the Tenth Class, I began to notice that the teachers themselves were making mistakes in their teaching, so I started correcting their language. I was never thrashed for it, but some of the teachers did periodically get irritated with me and would say that if thought I was so good at English I should perhaps teach instead of being a student there.

In those days, strange feelings would occasionally overcome me, as if the sky had suddenly changed colors, or things had suddenly receded into the distance, or the sunlight had suddenly become of a soft orangish hue, and all that I had seen in the past had become immeasurably different; the world itself appeared, at such times, to transform itself into some kind of a picture-screen. That sort of feeling used to recur occasionally in past years, but I seem to have lost it now.

And there were of course 'mushairas'. There was a sprawling old house next to ours where 'mushairas' were held in winter. There was a gentleman in Sialkot, by the name of Pandit Raj Narain Harman Dil, who used to organise these 'mushairas'. There was also Munshi Siraj Din, who otherwise served as the meer munshi for the Maharaja of Kashmir, but who would also preside over these 'mushairas'. By the time I came up to the tenth class, I too had started dabbling in versification, and even recited some of these poems in a couple of the 'mushairas'. Munshi Siraj Din said to me, 'Yes, you do write well, but give up this versifying for now. You should study first, and when your heart and mind have matured you might want again to take it up again. For now, you are merely wasting time'. And I did actually stop writing poetry.

Later, when I was admitted to the Murray College, Sialkot, Yusuf Saleem Chishti Sahib, who has also done explicatory work on Iqbal, came to teach Urdu and started organising 'tarahi mushairas'. I too wrote some, and was

much applauded. Chishti Sahibs advice was the opposite of Munshi Siraj Din's. He urged me to give more attention to my writing, so that I may infact become a poet some day.

Then I went to the Government College, Lahore, where I was fortunate to have very learned and kind teachers. Pitras Bukhari was there. Dr. Taseer was in the Islamia College. A little later, Sufi Tabassum Sahib also came. In addition, I also got to personally know the other prominent writers in the city at that time, such as Imtiyaz Ali Taj, Chiragh Hasan Hasrat, Hafeez Jallundhuri, Akhtar Sheerani, and so on. Those days, the relationship between students and teachers used to be a mixture of friendship and quite decorous respect. I probably didn't learn much in the classes, but the affectionate and close association with these elders taught me a very great deal.

I also learned much from my friends. Whenever I wrote a poem, I would show them first to my closest associates. If they liked the poem, I would then present it in a 'mushaira', but if I didn't myself like any of the verses, or if any of the friends told me to omit one, I would revise the poem accordingly. By the time I began studying for my Masters, I had begun writing quite regularly.

One of my friends is Khwaja Khurshid Anwar. It was because of him that I got interested in music. In the beginning, Khurshid Anwar was a terrorist and a member of the Bhagat Singh group. He was sentenced for that, but the sentence was commuted later. After giving up his terrorism, he got absorbed in music. I used to attend my classes during the day and spend my evenings in the living quarters of Khurshid Anwar's father, Khwaja Firozuddin 'Marhoom', where I would listen to the singing of the great 'ustads' of the time, such as Ustad Tawwakul Hussain Khan, Ustad Abdul Waheed Khan, Ustad Ashiq Ali Khan, and Chhote Ghulam Ali Khan. There, I used to meet Rafiq Ghaznavi too, who has now of course passed away; he used to be a contemporary of these 'ustads' and a friend of ours. Rafiq was at that time a student at Law College. He was, I should rather say, registered at the Law College; for, Rafiq was in no wise given to any study of the Law. We used to congregate often either in Rafiq's room or at Khurshid Anwar's. In any case, it was in the company of these friends that I learned to appreciate the delicacies of the musical arts.

During the summer vacations, I used to either go to Srinagar with Khurshid Anwar and my brother Tufail, or to my sister's house in Lyallpur. There, in Lyallpur, I used to spend my time with Bari (Alig) and others of his group. Sometimes, I used to also go to my eldest sister's house in Dharam Sala, where the exceptional beauty of the natural landscape had an extraordinary effect on my emotional make-up. For the most part, however, I must say, my sense of attachment has always been geared more toward other humans than toward natural landscapes or the contemplation of beauties of non-human nature. I used to feel even then that the alleys and neighborhoods of the city had a kind of beauty in no

way inferior to the beauties of rivers and deserts, or of mountains and orchards. Of course, one needs a different kind of eye to see that kind of beauty. I remember, we used to live inside the Masti Gate, on the upper floor of a house. There was an open sewer in the alley below, but also a little flower-bed, and orchards all around. There was a bright moon one night, and its soft light fell on the sewer and the garbage dumps in such a way that the shapeless squalor of those surroundings had been hidden and, instead, the interplay of the shadows and the moonlight had given the scene a strange kind of beauty. I have at times tried to write of those feelings in my poems, since there always are those special afternoons or evenings when the alleys, and the neighborhoods, and the enclosed backyards of the city take on that special shape and feel which is altogether magical.

When I was studying for my Masters, I would sometimes attend classes regularly but then would at times feel not quite upto it. Most of the time was spent in reading books that were not in the syllabus. The result was that my performance in the examinations was anything but outstanding. But I knew that I knew more than those who had secured the first and second positions, although my scores were clearly lower. My teachers also knew that. When any of my teachers, such as Prof. Dickinson or Prof. Hari Chand Katapaliya, did not feel like lecturing themselves, they would ask me to lecture in their place. Prof. Bukhari, however, was of a more austere temper and would never do such Irregular things. Prof. Dickinson was supposed to teach the literature of the nineteenth century, but he was not the least interested in the subject. So he told me to prepare a few lectures. The other brighter students in the class were also told to prepare a couple of lectures each. He offered to help, of course. In the process, I became a semi-professor while I was still a student.

When I first began writing poetry, and throughout my college days, I had never thought that I would actually become a poet. And politics was something I hadn't even dreamed of at that point. I was of course perfectly aware of the principal political movements of the period, such as the Congress Movement, the Khilafat Movement and Bhagat Singh's terrorist movement, but I had never thought of actually participating in any of these.

In the beginning, I had wanted to be a cricket player, since I had been fond of cricket since childhood and had played a lot of it over the years. Then I thought of becoming, successively, a teacher, a critic, or a research scholar. In the long run, of course, I proved thoroughly incapable of all such enterprising activities, and became neither a cricketer, nor a critic, nor indeed a research scholar. But I did go off to Amritsar as a teacher.

The time that I spent in Amritsar proved to be one of the happiest periods of my life. For many reasons! I enjoyed that first opportunity to teach, and that included the joy of friendship with students, and the joy of learning from them as well as imparting some knowledge to them in the course of

daily interaction. Those friendships have survived to this day. Secondly, it was during this time that I began to adopt the writing of poetry seriously as a vocation. Thirdly, it was in Amritsar that I began to gain any considerable understanding of politics, thanks largely to my friends, which included Mahmoud -uz- Zafar as well as Dr. Rashid Jehan; Dr. Taseer also came there a bit later. This turned out to be a different world. I started getting active in working class politics and participated in the civil liberties union when that came into being. The Progressive Movement got started during the same period, and I got involved in organising it. All these activities were a source of great mental consolation for me.

When debates got going about progressive literature itself, I participated in them. Later, when the editorship of Adab-e-Lateef was offered to me, I worked in that capacity for two or three years. Writers were divided in those days between two large groups, namely the progressive writers on the one hand, and on the other those who preached the idea of 'literature for literatures sake'. The debate between these two groups lasted for many years and kept me busy through all that time. This was itself an interesting and satisfying experience.

Then broadcasting began in the subcontinent. Many of my friends worked for the radio. One was Syed Rashid Ahmed who later became the director general of Radio Pakistan. Another was Somnath Chup, who is currently the head of the Department of Tourism in India. Both these friends served as station directors in Lahore, and many of the writers in the city, such as Dr. Taseer, Hasrat, Sufi sahib and Hari Chand Akhtar started frequenting the radio stations with me. In those days the radio programs were devised not by the Director of Programs but by the likes of us, who thought up new ideas and created programs accordingly. During that period, I wrote several plays and radio features...

It was through the radio that I first met Majaz, Sardar Jafri, Jan Nisar Akhtar, Jazbi, Makhdoom, and others. Aside from pure friendship, these new associations also gave me new opportunities to learn and understand all kinds of new things. That was a busy time of my life but also a time when I felt largely unworried and carefree.

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Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the ones who think differently