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THE LIFE AND POETRY OF FAIZ AHMED FAIZ

Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Pakistan's unofficial poet laureate, was born almost exactly a hundred years ago, on 13 February 1911, in Sialkot, the hometown he shared with Pakistan's national poet, 'Allama' Muhammad Iqbal. Faiz passed away in 1984, aged 73, in Lahore, the city he came to call home during the last years of his life.

While Faiz acquired the status of a living legend in Pakistan and throughout the world, it is not as widely known that his father was also one of a kind, one who led a more colourful life than Faiz himself. Sultan Mohammad Khan was a poor shepherd boy, the son of a landless peasant in Sialkot, when he was spotted as intellectually gifted by a local schoolteacher and educated in a local school. Once he had gone as far as he could in Sialkot, he ran away to Lahore to continue his studies, living in a mosque for poor, homeless students. By this time, he had taught himself Persian as well as Urdu and English. By chance one day in the mosque he met an official of the Afghan king, Habibullah Khan; impressed by the young man's linguistic skills and intelligence, the official brought him to the royal court in Kabul. There, Sultan Mohammad rose to become the king's personal interpreter and senior minister. He later moved to England, where he acquired a law degree at Cambridge and became friends with Iqbal. He eventually retired back to Sialkot as a practicing lawyer and gentleman of leisure.

Sultan Mohammad Khan had acquired several wives during his travels, including some daughters of Afghan nobles. After returning to Sialkot, he married Faiz's mother, his last and youngest wife. Shortly thereafter Faiz was born, and received his early education under the tutelage of the renowned scholar Sayyid Mir Hasan, known as shams-ul-ulema (the 'Sun of Scholars'), at the Scotch Mission High School. For all the later accusations against Faiz of being an atheist, he memorised a part of the Quran while young, a tradition still practiced in Muslim households today.

Incidentally, the matter of his faith came up in an interesting way when Faiz was arrested and imprisoned from 1951 till 1955 in the notorious Rawalpindi conspiracy case. This was a plot by some left-leaning army officers of the new state of Pakistan, who wanted to overthrow the government and establish a republic along the lines of Turkey under Mustafa Kemal 'Ataturk'. Faiz and the fledgling Communist Party of Pakistan had been asked to be a part of the plan. While they eventually declined to support it, suspecting it would not have popular backing, the plot was discovered and all of those involved, including Faiz, were arrested and jailed. Faiz whiled away the time by teaching the Quran to his fellow prisoners – mystifying his jailers, who had been told their prisoners were godless communists.

Classical hinge

After completing his early education in Sialkot, Faiz went on to Lahore's prestigious Government College on the personal recommendation of Allama Iqbal. The latter had heard the teenage Faiz's poems in local recitals, and had once awarded him a prize in a poetry competition. By his own account, Faiz had read many of the classics of Urdu and English literature and poetry while still in school. He described his particular fascination for the poetry of the old masters – Mir Taqi 'Mir', Mirza Rafi 'Sauda' and Asadullah Khan 'Ghalib', whom the young Faiz found mostly impenetrable. His familiarity with the masters of traditional Urdu ghazal and poetry is the reason he is perceived not only as the last of the classical poets in Urdu, but also as the 'hinge' between the classical and modern ghazal.

Faiz's first published collection, *Naqsh-e-faryaadi* (The lamenting image), begins with the typical

musings of a young poet – on love, beauty, loss and the beloved's countenance. It is commonly thought that unlike prose writers, whose art matures with the years, a poet creates his best work in youth. This was certainly true of Ghalib, who composed some of his best and most mystical verses while in his teens and early 20s. But it was different with Faiz, whose first collection begins with that 'emotional preoccupation of youth' – love. Faiz himself describes this preoccupation as dominating the first half of this collection with poems dating from about 1928-29 till about 1934-35.

As was his habit and his lifelong philosophy, Faiz was able to relate his internal, subjective world to the larger world around him. And so he describes how the decade of the 1920s was one of carefree prosperity in the Subcontinent, in which both poetry and prose acquired a flippant, non-reflective style, a perpetual celebration of sorts. Of the poets of that era, Hasrat Mohani, Josh Malihabadi and Hafeez Jullundhri are prominent, while in prose the prevailing philosophy was 'art for art's sake' – a forceful rejection of the position that the artist must try to change social conditions.

By the end of the 1920s, the revolutionary fervour released by the Russian Revolution of 1917 was subsiding. Similar revolutions had failed in Germany, England and China. In the aftermath of World War I, the Ottoman Empire, which had ruled over large parts of southeastern Europe, West Asia and North Africa, was divided among the wars' victors; the caliphate itself was abolished by Turkish nationalists, led by Ataturk. Beginning in 1929, the worldwide financial crash led to social unrest all over the world and, in 1933, to the rise of Adolf Hitler and his Nazi party in Germany. The Subcontinent was certainly not immune to the impact of this international upheaval: urban unemployment rose, farmers were ruined, and an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty took hold.

This was the backdrop to a new movement in literature and the arts in the Subcontinent, with the formation of the All-India Progressive Writers' Association (PWA). The initial supporters of the PWA, coming in from literature, drama, poetry, music and cinema, wrote mostly in Urdu. The genesis of the movement was the 1932 publication of a collection of ten Urdu short stories, *Angaray*, by four young writers, Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmad Ali, Mahmooduzzafar and Rasheed Jahan. The movement's guiding light was, undoubtedly, Sajjad Zaheer, Faiz's mentor and lifelong friend. The PWA's first manifesto, from 1936, gives a glimpse of the movement's aims:

It is the object of our Association to rescue literature and other arts from the conservative classes in whose hands they have been degenerating so long to bring arts in the closest touch with the people and to make them the vital organs which will register the actualities of life, as well as lead us to the future we envisage.

The new movement vociferously denounced the philosophy of 'art for art's sake'. They deemed it incumbent upon the artist to use his or her art to criticise the existing social conditions of society – as a tool to lay the foundations of a new society.

In 1934, Faiz finished his college education and started teaching at Muhammedan Anglo-Oriental (MAO) College in Amritsar. This was where he became friends with Sahibzada Mehmooduzzafar and his wife Rasheed Jahan, who were teachers, writers and progressives. They persuaded Faiz to join the PWA, and his life and outlook were transformed forever. In Faiz's own words, 'joining the PWA opened new worlds to my eyes. The first lesson that I learned was that it is pointless to think of oneself as being apart from the larger world around us ... In the end, any one person, with all their loves, their hatreds, their joys and sorrows is a miniscule being. [I learned that] the sorrow of life and the sorrows of the world are one and the same'.

Thus began the second phase of his first poetry collection, with the remarkable poem 'Do not ask of me, my beloved, that same love'. This was Faiz's first experiment with blending love for the

'beloved' into love for humanity, of turning the pain of separation into pain for all those who suffered under the 'dark, bestial spells of uncounted centuries', in which he declares, ruefully:

*Aur bhi dukh hain zamaane mein mohabbat ke siva
Raahatan aur bhi hain vasl ki rahat ke siva*

There are other griefs in this world apart from that of love
And other pleasures apart from that of union.

Faiz's most forceful declaration of his allegiance to the ideas of social justice, and opposition to exploitation and injustice is his poem 'Bol' (Speak). It is a call-to-arms for all writers and artists. According to his close friend and interpreter in the former USSR, Ludmilla Vassilyeva, 'Bol' is the poetical motto of Faiz's life generally, written immediately upon his return from the first PWA conference in Lucknow in 1936. In it, Faiz captured beautifully the longing 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 society and the rising tide of the independence struggle'. How, he asked, could artists ignore concrete realities and cruelties? Faiz lamented that some artists termed writings on unpleasant realities 'propaganda', refusing to consider them art. He remained a worshipper of beauty, but endeavouring to create a beautiful society was more worthwhile still. 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.

A full comprehension

While always considered a leftist, Faiz was fiercely independent in his opinions. He criticised Mohandas K Gandhi for attempting to stifle the aspirations of the masses of the Subcontinent in his poem 'To a political leader'. Yet he also joined the British Army's propaganda department once he was convinced that Hitler and his armies allied with the Japanese presented a far graver threat to India than the British. He was one of the first to see that Independence, the communal partition of India into two countries, was a poisoned chalice. The searing lines of 'Independence Dawn'

record his disillusionment, leading to much anger and recriminations from his contemporaries in Pakistan:

*Ye daagh daagh ujaala, ye shab- gazeeda sehar
Vo intezaar tha jis ka, ye vo sehar to nahin*

This blemished light, this night-bitten dawn
This is not the dawn we awaited so long

In early 1947, just before Independence, Faiz was asked to become the first editor of the English daily, the Pakistan Times, the flagship of the Progressive Papers Limited chain. V G Kiernan, one of his most distinguished translators, writes that at the newspaper Faiz 'made use of prose as well as verse to denounce obstruction at home and to champion progressive causes abroad; he made his paper one whose opinions were known and quoted far and wide.' In the new state of Pakistan, Faiz took the lead in putting forward the demands of workers, women, peasants and the poor, through his work with the trade unions and his editorship at the Pakistan Times. For his troubles, he was arrested on trumped-up charges in the notorious Rawalpindi conspiracy case. Over the next two years, he would face trial before a secret tribunal that held the power to condemn him to death before a firing squad. He would also compose the remarkable poems of his second book, *Dast-e-saba* (The breeze's hand), declaring to his jailers:

*Mataa-e lauh-o qalam chhin gayi to kya gham hai
Ke khoon-e dil mein dubo li hain ungliyaan main ne*

If they have snatched away ink and paper, what of it
I have dipped my fingers in my heart's blood

The book begins with a short introduction by Faiz himself, a small polemic on the responsibility of the artist. 'The poet's work is not only perception and observation, but also struggle and effort,' Faiz writes.

A full comprehension of this ocean of Life through the live and active 'drops' of his environment depends upon the poet's depth of perception. To be able to show this ocean to others depends upon his control over his art; and his ability to set in motion some new currents in the ocean depends upon the fire in his blood and the zeal of his passion. Success in all three tasks demands continuous toil and struggle.

Faiz was to say that the years in detention were some of his most productive. Time in jail, he said, was like falling in love again – meaning that it offered him impetus to put his thoughts into verse.

One of his most beloved poems from that era is titled 'The soil of my land'. It dates from 15 August 1952, Pakistan's fifth anniversary of Independence. Faiz wrote to his wife, Alys, that there had been a celebration in jail, with colourful buntings, lights and loudspeakers. Yet while the Pakistani government was busy celebrating, he felt, the ordinary people of Pakistan had nothing to rejoice about. Mohammad Ali Jinnah had died just a year after Independence. Liaquat Ali Khan, the prime minister at the time Faiz had been arrested in 1951, had soon thereafter, been assassinated in public. A long period of political turmoil and instability culminated in Pakistan's first military government, in 1958.

This was the backdrop for a poem, 'The soil of my land', that became immensely popular, and is still quoted widely today:

*Nisar main teri galiyon
ke ai watan ke jahaan
Chali hai rasm ke koi na sar utha ke chale*

Blessings be upon the soil of my land,
where they have decreed the custom
That men should walk no more with heads held high

Come home now

After his release, as his fame grew, so did the fear of successive governments in Pakistan about what Faiz represented. This was especially true after he was awarded the Lenin Peace Prize, the Soviet Bloc equivalent of the Nobel Prize, in 1962. He was warned by the military government not to accept the award since, by this time, Pakistan had become an ally of the US, and all left-leaning, progressive voices had been silenced or were heavily censored. Faiz proceeded to Moscow anyway to receive his award, and his acceptance speech ranks as one of the great humanist, peace-loving documents of all time. In it he said,

Human ingenuity, science and industry have made it possible to provide each one of us everything we need to be comfortable provided these boundless treasures of nature and production are not declared the property of a greedy few but are used for the benefit of all of humanity ... However, this is only possible if the foundations of human society are based not on greed, exploitation and ownership but on justice, equality, freedom and the welfare of everyone ... I believe that humanity which has never been defeated by its enemies will, after all, be successful; at long last, instead of wars, hatred and cruelty, the foundation of humankind will rest on the message of the great Persian poet Hafez 'Shirazi': 'Every foundation you see is faulty, except that of Love, which is faultless.

He was arrested several times during the reign of General Ayub Khan, and faced a dilemma when the India-Pakistan war broke out in 1965. Friends pressured him to write 'patriotic' songs; instead, he wrote 'Lament for a dead soldier':

*Utho ab maathi se utho
Jaago mere laal
Tumhri seej sajawan karan
Deekho aai rain indhyaran*

To paraphrase the poem:
Beauteous child, playing in the dust
It is time to come home now
Come then, it is time to come home
Priceless jewel, lost in the dust
It is time to come home now

This infuriated both the nationalists and the left, and for a time he had to go into hiding. After the trauma of Pakistan's 'second partition' in 1971, and the bloodshed in Bangladesh, Pakistan's first elected civilian government came to power, and Faiz was appointed its culture advisor. In that position, he created the Pakistan National Council of the Arts as well as the Lok Virsa, the Institute of Folk Heritage. In 1974, he was part of a delegation that accompanied Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto to the new state of Bangladesh, to repair relations after the civil war (see accompanying piece by Afsan Chowdhury). While the official visit did not accomplish much, Faiz, at the suggestion

of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, an old friend, composed the famous 'Hum ke thehre ajnabi' (We, who became strangers) to express his sadness.

After the military coup of 1977 in Pakistan, he chose to go to Beirut. There, he served at the side of Yasser Arafat of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) as the editor of Lotus, the magazine of the Afro-Asian Writer's Association. As Israeli helicopter gunships were pounding the PLO's strongholds in Beirut, he was composing 'Lullaby for a Palestinian Child'.

*Mat ro bachche
Ro ro ke abhi
Teri ammi ki ankh lagi hai
Mat ro bachche
Kuchh hi pehle
Tere abba ne
Apne gham se rukhsat li hai*

Don't cry little one...
your mother
just slept weeping...
don't cry little one...
your father
moments ago...
bid his sorrows adieu!

He got out just ahead of the tanks of the Israeli army in 1982, and returned to Lahore for the last years of his life.

What he has not received

While loved throughout the Subcontinent, like all great artists, Faiz remained dissatisfied with his life's work. On multiple occasions he also said that he had received much more than his share of love and acclaim and, as a result, felt perpetually guilty for not having done enough through his work to justify it.

It is the poet's birthday, bring wine
position, title, honours, what has he not received
the only shortcoming, is that the one being praised
has written no verses worthy of any book

Faiz also remained painfully aware of the price paid by the loved ones of all those who dedicate their lives to an ideal. He married Alys, a member of the British Communist Party, in 1941. She had come to British India to visit her sister, Christabel, who had married a teacher and moved to the Subcontinent. Christabel's husband, M D Taseer, had been one of the original founders of the Progressive Writer's Association, and had helped draft its original manifesto in England. After her marriage to Faiz, Alys lived in India and Pakistan for the rest of her life, and is buried in Lahore. In one of his first letters to her from prison, Faiz talked about how he felt about his struggle for social justice:

for the first time, I felt that it is wrong and unfair to allow one's near and dear ones to suffer for something one holds dear. Looked at this way, idealism or holding to particular principles is also a form of selfishness because in the worship of a certain ideal, one forgets that others may hold differing views and one's attachment to that ideal causes them suffering.

Salima, the older of Faiz's two daughters, recalls Faiz expressing his regret in missing out on the children's childhood, and that he was now missing out on the childhood of his grandchildren as well – all for the sake of his work and his ideals.

My own earliest memory of my connection with Faiz, my grandfather, was of being called an 'atheist' and a 'communist' in school – terms that did not have meaning for me at the time. Even as children, we knew he was not someone ordinary. When he was home, which was not often, there was excitement in the air, with people coming and going at all hours. A contingent of military police camped permanently outside our gate. The grandchildren never got much private time with him, as he was constantly surrounded by friends and admirers. His funeral of course was a very public affair and I remember wondering why we could not mourn him in private.

All of us, his family members, feel the heavy burden of his legacy. When people shower us with love and affection for his life's work, it makes us painfully aware that we need to always try harder to live up to his ideals. We have all been asked the dreaded, inevitable question, 'Do you also write poetry?'. Of course we don't. How would we ever measure up?

Just before he died, my grandfather went back to his ancestral village. There, in a final act of defiance to his detractors – which by that time included writers, government officials, bureaucrats and even some erstwhile 'progressive friends', who had vacuously branded him an atheist, communist and Russian agent – he led the prayers at the local mosque. Today, outside that building is a stone on which is currently inscribed his one and only Persian na'at, or ode to the Prophet:

*Khwaja be takht banda-e-tashveesh-e mulk-omaaal
Bar khaak rashk-e khusraw-e dauraan gadaa-e tu*

The rulers on their thrones are slaves to anxieties of land and wealth
Upon the dusty earth, Oh envy of the rulers of the age is thy mendicant!

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