

Faiz's Letters to Alys

By Salima Hashmi

This is obviously not a literary work, since these are private letters. There is no need to go into any serious discussion about them.... [I]t is quite possible that in our Department of Sociology, imprisonment may become a subject for research. Therefore perhaps these letters might reveal a few aspects of the psychological experience of a lengthy incarceration.... I can see only one positive aspect to the publication of these letters, which is that for many people imprisonment is not unusual¹.

(Faiz Ahmed Faiz)



¹ Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1976), Foreword to *Saleebain Meray Dareechay Mein*. Cited (trans. Salma Mahmud) in *Two Loves* (2011). Sange-e-Meel, Lahore. pp.53-4.

I am no scholar on Faiz. The glimpses I share here, I contribute as his daughter, hoping to offer a window into a very human, loving, family man— someone who saw himself as part of a milieu—more companion than champion. This simply human aspect of Faiz’s life, and of his time in prison, can sometimes run the risk of being lost amidst a more political or scholarly focus— but, alas, incarceration and imprisonment is not as uncommon an experience in Pakistan as it ought to be, and too many could unfortunately also identify with these letters at a more humanly felt level.

In 2009, when we had embarked upon the project ‘Faiz Ghar’— setting up a small Museum in a house leased to us by a friend and admirer of Faiz— we commenced sorting Faiz’s belongings, papers and books. It was not a massive collection by any means, given his nomadic, rather spartan life, but an interesting one. My mother was instrumental in saving and sorting what little there was: a smart grey lounge suit, a fur cap, his scarf, his pen, and a reasonably large cache of photographs, letters, certificates, medals.

After my mother’s death, all this had been packed away in cartons in my house, waiting for just the sort of opportunity that the Faiz Ghar project afforded. Sifting through his papers, I came across a plastic bag containing some scraps of paper. On closer look, I deciphered Faiz’s writing, and the unmistakable stamp of the censor from Hyderabad Jail. These few letters were in poor shape but readable. It is surprising that they were there at all. Alys and Faiz had moved to Beirut in 1978. Their home in Lahore was closed for almost three years. On return, all seemed to be in order except our cupboard, which had been attacked by termites. Here too, the termites had spared all but one small wicker basket, where Alys had stored all of Faiz’s correspondence from the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case days. Alys was inconsolable, but Faiz reminded her that the Urdu translation existed: ‘Saleebein meray dareechay mein’, published in 1972.

*The termite ridden, now salvaged remnants were conserved with the help of Dr. Asma Ibrahim and transcribed by Kyla Pasha and were published under the title **Two Loves** in 2011. We decided to bring out the volume accompanied by photographs of some of the cells and other bits and pieces.*

(4M)
I know what I got? You can never guess.
Jehudi Menuhin, perhaps the greatest violinist of all
times, playing Bach and Paganini in the auditorium
of the Indian Film Festival. It made me angry and
jealous and sad when I thought about it later. This
country is now ~~five~~ nearly five years old and
in five years we have not given the people
one real exhibition of anything of beauty, of culture,
of being pleasure. And yet there has been no
of 'tamashas'. But all that we can think
to collect some silly old grey-heads from all
over the world, make them talk a lot of bodge
that no one cares a damn f*cking about, give
a few people an opportunity for lots of eating
& lots of shoving & then forget all about it. ~~that~~
India may be a bigger country but culture is not
a matter of size but of ~~the~~ the ways of living and
thinking + why shows the people of this country
not be given a change ~~at least~~ to look at culture even
if they can't live it. Anyway it will all come
some day perhaps & perhaps I shouldn't be talking about
it.

I chose not to go to Hyderabad Jail for personal reasons, but Arif Mahmood, friend and photographer, went and identified the cells and photographed them. I remember that I had been allowed just once to visit: The occasion was Eid, and the prisoner's families had been allowed into the inner sanctum, into the courtyard with a courtroom at its center. (The trial was held in camera, with no one present but the accused, the judges and lawyers—the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case Act had forbade any public access to information about the proceedings.) Around the courtyard were rooms for lawyers, guards and witnesses. I have a vague recollection of a few shrubs carefully tended in sandy soil.

Going through these letters—only 25 had survived from the originals—I was struck by two things: Firstly the comparison with the Urdu translation, and I realize what a good job Faiz had done of translating his own letters. And secondly, the things he had chosen to omit in the translation, in the published translation. (These were largely bits of juicy gossip, and also certain bits of intimate sentences written to his wife and the way that he chose to mention us, the two daughters, calling us “pigeons” and “funny faces”.) Below are a few excerpts.

Faiz writes to Alys from Hyderabad, 15 March 1952:

The court closed for a fortnight. Today is our first holiday. It is a little after seven o'clock as I write. The sun has not yet come into our yard and every one else is still in bed. (We are sleeping in the verandahs now). I have already shaved and washed to the utter confusion and amazement of the half-awake fellows in their mosquito nets as I am usually the last to get up. One or two have been calling out in scandalized voices to enquire what is biting me, whether the Governor has invited me to breakfast or Rita Hayworth is waiting in the visitors room. Actually I am only making one of my periodical attempts at self-reform...

17 September 1952:

Yesterday Asghari (Manzoor's wife) sent two sprays of lovely flowers for Nasim and me...and as I write they are before me, disbursing their heavy, sugary odour, nestling under Cheemi's big picture like a votive offering. What a lovely picture it is...and as I sit down on my table I contemplate it often, trying to read her future from her face. I think I have begun to see a good deal of it now. In her face there is not a streak, not a line of

meanness, dishonesty or bad temper. It is open like a book. So I know what she will grow up into—a frank, open, trusting, jolly, affectionate person but albeit silly like her father with no understanding whatsoever of the world's wiles. This means that she will hurt herself often and will be frequently imposed upon but she will retain her happy smile all the same and will never be really unhappy. This is because I think that pain and unhappiness are distinct and different things and it is possible to go on suffering pain without really being unhappy. Pain is something external, something that comes from without, an ephemeral accident like a physical ailment, like our present separation, like the death of a brother. Unhappiness on the other hand, although produced by pain, is something within yourself, that grows, develops, and envelops you if you allow it to do so and do not watch out. Pain no one can avoid but unhappiness you can overcome if you consider something worthwhile enough to live for. Perhaps I'm being pedantic again so I shall leave it.

15 August 1952:

Your letter came today. I feel happy today after a mild attack of a blue period lasting over a few days. It must be the weather. It is more like spring than summer. The mornings are vaguely cool and disturbing like the first breath of love and the sun in the early hours brings more colour than heat. In the evenings the breeze seems to bring the breath of the seas and the skies seem to close not on drab prison walls but on distant palm-fringed beaches. And it is sad like all beauty that is within your sight and beyond your grasp—like all beauty that you know to be an illusion. Yesterday we had a change. The prison gateway was festooned with lights, red blue and green, and four loud-speakers blared forth radio programmes in cracked, discordant voices. The lights and the colours, and din felt more like Anarkali than Hyderabad Jail and for a long time I could not sleep. In the morning I awoke with a strange happiness in my heart and I wrote what I enclose with this letter. I was astounded to find that it took me hardly anytime at all and I had practically finished when we went down to breakfast. I am still feeling rather intoxicated with it and am beginning to fear that perhaps someday I might end up as a poet after all.

2 October 1952:

I've already sent one ghazal to Rauf and the enclosed should provide a befitting end-piece. I feel particularly pleased with this one because "I don't mind telling you" (to borrow Majid's pet phrase) that nobody else can write like this today and for a long time nobody will. This is not

because of vanity regarding talent— mine is very limited and so many others possess more talent than I—it is merely a question of the capacity of taking pains, particularly in descriptive writing where the temptation to follow the line of least resistance and accept any cliché and any approximation to the image in your mind and have done with it. The reader, of course, can never tell how much effort has gone into each word, the final word that emerges after innumerable mental rejections. I'm sure you're laughing now, because I'm preening myself so much, but I must do it some time.

8 October 1952:

Beloved,

This morning the moon shone so brightly in my face it woke me up. The jail bell tolled the half hour after four. I sat up in my bed and at the same moment Arbab (51) in the bed next to me also sat up and smiled at me. He went back to sleep at once but I got up and sat in the verandah opposite my cell and watched the morning come. I heard the jail lock open and shut as the guards changed, the keys and chains rattle in the distance and the iron gates and door clamp their jaws as if they were chewing up the last remains of the night's starry darkness. Then the breeze slowly rose like a languid woman and the sky slowly paled and the stars seemed to billow up and down in pearly white pools and then sucked under. I sat and watched and thoughts and memories flooded into the mind. Perhaps it was on a morning like this that this moon beckoned to a lonely traveler a little distance from where I sit and took the traveler with him away into the unknown and the traveler was my brother. Perhaps this moon is at this moment softly shining on the upturned faces, painless now in death, of the murdered men in Korean prison camps and these dead men too are my brothers. When they lived, they lived far away in lands I have not seen but they also lived in me and were a part of my blood and those who have killed them have killed a part of me and shed some of my blood. Albeit they are dead, as my brother is dead, and only the dead can adequately mourn for the living. Perhaps some day I shall be able to put this morning into verse and I have threatened Arbab that if I do he might become immortal by being in it.

There are many other letters which come from an earlier time. He wrote the following in the mid-1940s:

Darling,

Delhi heat is just coming into its own with 100 during the day and dust storms in the evenings but the nights are cool. Further heat is being engendered by the discussion, the talk of communal riots etc. I have twice visited the Imperial Hotel lawn in the evening in company with Morris Jones, and the atmosphere here needs a Voltaire or Swift or some equally great satirist to describe it. Every giggling ninny is a political expert these days and the Foreign Correspondents, I bet, are having the time of their lives. Woodrow Watt (The MP) asked me to lunch the other day. He insisted on talking politics and I insisted on talking about Freda Martin, so there was a stalemate...I had a rather nice surprise the day I arrived when a parcel insured for Rs. 200 suddenly turned up on my table bearing some Bombay address. Inside was an expensive looking watch and a letter from Ms. Jaddan Bai (the film star who wanted a poem of mine for her film) saying that she wanted only three lines from a ghazal and as she 'dare not offer money (the verses being invaluable of course) and can I kindly accept the present? There was nothing for it but to accept the present but I wish she had made it money instead

I hope my darlings are well – the few days in Simla have done a lot of good to my morale.

In 1947, when my mother, aunt and we the two daughters were in Srinagar, my father visited, and the following are a few excerpts from letters he wrote when he came back:

The Muslims have got their Pakistan, the Hindus and Sikhs their divided Punjab and Bengal, but I have yet to meet a person, Muslim, Hindu or Sikh who feels enthusiastic about the future. I can't think of any country whose people felt so miserable on the eve of their freedom and liberation. Both morally and politically the British could not have hoped for a greater triumph.

Another letter from the same times:

Darling,

Arrived here safely the day before yesterday. For once, safety has some meaning, for if I had been a Hindu or a Sikh I could never have gone

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beyond half way. The situation in the West, however, bears no comparison to what has happened and is happening in the East. It seemed so unreal and far away as long as I was in Srinagar, but it has all come back and is far far worse than anything I had feared and imagined. From early morning till late evening one hears nothing but tales of horror and even though one ties shut one's mind and one's ears tight against them there is no escape from the horror or tragedy that surrounds one from every side. To be alone and ponder over it all is an unbearable pain, and one has conceived a horror of being alone with one's thoughts. It is difficult to see a path or a light in the gloom but one has to maintain one's reason and one's courage and I shall certainly maintain it. I am glad you are not here although Lahore is peaceful for now; it resembles more a deserted wilderness than a populated city.

In 1958, Faiz embarked upon working on the film "Jago Hua Savera". Just an excerpt from Hotel Shadbagh:

In the last three days, there has been no sun, the trees are dark with rain and the wind feels heavy with nostalgic regrets. My window brings memories of Simla and Kashmir and in the midst of work and discussions there are sudden stabs of homesickness and thoughts of you and the urge to drop everything and return. I could work so much better if you were here, but it can't be helped so I'm trying to rush through it as speedily as I can.

Among the letters, I came across a letter written in Ziarat, in 1972. This was news to me; I didn't know of the trip. It's odd that he decided to take a trip to Ziarat. He writes:

Arrived in Quetta yesterday after quite a pleasant flight – it felt strange to arrive at a place unreceived, unannounced, unwelcomed, to hire one's own transport and go looking for a place to stay. I don't even remember when it happened to me last. There were no taxis at the airport so I had to take the PIA station wagon. The driver asked where I wanted to be dropped. I said I don't know, some hotel you know of. He took me to Lourdes, who were full up and then dropped me at the Grand where I spent the night.

It certainly looks grand from outside, marbles and what not but the rooms are cheerless. I made a round of the town in a rickshaw, what a dreary, one-eyed place it is quite unlike what I remember of it from the past – then I slept for a while and in the evening began investigations for a drink, Lourdes bar seemed to be the only place. I found one solitary drinker in the bar, sitting on a bar-stool, looking for all the world like Picasso's Absinthe Drinker.

I sat in a chair nearby and ordered a drink. I am not quite sure whether I liked or disliked the loneliness, perhaps both. Before I had finished my drink the bearer brought another, unasked. And then the absinthe drinker turned around and said "If I may have the honour sir". So I had to ask him to join me. He introduced himself as Bashir something an engineer. "I'm sorry I don't quite recognize" I said "how can you when we have never met. But I read poetry and I never thought I would ever be alone in the same room with such a great man" (ahem! etc.) Fortunately he was not a bore – in fact an intelligent and aware young man.

Telephone from Lourdes "Sir, since you are going to Ziarat in a taxi, would you mind taking two young ladies with you? They don't have an escort and feel nervous about going to Ziarat alone in a bus". I suppose a gentleman has no option so I had to say yes, imagining some glamorous American beauties. They turned out to be two PIA girls. One a Punjabi and not too bad looking, the other a Parsi from Karachi, both equally dumb.

I tried to make some bright conversation on the way and drew a blank. "No oil in these seeds" as they say in Urdu. So we all landed up in this hotel in Ziarat to find that we are the only 3 denizens in the place. A sore disappointment for them – but not for me.

But there is a nice young Parsi boy, Manager of the place here and I think he is keeping them amused. Had a nice nap, hot bath then a long walk by myself, absolutely weird, like walking through ghost land. Not a soul, not a sound, not even a bird. Almost terrifying, ideal for a honeymoon couple terribly in love. But I think ordinary mortals would find it a bit trying – as these two girls are doing, who are, as I write, desperately trying to get through to Karachi. I have a feeling that they are not going to last out for more than a day unless young Pervez our manager rises to the occasion. How he can rise to the both of them I don't know....

And the last bits of his correspondence are of course from his time in Beirut—he especially talked about the Israeli invasion, and he says that all the pain and glory of those days, the anguish of the people and their heroism, were almost too much for the

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heart and for poetry. After the 6th of June, when the Israeli invasion began, (and Mahmoud Darwish was always with him)— he writes from the Hotel Meridian in Damascus:

Dearest

Here with the letter I wrote to you one day before everything went dead – the airport, post office, telephone, lift, electricity, and finally even the water. There was no room in any hotel, so Moin kindly shifted me to a flat below his own (he had finally found his way back from Kuwait through Syria) as the occupant had shifted to East Beirut. So had our Ambassador and his family. I could have done the same, but the heart didn't agree to let the side down. So I decided to stick it through and what the poor Palestinian and Lebanese and the city went through beggars all description. And then the evening before yesterday, Azam Khan from the UN (you know with the poet wife) somehow traced me to Moin's flat and offered to take me along with his family to Damascus through Tripoli and Hams. So I asked Moin and he said "yes, I couldn't let you go alone, but probably they will let UN personnel through". Of course the heart missed a beat at every Phalangist checkpost but we made it in about 9 hours. And arriving in this posh hotel almost felt like having risen from the dead. First hot bath after ten days and the light all around. (although even in Beirut I never missed a night's sleep despite the guns and most of the time I nap in the afternoon) so all is well sweetheart...

*In 2010 when we started preparing the volume **Two Loves**, I also came across some of the other letters from 1959, during the time when he was detained in Ayub Khan's period. He had to write on regulation paper known as form 'B' and give details of all people he mentioned in the letter. There were 14 lines on the paper. We were allowed a visit every Thursday afternoon.*

I'm looking after myself and the days are slowly sliding into nothingness so keep your chins up. Even the miserable half-hour every fortnight is better than the complete absence of beloved faces, so I look forward to the Thursday that will bring its respite to the days of hopeful waiting.

Last year I made two journeys, not to Hyderabad but to Montgomery and Lyallpur Jails: Lyallpur (now Faisalabad) because that is where we first visited Faiz before his indictment and where he had been kept in solitary confinement. Having been told he was tortured, Alys was fearful of how he had fared. I had a recollection of those first moments of seeing him through the window of the Superintendent office, walking towards us. My

mother's back was towards the window, when I told her he looked his old self, smiling and smoking his perennial cigarette, she relaxed. The cell I could not trace, and could only conjecture where he may have spent those three months.

The cell in Montgomery (or Sahiwal,) was a different story. Here too, my sister and I had been allowed a special visit. Not only is the cell there, but has a plaque on the door, which says "Kamra-e Faiz Ahmed Faiz". The garden that he planted, that he laid out with grass, shrubs, trees and flowers, is in place, fresh as the day I saw it at age 12. There were roses blooming in the August of 2010 – in memory of and tribute to Faiz.

