

## Found in Translation: Revisiting the experience of Translating Faiz for Merchant-Ivory's *In Custody*

By Shahrukh Husain

*"To recite a verse, you need power, resonance, the explosion of a cannon. There's a spark or two still left in Urdu."* Nur, *In Custody* (quoted from film subtitle)

It was an odd experience watching *In Custody* eighteen years after it was premiered at the London Film Festival in 1993. The decision to make this film was unique and crazy. Anita Desai's Booker-nominated novel of the same title follows the nightmarish journey of a Hindi lecturer, Deven (Om Puri), in the small town of Mirpur whose secret passion for Urdu ("the right to left language") is suddenly exposed when a roguish magazine editor of an Urdu magazine commissions an interview with Nur Shahjahanabadi (Shashi Kapoor). Nur is the pivotal character of the narrative, once hailed as the 'poet of the age', though now he is all but forgotten, having fallen into decadent ways, impoverished, sick and unproductive. Perhaps he has given up on his art, believing that "*if Urdu is no more, of what significance is its poetry? It is dead, finished. You see its corpse lying here, waiting to be disposed of.*" Nur, *In Custody* (quoted from film subtitle).

Deven is charged with recording any new work by the poet for his magazine and so begins a nightmarish journey in which the lecturer disgraces himself at his university, embarrasses his supporters and alienates even his long-suffering wife. Nur, constantly surrounded by clamour and domestic dissension, demeans and exploits him, always hinting at the possibility of letting him see his new verse.

Steaming with passion for Urdu and its poetry, Desai's taut, scant prose emphasises by striking contrast the mellifluous, elaborate timbre of Urdu to those familiar with the language. Desai is not an Urdu speaker though she has had some exposure to it. She is multilingual, speaking a couple of Indian languages including Hindi, as well as English and German. Ismail Merchant on the other hand did speak Urdu and though Urdu is not, traditionally, the first language of his community, he was passionate about it. This is not unusual. Hordes of South

Asians love Urdu poetry and despite lacking a true understanding of it, they are enticed by its familiar lyrical phrases and evocative romantic images which conjure up the profound universals of undying love, pain, sacrifice and death, the last three often resulting from the first. Anita Desai had always imagined the story of *In Custody* in Urdu, with its crumbling edifices and declining standards embodied in the once great talent of Nur. Ismail Merchant believed this was the story of the death of a language. He spoke, when describing the narrative theme, of ‘the death of Urdu culture’, a phrase which in itself evokes the reality of a way of life underpinned by customs, literature and a language that appeared in many ways to interact with modes of behaviour, etiquette and morals. His production is tinged with the nostalgic filmic genre of the Muslim Socials in Indian Cinema. The Muslim Socials, evolved in the Thirties, depicted a lavish lifestyle where poetry was as much a part of good breeding as classical singing or dancing in other Indian societies such as Bengal or South India, or indeed, further afield in Victorian and Edwardian England and Ireland.<sup>1</sup> The prodigious success of these movies, which visited all the sacred shrines of Urdu – or Indian-Muslim - culture from literary reference to the best known religious ritual, namaz, visits to dargahs and qavvali singing to über-polite manners, exotic costumes and what goes on behind the purdah, testified to the allure of this sometimes mysterious, closed yet impactful, set of communities. It also appealed to the Muslims themselves who enjoyed representations of what they regarded as the best aspects of themselves as well as humorous depictions of the quirky extremes to which they took politeness and good manners. The filmic adaptation of *In Custody* in Urdu was to be an art house Muslim Social from the western world, updated to a marginally more socially interactive narrative with a theme-shift from romantic love, self-sacrifice and death to one in which the protagonist’s Beloved is an art-form symbolised by Nur, rather than a woman or divinity. I always believed the Muslim Social was a homage to the great death-bride complex of the Asian subcontinent so deftly appropriated by Sufi writers. *In Custody*, could be said to be a bridge between the traditional Muslim Social and the modern one in which the decay of an elitist culture gives way to a more realistic genre in which economic and changing social aspirations are uppermost, a trend illustrated in films such as *Dastak* (1973) and *Bazaar* (1982).

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<sup>1</sup> The Muslim Socials gained massive popularity which peaked with Mahboob Khan’s 1946 movie *Najma*, a love tragedy, creating a model for subsequent productions. Some of the most popular ones include *Barsaat ki Raat* (a rainy night) 1960, prod. P.L. Santoshi, prod. R. Chandra; *Chaudhvin ka Chand* (The mid-cycle moon) 1960 dir. Mohammad Sadiq, Producer: Guru Dutt; *Mere Mehboob* (My Beloved) 1963 dir. Harnam Singh Rawail; producer: H.S. Rawail.

Anita adapted the book and wrote the script in English and it was decided the film should be shot in Urdu with Ismail directing. Ismail set about looking for a translator and my brother Aamer Hussein told him I was researching the works of Faiz, Firaq Gorakhpuri (1896-1982), Josh Malihabadi (1894-1982) and Jigar Muradabadi (1890-1960). I joined the team to translate the script and to select a range of suitable poems to represent the work of Nur Shahjahanabadi. Like the others, I am not monolingual. Urdu is my mother tongue; I grew up in Karachi, speaking it perhaps more fluently than others of my age and social background. Urdu was the national language of Pakistan but did not belong to any of its regions reflecting the position of English under the Raj. In a freshly post-Partition Pakistan good schools taught, at most, two hours of Urdu against ten of English language and literature. Urdu had the status of a 'second language' even after the syllabus was upgraded in the mid-Sixties to introduce an anthology of classical poetry and prose to supplement the two-way translation of short passages and essays.

From the beginning, Anita, Ismail and I shared an excitement and a belief in the success of the film despite its bizarre genesis and trajectory. Anita adapted it from her English novel into an English script, which I translated into Urdu and then back into English for the subtitles. Likewise, the poems, chosen for their quality and the popularity of the poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz among Urdu poetry lovers in Pakistan, and to a significant extent in India, were translated into English for the subtitles.

After the script was translated, I presented Ismail with poems by a number of poets. We had visualised Nur as a Josh-like character, fond of his drink and surrounded by sycophants but as the session progressed we seemed to focus more and more on the work of Faiz, a poet anomalous among Urdu writers because, like the three of us, he was perfectly bi-lingual in Urdu and English, held a Masters in English Literature as well as a degree in Persian and Arabic. His wife, Alys, was an English woman who spoke fluent Urdu. The multi-lingual theme continued in the film's core creative tribe. (This worked well in a scene where Nur wanders off into a reverie about English poets and quotes a line or two from Keats' "Ode to the Nightingale", which my husband Christopher Shackle and I had a great deal of fun transcreating into Urdu verse!).<sup>2</sup> I was delighted that my two favourite choices of poem book-ended the film. They were "aaj ek harf ko

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<sup>2</sup> Christopher speaks English, Urdu, Panjabi and, in addition to fluency in Greek and Latin, has a working knowledge of several other European and South Asian languages as well as Persian, Arabic and Turkish.

phir dhoondta phirta hai khayal” (Today, once more, thought wanders in search of a word) appropriate for a poet whose Muse had abandoned him, and “aaj bazaar me pabajaulan chalo” (walk in the bazaar with feet in chains) to be used at Nur’s funeral procession.

In order to write this piece, I revisited the movie after nearly two decades to refresh my memory about the circumstances under which some of the translations (or subtitles) came to be as they were. All were relatively close to the original in the draft translations, recording the learning curve, the process of discovery and compromise that marked the part of this movie which was, for a brief while, in my custody – the translation.

As the DVD began, my mind flashed back to my first viewing of the movie. The memory of slipping into my seat in a New York auditorium beside Ismail Merchant, Anita Desai and Ruth Praver Jhabvala along with the rest of the Merchant-Ivory team is still vivid. With characteristic kindness Ruth leant over and told Anita and me: “Don’t be shocked. It’s just a rough-cut. Nothing like the movie will be.” Then the lights went out and the screen was dominated by the magnificent image of a hand with a quill writing the Urdu script. The auditorium was filled with Shashi Kapoor’s voice.

*Aj ek harf ko phir dhundta phirta hai khayal  
Madh bhara harf koi, zehr bhara harf koi  
Dilnashin harf koi, qehr bhara harf koi  
Harf-e-ulfat koi dildar-e-nazar ho jaise  
Jis se milti hai nazar bosa-e-lab ki surat  
Itna roshan ke sar-e-mauja-e-zar ho jaise  
Sohbat-e-yar men aghaz-e-tarab ki surat  
Harf-e-nafrat koi shamsher-e-ghazab ho jaise  
Ta abad shehr-e-sitam jis se tabah ho jaen*

Sunil Wadekar’s singing overlapped with Kapoor’s voiceover as the screen was filled with a succession of images representing Indian Muslim interests. Zakir Hussain’s composition was restrained and in keeping with the ambience of the film. Now I had to meet the same challenge.

Back in London, I sat down with trepidation to translate one of my favourites from Faiz’s entire body of work. I reminded myself that I had never been an accomplished translator and that subtitles had to be read swiftly by the audience,

typically, three seconds for a single line, six for a double. My priority would be to ensure the translation supplemented the context of the scene.

My experience of translating was unconventional, to say the least. I began compulsively translating poems from Urdu into English from the age of twelve, ghazals and nazms, classics by greats like Ghalib and Mir alongside modern poets who wrote lyrics for the cinema. Several of Faiz's poems had been used in movies and more frequently, sung by well-known vocalists such as Nurjehan, Malika Pukhraj and later Mehdi Hassan ("Mujh se pehli si muhabbat mere mahbub na mang" (do not ask, Beloved, for the love that was), "gulon me rang bhare bad-e-naubahar chale" (filling roses with colour, the breeze of early spring goes by), "ae roshniyon ke shehr" (Oh city of lights), "tum mere pas raho" (stay by me) and many others in private sittings). Often, they were recited *teht-ul lafz* at random social gatherings and afterwards I feverishly searched the collections on the bookshelves at home for the poems. I believe translation was my way of trying to make a deeper connection with the meanings that lay beneath words that held so much appeal. Placing them squarely in the language I knew best would make them clearer. In fact, the process delivered a different outcome. Words and phrases, internal rhyme schemes and beautiful imagery so mesmerised me that I ended up with paragraphs instead of couplets or stanzas. When I read them back, I was frustrated by the inadequacy of my effort and began all over again. I had notebooks filled with page after page of scored out phrases, over-written, scrapped and rewritten from scratch. I never found a professional translation which I felt entirely conveyed the compass of the original. I latched on to every existing translation I could find but always ended up disappointed. I swore never to translate Urdu poetry into English except for myself. Years later, the translations in my academic work, though more concise, were as disappointing as the rest though the footnote alleviated some of my frustration. I refused offers to translate for literary editions, even leaving my share of verse in the small book, *Urdu Literature*, (Third World Foundation, 1985) to my fellow authors David Matthews and Christopher Shackle. Ironically, most readers gave me credit for those translations because I was the only native speaker of the three. It was only when I was asked as a student to translate lyrics to accompany music cassettes that I was finally persuaded by the hefty fee to take an assignment which demanded an involvement with a readership. Fortunately the often-inferior selection of ghazals and nazms helped me to tighten my brief; to provide literal, workmanlike translations which were far from lyrical. I was beginning to understand that each compacted line of poetry carries too much information to convey adequately into another language, that the process demands ruthless choices about stripping down the verse to certain basics prioritised according to

the translator and the target audience. One translator may choose to replicate the rhyme scheme and rhythm while another may place greater importance on underlying references or quirkiness. I was also aware now of my target audience. They were either western listeners who bought the albums for their classical music content with poems thrown in for light variation, or South Asian fans of top rate singers, in thrall to the listening experience, who understood something of the verses but wanted to understand more. Their interest, too, was primarily in the musical experience, and so simple, accurate translations would be adequate. The experience reminded me of the complex relationship between English and Urdu in South Asia where whole sections of social and regional groups feel a massive attraction to both languages but nobody quite belongs to either of them.

An individual's response to a poem is a complex affair, far beyond literary appreciation of prosody, content or words. Externally, it is enriched by social and political contexts and reference, and internally by personal elements, which involve the inclusion of the Self: experience, association, perception. The initial reaction is usually one of these two polarities, either emotional appeal or literary quality. It is only close analysis that prompts the peeling back of layer upon layer of substance. This is particularly true of Pakistanis reading Faiz whose work is rich with literary references from several languages and political connotations derived from his own activism and beliefs (such as "A jao Afrika" (Come, Africa), "Falastin ke liye" – For Palestine).

I began to read existing translations, Arberry, Nicholson and a host of others but they did not appeal. They were wordy, arcane and dry, useful as cribs but no more. Translations by mother tongue speakers on the other hand were even wordier, florid in an attempt to approximate Urdu imagery and expression but sacrificing the exquisite sounds and cadences of the language to an orgy of 'feeling' words and extravagant adjectives. There was something of this tendency in my own teenage scrawls, 'thous' and 'thees' and sub-Fitzgerald exuberance mixed with the influence of 17-19<sup>th</sup> century English poetry and literature on our school curriculum. It never occurred to me until years later that there was sometimes a colloquial quality or a flippant tone implicit in those originals that was ignored and submerged with an excess of English words. The UNESCO series (Allen & Unwin) 1971 translations arrived in the Seventies and there was a buzz around them in India and Pakistan. The first, I think, was Victor Kiernan's translation of Faiz's work. He had achieved a flow and ease which made the poems accessible, but there was still something indefinable missing – thought searching for a word.

The bilingual speaker's metalingual relationship with the lines, a special, perhaps

unique understanding, a communication between a line of poetry and an individual, was lacking. All of these influences came strongly back into play when I began the task of translating the poems chosen for *In Custody*.

I fortified myself with Faiz's pragmatic response to the translations of a young American poet in the early Eighties. I had asked his opinion once about a translation of his famous poem "rang hai dil ka mere" (the colour of my heart). The opening lines seemed to me a travesty of the original. His response was simple and typically modest, "What I wrote, she translated." It made me reflect more deeply. He was right. The translation of the words was entirely true to the original, so why did it sound and feel so flat? The words in Urdu were beautiful, "asman hadd-e-nazar, rahguzar, rahguzar, shisha-e-mai, shisha-e-mai". (The sky, the vision's limit, the path, the path, the wine glass, the wine glass)

It struck me that the translator's job is complicated by yet another element, the aural effect of words and their positioning, triggers a complex of associations and expectations. The subjective reception of the poetic discourse of Urdu is often at odds with English, it may translate accurately into English but loses its lyrical or poetic quality, sound and rhythm, all of which are important elements in the presentation of a poetic line. Faiz had sketched a pen and ink impression of a horizon, a road, a bottle of wine. But to many of his admirers, the words lifted from the language of his choice, drenched in his sensibility, redolent with the resonances of his idiom and thought, had been stripped of their meta-discourse. Besides, the rhythmic repetitions, the wave upon wave of rhyming phrases, the consistent pace interspersing the phrases, created music which is lost in another language.

My task now, was to keep Faiz's response firmly in my mind. "*What I wrote, she translated.*" I wanted the statement to liberate me from the obligation to convey the richness. I decided that would be my starting point. I put myself firmly in Faiz's custody as I began.

I whipped through a literal translation in the workmanlike mode I had become used to, re-translated, cut back, and tweaked. When I could do no more, I edited again for accuracy and literals and sent it to Ismail. He showed them to the late Ruth Praver Jhabvala who was Polish and married to an Indian, bilingual in Gujarati and English. Ruth had acquired knowledge of Indianness and some familiarity with its literature and poetry but I suspect she approached the translations from the point of view of the English-speaking reader. She worked with a gentle touch and some of her tweaking improved the draft.

Overall, the translation worked because the poem expresses with remarkable clarity the conflict and power of the creative process in action, of the poet seeking inspiration and precision to express an array of thoughts and feelings. It falls into a category of poems familiar to Faiz aficionados, the impetus of which has often been debated and questioned, that is, the juxtaposition of stark and violent images of social deprivation with romance and lyricism (“Mujh se pehli si muhabbat mere mahbub na mang”, “raqib se” (to the rival), “do ishq” (two loves), “mauzu’-e-sukhan” (poetry’s substance). “Aaj ek harf” is a later poem in which the poet’s reflection on the uses and themes of his art achieves a subtler register. Earlier poems in this category contained a schism between one section and the next, beginning with the poet’s remit to write of truth, romance and beauty, which would then ruthlessly metamorphose into descriptions of harsh and bloody violations of humanity. “Aaj ek harf” begins with the poet’s search for inspiration, which includes both aspects of the above. Immediately after stating the intent of the search, Faiz posits a series of oppositions demonstrating the depth and reach of his ambition and the power of words to express all. Here is the translation that appears in the subtitles with line-breaks altered:

*My mind is groping for a word*  
*A word as sweet as seduction*  
*And bitter as poison*  
*A word that bewitches*  
*But is full of rage*  
***A word as brimming with passion as the gaze between two lovers***  
***As soft as a kiss***  
***A word shining like a sea of gold***  
*A tune struck up in a lover’s arms*

I struggled minimally with the whole, and a little more with the highlighted lines; the original was taut, devoid of adjectives and consistently structured. The translation contained extraneous words, which detracted from the clean, regular phrasing of the original. I was overruled in the name of “readability quotient” and accepted it as part of the collaborative process which I was fast learning was a crucial part of filmmaking. I would however have preferred my original translation below.

*A honeyed word, a venom-filled word*  
*An alluring word, a rage-filled word*  
  
*A loving word, like the Beloved (herself)*



*Whose gaze is met like a kiss on the lips  
Luminous as a gold-tipped wave*

*A hate-filled word like a sword of fury  
Which would destroy forever the cities of oppression*

The last two lines pick up on earlier hints at the atrocities which engage the poet's search as much as the romance. I noticed when I went to the premiere that they never made the subtitles though they remained on the voiceover.

The words were a perfect fit with the circumstances of Nur Shahjahandabadi, and offered the audience a sense of his concerns which went beyond the drinking, scrounging ways into which he had fallen, to deeper preoccupations with the human situation. No new poems by him had appeared for a while, apparently words had abandoned him. The poem also resonated powerfully with me as a writer. And in that moment, they reminded me that living in London, I too in some sense was in search of a word from the language that was a seminal part of my Self. I felt I had a responsibility to convey the full impact of its significance in this context to the wider audience the film would reach, those who had experience of it and those who did not.

I was grateful that I was able to be pragmatic about the opening poem and this was more or less true of the remaining poems. I had few quibbles with "aaj bazaar men pabajaulan chalo", which so aptly fitted the funeral procession of Nur. Faiz had written of an incident where he was spotted as he was transported to the dentist from the prison at Lahore Fort, bound in chains in a police vehicle. Someone in the crowd recognised him as he was driven through the town centre and soon a procession formed behind the jeep. It inspired the poem which to date has been sung by a number of the best Pakistani singers. The procession in the movie echoed the original incident.

*Aaj bazaar men pa-bajaulan chalo  
Chashm-e-nam, jan-e-shorida kafi nahin  
Tohmat-e-ishq poshida kafi nahin*

*Dast-afshan chalo, mast-o-raqsan chalo  
Khak barsar chalo, khun-bab-daman chalo  
Rah takta hai sab shehr-e-janan chalo*

*Hakim-e-shehr bi majma-e-aam bhi*

*Teer-e-ilzam bhi, sang-e-dushnam bhi  
Subh-e-nashad bhi, roz-e-nakaam bhi*

*Inka damsaaaz apne siva kaun hai  
Shehr-e-janan men ab basifa jaun hai  
Dast-e-qatil ke shayan raha jaun hai*

*Rakht-e-dil bandh lo, dilfigaro, chalo  
Ab hameen qatl ho aaen yaro, chalo!*

*Walk through the bazaar today with feet in chains  
Tears of rage, a lamenting being are not enough*

*With arms flung out in a dance of ecstasy  
With ashes on your head and a bloodstained cloak*

***Walk past the gaping crowds of the great and the small  
Past slings and arrows of slander  
Past the unhappy dawn and the oppressed day***

*In who can they confide but me?  
**I alone know who is sincere among lovers  
And who deserves to die***

*Prepare yourselves all of you with aching hearts  
Come friends let's go again towards our death*

I had a few differences with the final version as it appeared. The first highlighted line which was slightly inaccurate “rah takna” suggests anticipation, awaiting, great and small was from a separate line where the original specified the town noble and the common crowd – neither merited a battle but I did feel uneasy about the next lines which are closer to:

*Who in this city of lovers remains untainted?  
Who remains worthy of the executioner's hand?*

The meaning seemed to be subverted. These lines mattered because they signified the importance of trust and loyalty in a society where people had to watch their words and deeds. Indeed, the poet was serving a sentence for a political crime he always denied. But by this stage I was constantly conscious of the fleeting nature

of the subtitle, balancing the truth of the poem against its relevance to the movie and I questioned if anyone would buy the video and re-run it to examine the translation. How much would anyone absorb much less retain of the verses? I brushed aside my difficulties along with concerns about failing to convey the significance of Faiz's use of the collective "we" – his identification with the populace in whom he longed to develop social consciousness, the desire to strive on, the right to hope. This act of joining in with those whom he attempts to inspire, strikes a distinct contrast to the verse of Iqbal, Pakistan's national poet who inspired from a distance. Faiz carried out his own injunctions, as the context of *pabajaulan* demonstrates. The poems were now de-contextualised as they would be to any new reader uninformed about a unified corpus set against the lifelong social ideals, politics and principles of the poet. None of this was remotely possible in this project. I continually reminded myself I was not writing about Faiz's political verse or his personality as a poet but translating his poems for Nur, a fictional character. Therefore, none of the above concerns was relevant. But I realised in the course of working on the film, from poetry selection to final cut, that I had refracted Faiz's lines through the prism of Nur's narrative told in giant images where words spoken in Urdu were reinforced in large English captions. As I became immersed in the continual interplay of two languages, prose and poetry, high language and colloquialism, the constant teasing and tweaking in an attempt to balance accuracy, relevance and medium, Nur coalesced into another personality, one much closer to Faiz. I reverted to my default position – pragmatism. The job had been appropriately done. Ismail and Anita were happy with it.

Then I saw the translation of a verse in the last quarter of the film. It was the last verse of a ghazal popularised by Iqbal Bano. Its opening lines are: "na ganva navak-e-nimkash, dil-e-reza reza ganva diya / jo bache hain sang samet lo, tan-e-dagh dagh luta diya" (don't waste your arrow-like glance, I have already given up my shattered heart/gather up these unused stones, have (already) relinquished my scarred body).

The *bayt* fits that moment in the quest when Deven, the beleaguered protagonist of the movie, has suffered every possible failure and humiliation from Nur, his followers and his wives. He is on the verge of losing his job, has been discredited before his editor and even his long-suffering wife is angry with him. Then out of the blue, he receives a parcel of Nur's new poems and a letter authorising him to publish them. Deven rushes to share his triumph with a well-placed man who has gone to some trouble to get him a grant for the project. The man is not interested as he stands watching his ancestral mansion being demolished and fantasising

about the malls and flats that will replace it. In extreme close-up, Deven quotes a verse of his idol as he holds the now handsomely bound manuscript. He has risen from symbolic death to victory and will achieve the same for Nur and Urdu. It is a moment when everything the unlikely hero wanted from this consuming passion-project has turned to gold. The *bayt* is:

*Jo ruke to koh-e-garan the ham, jo chale to jan se guzar gae  
Rah-e-yar ham ne qadam qadam tujhe yadgar bana diya*

My translation read:

*When I stopped, I was a mountain, when I moved, I transcended life  
Path of my Beloved, I made every step of you a milestone*

The version Ismail returned to me was:

*Once I was steady as a mountain but now I leave life behind  
And walk along you, O pathway to the great Lover, building a shrine to him at  
every step*

My first reaction was one of shock. There was no concept in the Urdu ghazal of the Great Lover. Even Faiz's tolerant and down-to-earth attitude to translations of his own work, did not comfort me. This ghazal is characterised by a tone of almost exuberant defiance, a sense of triumph which reminded me of the image of a Muslim warrior striding off to war with a spring in his step and a shroud tied to his head. The achievements in each verse of the ghazal are spirited and surprising. In the particular *bayt* under discussion the oppositions of stability and movement are followed by the transformation of transience into permanence. The verse is the culmination of the poem's theme of triumph in death. It resonates with the exploitative, derelict wreck of Deven's idol, Nur, incredibly redeeming himself and his art by transforming his premonition of death into the resurrection of his fame. It is also true for Deven who plunged into the project without skill, knowledge or sense of self-preservation but who has suddenly and unexpectedly been rewarded. The revised rendering of the lines didn't work. I realise, looking back, that I had chosen this couplet to represent not merely a seminal narrative moment in the film but the culmination of the building internal narrative of the whole of Faiz's poem. Without the first, the second was also ineffectual. But I was the only one who felt it.

As I looked at the scene after nearly two decades, I could not remember if I

defended my view strongly enough against its failure to take account of the wilful, proud spirit that permeated the rest of the ghazal. I am responsible for it, I knew the verse and its context, no one else on the team did. I can only imagine that I was overwhelmed by the collaborative nature of filmmaking. I had gone from fervently translating for myself, to providing literal translations accessible to the lowest common denominator in the potential audience and finally to an art house film where I had to engage with a directorial team, most of whom were new to Urdu and its poetry, sometimes to the detriment of the narrative and poetic text.

When I watched the DVD, I felt what I can only describe as a sense of failure. Faiz wrote modern poetry and could incorporate any concept he chose to – and did, of course – but with finesse and consistency. He had told me many a time, his roots were firmly embedded in his vast knowledge of Arabic and Persian poetry and he loved and admired Ghalib. He had been content to stay, quite naturally and organically, within the tradition of an elusive Beloved. Even in his apocalyptic poems such as “ham dekhenge” (we’ll see) his choice of tone and the subversion of prevailing beliefs through traditional religious discourse remain consistent. The task I had accepted in the spirit of pragmatism had become a matter not merely of authenticity but of integrity as well. I have a vague memory of someone pointing out to me that this was a single and isolated verse among the many poems used in the film. All these years later, I see that though the subtitle utterly fails to reflect the resonance of the *bayt* with that climactic moment in the narrative, I also realise that, however perfectly rendered, it could never have conveyed all that I so desperately wanted from it. What I wanted was simply not achievable. The translation of a single couplet cannot be expected to showcase the whole of the poetic narrative and the reader’s unique participation in it. “Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany.” (James Joyce 1944: Chapter XXV).<sup>3</sup> That radiance is the investment of the reader’s soul or Self. It is not implicit in the words but comes from the associations, interpretations and unique participation of the reader in the text. Antonin Artaud and other theatre gurus assert that the script is a “pretext” which only turns into the full text after the interaction of actor and audience.<sup>4</sup> The poem, too, is a preliminary text germinated by the reader’s cathexis. What I had in effect been attempting while translating all those verses as a teenager, was to

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<sup>3</sup> James Joyce's *Stephen Hero*, edited by Theodore Spencer (New York: New Directions Press, 1944) <http://theliterarylink.com/joyce.html> (Accessed 17 May 2012)

<sup>4</sup> Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, New York: Grove Press, 1958. pp.53, 63.

translate the Self – myself, by including my immersion in the text and what it had become for me. It was not achievable. I found in translating for cinema that the passion which had turned to pragmatism over the years had returned, perhaps because cinema is both an overt and a profound medium of communication and demands a deeper examination of one’s own psyche and that of the recipient if a true rapport is to be established. Yet the medium imposes inflexible constraints of time while requiring sophistication disseminated in simple terms. Even in an art house film with subtitles and slightly more leisurely dialogues, this proved the nemesis of my pragmatism, reviving the conflict of my nascent efforts. My limitations in the skill and, even more, the art of translating Urdu poetry into English which I had once accepted, now made me feel I was selling out. The only way I could complete the job without feeling a thorough failure was to manage my own expectations by lowering them. Working on *In Custody* made me confront this mindset and analyse it. I was my own analyst, observing my practice and my objectives and assessing their validity and viability in a range of contexts. This, I believe, is a position in which all serious translators find themselves at some stage or other.

Pragmatism was, to quote from *pabajaulan* “not enough” (*kafi nahin*). I had discovered that Faiz and his work formed part of my thinking and my notions about the writer’s responsibility and authenticity. It was now clear to me that growing up, hearing the poems as they were published, knowing the poet’s political commitment, picking up, years after the event on the continuing admiration around Faiz’s imprisonment and solitary confinement for his alleged part in the Rawalpindi Conspiracy of 1951, all molded my own humanitarian convictions. These remain deeply implanted. Faiz’s verses were not merely literary works, they were part of the way I looked at the world, at life. I owed him a debt of gratitude and I was surprised to discover how seriously I took this at a deep subconscious level. I loved the experience of working on *In Custody*, with all its exciting lessons, creative challenges and frustrations. It was life changing and the discoveries I mention above attest to this. But I am relieved that, given its maverick bilingual genesis, it was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I wonder if the work of a less known or loved poet might have been easier to translate. I will never know because as a translator of Urdu verse into English, I am now firmly retired.