

SOAS Students Forum on Faiz Ahmed Faiz

Edited by Samreen Kazmi

(Contributors: Bilal Gilani, Urooj Chandani, Samreen Kazmi, Chinmay Sharma)

How is Faiz understood today by a new generation of global university students? Our attempt, in this set of thought-pieces, has been to go beyond the haloed academic domains of Pakistani literature, culture or politics. Such an attempt is only a fitting tribute to such a poet —one whose word seems to effortlessly sail the finest interstices between the personal and the political, the aesthetic and the philosophic.

How do we, whose lives have been touched by Faiz in some close or distant way, *feel* about Faiz? What does his life, or his work, or even his legacy, do for us? What do we or don't we understand about him, coming as we do from across a generation divide after him?

The four pieces that follow are diverse parts of this conversation. In autobiographical mode, Bilal Gilani traces Faiz through different phases of growing up. Urooj Chandani, someone who was involved in the Lawyers' Movement in Pakistan, veers markedly off the political track to reflect on the budding of words, the power of subjective image, and the unsaid. Samreen Kazmi's contribution is excerpted from a longer essay¹, suggesting that Faiz's poetry opens up the borders of sympathy and familiarity, through a poetics of suffering rather than one of allegiance. And perhaps to an opposite effect, Chinmay Sharma's opinion-piece hinges on alienation for those encountering Faiz in India today.

Diverse in scope, theme, and genre, these contributions are in conversation with each other in more than one way, and thus I present them as a constellation: Ultimately, it is the reader who contributes, taking away from them what she will.

¹ Kazmi, Samreen. "The Rebel's Survival: Universality of Faiz's Verse" (unpublished, 2012).

“Do Ishq”

(By Bilal Gilani)

Faiz Ahmed Faiz's name strikes many chords in the deep recesses of my mind, from where feared pains and passionate dreams are dim and shadowy glimpses: a lantern by the railway station, smoke by the lakeside hut, water in the oasis. Through my formative years, Faiz’s poetry has stirred, kindled and fanned nascent emotions into passions more blazingly felt and more fully understood. It has been both torch-igniter and torch-bearer.

*Rang pairahan ka, khushboo zulf lehrane kaa naam
Mousam-e-gul hai tumhare baam par aane ka naam
(Colour is of dress, fragrance is of flowing tress, a mere name.
The Season of flowers is a name for your coming to the window²)*

Through my teenage years, Faiz Sahib taught me what it is to be in love. His was a kind of drunkenness that makes one realise that the world is full of infinite love, that love is like seasons, that autumn and spring mix to make the symphony of life. His fearlessness taught me to be bold and experience the colours of the spring this world is always eager to offer.

*Aur bhi gham hain zamaane men mohabbat ke sivaa
Raahatein aur bhi hain vasl ki raahat ke sivaa
(Many other woes in the world besides love,
many other comforts besides our togetherness...³)*

Having grown up to young adulthood in the turmoil-ridden Pakistan of the Musharraf-era (2001-2008), I found in Faiz a different inspiration, a persona who could be my Great Leader instead of the tenth President of Pakistan. His poetry transported me from solitary experience to the sense of being united alongside hundreds of thousands of my fellow countrymen, in the same troubles and the same struggles. Not only me but many youth like myself felt that we had all had enough and the time for revolution had come. During the “Lawyers’ Movement” (2007-2009), Faiz’s poetry enthused us to dream for the people of our land—

² Faiz, *Nuskha-hai Wafa* (Lahore: Karvaan, 2002) 151. Trans. Samreen Kazmi.

³ Faiz, “Mujh se Pehli Si Muhabbat Mere Mehboob Na Maang”, in *Nuskha-hai Wafa*, 61. Transl. Agha Shahid Ali.

http://pdf.faicentenary.org/downloads/022_do_not_ask_by_gha_shahid_ali.pdf, Accessed 3 August.

songs and slogans from his works drove the movement, and guided us to channel our passions for constructive ends.

*Abhi giraani-e-shab mein kami nahin aayi
Najaat-e deeda-o dil ki ghari nahin aayi
Chale chalo, ke wo manzil abhi nahin aayi
(Night's heaviness is unlesened still, the hour
Of mind and spirit's ransom has not struck;
Let us go on, our goal is not reached yet.⁴)*

It is also to Faiz that I owe my understanding of the fleetingness and artificiality of the triumph against Pakistan's military regime. A successful lawyers' movement was but one small step in a very long and tedious journey. If it was "ishq" for our people, a collective love for the homeland of our dreams, which was the motor for the movement, then Faiz's lingering verse reminds us to keep going with *that* aim in sight.

As I take account of what Faiz has enabled me as a person to feel, think, and accomplish, I cannot help but say I have much farther to go. Indeed, I feel I haven't done much. The consciousness that is "Faiz" still continues to spread through me, to nudge my dreams into action. In taking account, I try to ward off the smugness of less poetic struggles, and dare to hope for more: If one day I were to do something for the downtrodden of Pakistan it would probably have a lot to do with Faiz— the igniter and the torch-bearer of revolutionary change.

Saying and Not Saying

(By Urooj Chandani)

As I stood there, the fresh snow fell on the pavement in front of me, on the grass patch and the railing: the beauty restored in the heavens seemed waiting to be unleashed, to be unshackled before engulfing everyone and everything in its magnificent embrace.

Asked by a friend to write about Faiz, and about what his writing and his struggle meant to me, I had initially planned to write about how so many of his poems had inspired us during the time of student uprising against President Musharraf's regime, how his memory and verse gelled together our hopes and efforts for a so-called democracy in Pakistan— but the silence of that night, the innocence of that snow took me to a different place, of personal memories.

Hum-sukhan hon gay jo hum dono to har baat ke beech

⁴ Faiz, "Subh-e Azadi", in *Nuskha-hai Wafa*, 118. Trans. Victor Kiernan.

*ankahi baat ka mohoom sa purdah ho ga
gard-e ayyaam ki tehreer ko dhone ke liyay
tum se goya hon damm-e deed jo meri palkein
tum jo chaho to suno, aur jo naa chaho na suno
(When we both speak, between each exchange there
will be the diaphanous veil of the unsaid.
In washing the writing of the sands of days,
if my eyelashes speak at the instance of sight,
if you want, listen; And if you don't want, don't listen.⁵)*

The liberating descent of the snow's white purity, its embrace, was the place where I had once rote-learned verses from Faiz's poetry — they had managed to capture the wholeness of my longing, my suffering, so simply and beautifully in words that I just couldn't find any other substitute. I had leaned on those verses for strength, for my own self-expression.

*aur jo harf kerein mujh se gurezaan aankhein
tum jo chaho to kaho, aur jo na chaho na kaho
(And if words shield their eyes from mine
If you want, speak; And if you don't want, don't speak.)*

I thought of that battle of words with silence. As I repeated the pieces of that poem to myself, the turns of phrase which I could still recall vividly were loaded with the feelings they had once evoked. I was carried to the finer creases of my long-shelved memories: how much I longed for *him* at that time, what his one word of agreement to my humble request would have meant to me... But the request was never made and my longing was never revealed. It just rested in my heart as it still rests to this day, as the two lines from Faiz still resound in my head:

*un sai kehnaai jo gaye thai Faiz, jaa sadqeh kyai
unkahi si reh gayee wo baat sab baaton kai baad
(Faiz, what you'd gone to say, ready to offer everything, even your life –
those healing words remained unspoken after all else had been said.⁶)*

⁵ Faiz, "Koi Aashiq kisi mehbooba se", in *Nuskha-hai Wafa* 598-9. Trans. Samreen Kazmi

⁶ Faiz, "On Return From Dhaka", in *Nuskha-hai Wafa* 528. Trans. Agha Shahid Ali.

A Brotherhood of Suffering

(By Samreen Kazmi)

“as a writer or artist, even though I run no state and command no power, I am entitled to feel that I am my brother’s keeper and my brother is the whole of mankind... But out of this vast brotherhood, the nearest to me and the dearest are the insulted and the humiliated, the homeless and the disinherited, the poor, the hungry and the sick at heart. And this is the relevance to me of Palestine, of South Africa, of Namibia, of Chile, of my own people and people like mine.”⁷

What exactly did Faiz mean by saying “my own people and people like mine”? While his view on partition and subsequent disappointment with the state of Pakistan’s affairs has been widely discussed— his poems “Subh-e azadi” (Freedom’s Dawn) and “utho ab mati sey utho” (Rise from the Earth) respectively critiquing Pakistan’s polity and reflecting on the sadness of war for both sides⁸— his position on the bloody civil war that ended in the independence of Bangladesh has not received a great deal of attention. When the military started its crackdown on the then-East Pakistani activists in March 1971, many in the West Pakistani literary circles, including progressives, maintained a somewhat tight-lipped attitude about what the establishment considered a necessary action to quell separatism.⁹ Faiz, however, was not one to toe the expected line, whether that of the establishment or that of fellow progressives. In a poem entitled *Stay Away from Me*, dated March 1971, at a high point of the military operation in East Pakistan, Faiz says:

How can I embellish this carnival of slaughter? How decorate this massacre?
Whose attention could my lamenting blood attract?
There’s almost no blood in my rawboned body
And what’s left isn’t enough to burn as oil in the lamp?
Not enough to fill a wineglass.
It can feed no fire,
Extinguish no thirst.

⁷ Faiz (1982) “The Role of the Artist.” *The Ravi* 71(2):1-2, cited in Khalid, 268.

⁸ Aamir Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (Princeton: Princeton, 2004) 252,269.

⁹ Khalid Hasan, ed. *O City of Lights: Faiz Ahmed Faiz: Selected Poetry and Biographical Notes*, (Karachi: Oxford, 2006) 23.

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There's a poverty of blood in my ravaged body—a terrible poison now runs in it.
If you pierce my veins, each drop will foam as venom at the cobra's fangs.
Each drop is the anguished longing of ages' the burning seal of a rage hushed up for years.
Beware of me. My body is a river of poison.
Stay away from me. My body is a parched log in the desert.
If you burn it, you won't see the cypress or the jasmine, but my bones blossoming like thorns in the cactus.
If you throw it in the forests, instead of morning perfumes, you'll scatter the dust of my seared soul.
So stay away from me. Because I'm thirsting for blood.¹⁰

While some Bangladeshi writers have since then wondered why Faiz remained relatively silent during the war, this poem reflects deeply felt sorrow and pain, and a near uncontainable anger at the developments in the region.¹¹ Faiz does not mince his words in criticising the perpetrators of the operation; his anger spills out as “a river of poison”, ready to pollute and destroy the whole landscape. Even as he was called upon by his fellow intelligentsia from West Pakistan, to show solidarity with the West Pakistani state, we see in this poem an outright refusal to “embellish this carnival of slaughter” and “decorate this massacre”.

When East Pakistan did secede as Bangladesh, he does not appear to have questioned their political decision to do so. Instead, in his 1974 poem *Dhaka se waapsi pe* (Upon Return from Dhaka), he asks:

Will we who remain strangers after all kindnesses are over
Become familiar after all the meetings are over?
How many seasons of rain will have to fall over
Scarred leaves before their greenness come unbloodied to mind?¹²

The refrain of the word “over” (translated from “*baad*”, literally “after” in Urdu)

¹⁰ Faiz, in Agha Shahid Ali, *The Rebel's Silhouette*. (accessed 15 April 2012)

<http://arafiqui.wordpress.com/tag/faiz-ahmed-faiz/>.

¹¹ Afsan Chowdhury, “Subsumed by history and Nation.” (2011) (accessed 15 April 2012).

<http://www.himalmag.com/component/content/article/3532-subsumed-by-history-and-nation.html>

¹² Faiz (1974) “On Return from Dhaka”. Transl. Azhar Hussain (accessed 15 April 2012).

<http://www.theindependentbd.com/paper-edition/others/art-a-culture/95315-faiz-ahmed-faiz-and-bangladesh.html>

in this poem points to its opposite— the feeling that this pain and separation was never-ending, would never be over. Time does not heal the wounds. Several years after the traumatic events of the partition of East and West Pakistan, the pollution Faiz had mentioned in his earlier poem seems now to have taken over the landscape in this poem. The very leaves are scarred and bloodstained—no number of monsoons, the poem seems to suggest, can ever wash away that blood, that suffering.

It is this suffering—sometimes sweet and sorrowful, sometimes suspended and nostalgic, and sometimes uncontainably violent and angry—that takes precedence in Faiz’s verse over all other affiliations. As such, his concern was not so much with the national unity of the polity of Pakistan but with the claims of mankind and felt experiences. He saw the borders carved around South Asia in his life-time as barriers further pitting man against man, irrevocably fracturing existence. And he did so without caring to conform to the demands of the state or political belief. While the geo-politics of the region may have moved on since Faiz wrote these verses, the emotion behind them still resonates, giving his otherwise non-conformist view a universal feel.

A Symbol Secularized

(By *Chinmay Sharma*)

In post-Independence India, Faiz Ahmed Faiz’s works have become, perhaps along with the rest of Urdu literature, a symbol of themselves. Faiz is introduced at a remove from his Indian audience, especially for the generation that comes much after partition. This is not to say that Faiz’s legacy does not resonate with the younger audience, but, it also gets converted into a symbol of itself in the syncretic “secular” polity that the modern Indian nation-state would like to project itself as.

I do not mean to say that this is always or necessarily so— I think there are different ways of looking at Urdu literature. My own observations are naturally tentative, based from my own cross-section of experience and impressions. For our generation, for whom Partition is something that happened to the grandparents, Faiz’s poetry doesn’t always constitute the finer points of the works themselves. Much like being introduced to *Shakespeare’s* plays, or *Eliot’s* poetry, or *Kālidāsa’s* plays, my introduction to the works was not from the point of view of, ‘this is Faiz’s poetry’, but instead with the italics already in place—

‘this is *Faiz’s* poetry’¹³. A presumed alienation marks the introduction to these works.

Of course, one’s association or engagement with the works does not need to be thus marked forever. With study and reading one does become more familiarized. But a kind of alienation is also beyond the mere breaching of novelty— borne out of the fact that the language in which the poetry is written is becoming alien in the imaginary of the Indian. The Urdu that I had access to, living in India, was either coded as Hindi or was used in Bollywood films. At the point of *introduction* of his works to some of us new readers in India—even without being linguistically opaque, like Neruda’s Spanish verse or Chaucer’s Middle-English— Faiz’s poetry is still accessed through a feeling of alienation.

The concerns to be found inside Faiz’s work, however, still have evident resonances with the concerns and history of contemporary India. His work is not removed in the manner of Shakespeare, Eliot or even Kālidāsa. It still forms a part, if perhaps a dwindling part, of the cultural imaginary of some sections in Indian society. For instance, I had access to Faiz through the ghazals of Mehdi Hasan, Begum Akhtar, Ghulam Ali, Iqbal Bano and Shanti Hiranand. Then, in a different vein, a younger subculture also produces its own kind of Faiz symbols: Recently, in a clothing shop for college students in Delhi, I saw verses by Faiz printed on T-shirts, much like the famous snap of the face of Ché Guevera. In terms of Faiz’s poetry itself, the works dealing more directly with partition continue to resonate in the popular cultural sphere, along with films and novels based on partition (e.g., *Pinjar*, *Train to Pakistan*, and *The Ice Candy Man* which was made into a movie under the name *Earth, Ammo* etc). Firmly planted in these niches of production and consumption, I think, Faiz’s poetry has become an integrated part of syncretic “secular” cultural sphere (if not the political sphere) of post-Independence India.

This is highly ironic if we consider Aamir Mufti’s idea that the divided Self in Faiz’s poetry consciously refuses the notion of ‘unity-in-diversity’¹⁴. Faiz’s poetry (and Urdu poetry in general) is not taught in the school or university syllabi; it is accessed at a remove and partially through popular culture. It thus

¹³ Sawhney, *The Modernity of Sanskrit*. (London&Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2009) Sawhney makes a similar point about Sanskrit literature.

¹⁴ Mufti, 248.

becomes a part, in an incomplete and partially recognized form, of the cultural imaginary— and as a part of this imaginary, it becomes a symbol (along with the works of Ghalib, Mir, Zauq) of Urdu literature in the Indian sphere. Its integration with this imaginary through a fairly well-organized and popular music world and Bollywood has made it a symbol of a pluralistic polity, at least in the cultural sphere if not the political sphere. This kind of partially projected (and perhaps partially understood) divided Self, at any rate, does not then need to be at odds with the idea of a peacefully pluralist Indian nation-state. It can become a simple lament for a lost undivided self, a pre-lapsarian self, but the very presence of the lament makes it a record of the plurality that is still existent.

Afterthought

It was promised at the outset to let the readers take away what they will. It is not my intent to tamper with that promise, but to simply point to a couple of quite key strands of connection that run across our snippets.

Sloganeering, Allegiances, Symbols—

Faiz is not the first poet to be called a political poet, and certainly not the first to be considered a nationalist and a revolutionary poet, a centrally-mobilizing but a radicalizing thinker, all at the same time. Movements deploy his verse and later movements re-deploy it for their cause; cultures and subcultures hail him as belonging to them; individuals bind with him their own aesthetic meanings and lives. But what in these deployments is variably picked up and what left unsaid, incompletely understood, misappropriated?

For example, in the recent Lawyers' Movement in Pakistan, briefly touched upon by Bilal Gilani and Urooj Chandani, to what extent do we differentiate between the slogan of the cause and the actual mechanics, political positionings or outcomes of the cause? Outside the active political sloganeering of revolutionary movements, our pieces collectively wonder at the kaleidoscope of identification and misidentification with Faiz. For instance, could he be claimed neatly by the polities of post-partition Pakistan or post-Bangladesh Pakistan, or even by the various non-polities or cultural communities which traverse a broad secular/minoritarian spectrum today?

Geographies—

The geography of Faiz's poetry is bewilderingly complex and vast in scope. In the most obvious sense, of setting, SOAS students have tried to cover here a wider geography than is normally spanned in a piece of this length. Bilal Gilani and Urooj Chandani looked at a contemporary Pakistan; I looked at East Pakistan in Faiz's 1970s poetry; and Chinmay Sharma looked at a post-independence India. But ultimately our scope enables us to raise questions

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pertaining to other kinds of geographies in Faiz's poetry. The material geographies of the "state", for example, can be quite at odds with the geographies of its subjects' experiences, of our subjectivities, and of cultures — particularly in our South Asian context of postcolonial fissions and bloody partitions. Do our postcolonial polities, and the kinds of borders that bolster them just lead to further break-up? Does the poet, as king of his own landscape, wield the power to erect boundaries (e.g. in "Stay Away From Me", discussed in my own piece) where he chooses? If so, can he then also erase boundaries, where he wants, with the same ease? How does Faiz's own geography negotiate these boundaries? What is the reach of raw human emotion (of "ishq" for a people or of sympathy for their suffering), and conversely, what are its limits? Must alienation set in beyond these limits?

In this section, we have tried not so much to answer these questions but simply to raise them — to extract, as it were, from the deeper subjective level at which we as youth engage with Faiz today.