

The Colour of My Heart: On Reading Faiz

By Aamer Hussein

Reading about the death of Mehdi Hassan last week reminded me of the first Faiz ghazal I ever learned to sing.

Mehdi Hassan's "Aaye kuch abr, kuchh sharab aye" (The clouds came, the wine came) was on one side of a 45 rpm record tht had been sent to my mother in 1966 by the artist Laila Shahzada, who'd designed the cover. On the other side was a ghazal sung by Farida Khanum, written by some other, now forgotten poet.

For some years, Faiz had lived just down the road from us in PECHS (Karachi), where we'd often see him taking the air in the garden as we passed his house on our way to school. But though we hummed it all the time, that song was my sister Shahrugh's: in the mid-sixties it was her signature tune, and she'd practice its complicated cadences when my mother's teacher, Ustad Umrao Bundu Khan, the renowned singer and sarangi-player, came over to give her singing lessons. Khan Saheb, as we called him, first told us about Mehdi Hassan's version of Faiz.

My mother, too, sang Faiz in her beautiful soaring voice – "Dil men ab yun tere bhule hue gham ate hain/jaise kaabe men safiaane haram aate hain" (My heart is filled with your forgotten memories / Like the emissaries of the sacred enter the Ka'ba.) -but for the English-educated, semi-westernised boy I was, melody, message and man were three different entities. I tried, but couldn't yet, associate the poet in the garden - although I knew he was a leftist and a rebel, and, many said, an atheist - with the poems he wrote, or with the songs that were sung so sweetly all around me.

Somehow that recording of "Aaye kuchh abr" travelled along with my collection of music and my green portable record player and me when I moved to school in Ootacamund a year and a half later. My uncle, who taught English Literature in that mountain resort, longed for the sound of Urdu poetry in that climate of Eng Lit and Carnatic music; so on Sundays he'd listen to the record and at other times he'd ask me to sing. I didn't consider myself a singer and my Urdu was imperfect, but as I memorised the words to please him I began to unravel the nuances of the poem: the poet encircled by imaginary suns and moons descending from his wine glass, calculating the sorrows of the world, remembering his beloved without restraint, and then, the last verse, a wanderer's refrain.

In Ooty, too, a friend of my father's, an eccentric maharani, who lived in a hilltop villa behind a church, had a collection of records to match her collection of guns, and would hum a nazm by Faiz: "Mujhse pehli si muhabbat mere mehboob na mang" (Do Not Ask of Me a Love like Before). She had a 78 rpm recording of Noorjehan's rendition, and once again I was forced to learn it to please a listener when I'd rather be singing "Summer Wine" or the theme song of *A Countess from Hong Kong*. But she thought that at thirteen my voice was just sweet and high enough to sing the upper notes of the ghazal: soon it would break, she said, become a tenor

My voice broke. And then I left Ooty for ever. The record stayed behind with my uncle, the only part of myself I gave to that grim town. Soon after my fifteenth birthday I relocated for the third time in about as many years; I was in London, in a flat with windows that overlooked Hyde Park. There my Faiz-loving sister Shahrukh, who was back in Karachi, sent me another 45 rpm record: Noorjehan again, singing "Tum aaye ho na shab-e-intizar guzri hai" (You haven't come nor has the night of waiting ended) and "Aa, ke vabasta hain us husn ki yaadein tujh se" (Come the memories of that beauty are embedded in you) I had to take it over to a friend's house to listen because I didn't, for some reason, have a record player at that time. My friend didn't understand Urdu or take to Noorjehan's plaintive melodies; I didn't really follow much of what she was saying; my ear had changed, and I didn't sing much any more, so the record was left in my friend's rented flat when he moved to Lausanne.

But then I found Faiz. It must have been that same year, 1971. An easy walk away from us, there was a library at South Audley Street that had a small but intriguing collection of books in foreign languages. I'd developed a vague interest in learning Persian, which I did in part by borrowing bilingual volumes of Rumi's verse that I'd make my mother read out and explain to me. I must have been looking for a volume of Rumi when, entirely by chance, I came across Kiernan's substantial volume of Faiz translations. The first poem I looked for was "Aa, ke vabasta hain", because some part of me felt guilty about not having related to my sister's gift of a song. They were all there, the words to all those songs we'd sung: and so many more: yearning, contemplative pieces about love and loneliness, carrying subliminal messages that appealed, beyond the beauty of sound and image, to the adolescent I was, who nurtured himself on Leonard Cohen, Cat Stevens, Carole King and the troubadours of their time.

phir koyi aya, dil e zaaar! nahin, koi nahin

rah rau hoga, kahin aur chala jayega¹

or

*is tarah hai ke har ik per koi mandir hai
koi ujra hua, benur purana mandir²*

and

*tum na a'e the to har chiz vohi thi ke jo hai
asman hadd-e-nazar, rehghuzar rehghuzar, shisha-e-mai³
aur ab shisha e mai, rehghuzar, rang-e-falak
rang hai dil ka mere, khun e jigar hone tak....*

Faiz had taken the metaphors of traditional Indo-Persian verse - flowers, gardens, longing, exile, cages - and crafted something new, poems that spoke of prison and companionship, loneliness and longing for the new day of liberation. He made the abstract images of classical poetry luminous and tactile. His birdcage was a prison cell, his exile a term in jail.

I suppose that finding that book of poems, hidden away on the bottom shelf of the public library's Foreign Languages section, tracked the distances in my own life, how I'd left one country (Pakistan) to study for two years in another (India), and then left India for England; travelled from North to South and then further North than I'd ever been; how I'd always lived between languages and changed scripts, from Urdu to Hindi, and nearly lost the former on the way. I'd written poems of longing myself - a few in the Hindi script - but Faiz's poems returned me to landscapes I'd left behind and dreamscapes I hadn't, reflected obliquely on what I felt about life and literature, and yet told me so much more than I knew; though I wouldn't have found the words for my reactions then.

¹ Someone has come at last, sad heart!-No, no-one is there;
A traveller must be going by, bound some other way. (tr.Kiernan 1971: 77)

² It is as if every tree is some temple
Some ruined, unlit old temple (tr. Kiernan 1971: 227)

³ You had not come, then each thing was the same that it is:
The sky the frontier of sight, a road a road, a glass of wine a glass of wine
And now a glass of wine, a road, the colour of heaven,
Are the colour of my heart, "about to turn into blood of the liver"
(tr. Kiernan 1971: 253).

There was also a practical aspect to this new-found passion of mine. Below each translation was a transcript, and on the facing page the original Urdu: I could not only find the words I couldn't understand, I could see them in three different shapes. Suddenly there was the rapture of watching Urdu giving birth to itself on the page, with its curves and broken lines, those half-familiar angles and dashes. I knew, too, that something in the music of his words reached my inner ear in a way English verse, which I was studying then for my 'A' levels, hadn't done. I probably realised then that English was a language that had been given to me by contingency, but Urdu was mine as both birthright and choice.

If Faiz had merely reproduced traditional rhythms and metres I might have been less intrigued, but over and over again his forms extended inherited structures and then broke their mould. The translations and then the Latin letters fell away, and I was reading, without mediation, in the language of the colour of my heart. Suddenly, too, I was in the presence of an iconic poet, to join Hikmet and Seferis, Cavafy and Neruda and the other international greats I'd been reading, a poet I could claim as my own, just at the time that my country, which I'd left for good a few years before, was threatening to fall apart. The poet in the garden became a poet of the world, who sang to of "some foreign students":

*ai puchhne vale pardesi
ye tiftl o javan
us nur ke nauras moti hain
us aag ki kachhi kaliyan hain
jis mithe nur aur karvi ag
se zulm ki andhi rat men phuta
subh e baghawat ka gulshan
aur subh hui man man, tan tan⁴*

Or invoked Africa:

⁴ Oh questioning stranger-
These striplings, these young lives,
Are fresh-grown pearls of that light,
New-budded shoots of that flame
Soft light and devouring flame,
From which amid tyranny's dense night sprang
The rosebed dawn of revolt
And dawn was in every nerve and soul. (Kiernan 1971: 176-7)

*aa jao main ne sun li tere dhol ki tarang
aa jao mast ho gai tere lahu ki taal
aa jao, aifriqa!*⁵

And he addressed us all, in that heady climate of the early 70s, with his words of many years before:

*bol, ke lab azad hain tere
...
bol, ke jaan ab tak baqi hai*⁶

When I think of the new words I learned from Faiz and the old words that came to life in his poems in unique images (I think of the night's tinkling anklets, those violet pain-anklets), I give him credit for teaching me the refinements of my language; or, more importantly, taking my understanding of my language to another level. So the Faiz of the garden and the poet of the vinyl disc was replaced by another figure, an invisible mentor, a giant.

But to claim that the door to the hidden treasures of Urdu poetry immediately swung open when I first read Faiz would be grandiose. What reading Faiz did - along with its poetic and its philosophical gains - was to bring me back, on a pedagogic level, my lost alphabet (which I'd never known very well), and give me a lexicon of abstract words. It turned what was becoming aural into visual images, sounds into signs.

I don't know exactly what made me decide to study Urdu for another "A" level when I was about nineteen. The working reason was that I needed an additional subject to go to university, but actually I was filling a growing lack. Whatever the reason, the chance to study Urdu had finally come.

Mirza Hadi Ruswa would be my passport to Urdu studies: Mr Shah, my teacher, was an expert in prose literature. (I remember him complaining: "The violet anklets of pain? What does he mean?" He said "Faiz steals from Yeats and others". I think he mentioned Eliot, too. Later I'd be told Faiz was influenced by

⁵ I have caught the madness of your drum,
My wild blood beats and throbs with it - come Africa, come! (1971: 209)

⁶ Speak, for your two lips are free;

...
Speak, your life is still your own. (Kiernan 1971: 87).

Neruda. But to me these are signs of the poet's essential modernity: how he could speak to his poetic peers from different eras, and be both classical and contemporary, cosmopolitan and deeply rooted).

In my twenties I met Faiz several times. I heard him speak about culture and identity when I was twenty-two. I learned the phrase 'cultural Muslims' from him as he spoke to a group of us at a birthday party; the appellation seemed to answer so many of the dilemmas of our generation. Was it his syncretic idiom then that drew me to his words in my youth, or the fact that he remade or reformed tradition that made him seem so approachable?

I joined university and one of my professors, ideologically sound (even hidebound), took exception to this very accessibility and syncretism. Faiz socialised with the bourgeoisie. His poems were sung by pop singers. But I never subscribed to the professor's views. If the living genius of Urdu enjoyed himself in living rooms, so much the better for me, as I could meet him there. And as for musical renditions, his verses lent themselves to classical and conventional interpretations and to postmodern compositions alike. As I was steeped in those canonical poets in whose verses Faiz delighted, I could listen to the redoubtable doyenne of ghazal singers, Malika Pukhraj, singing, in the identical melody, the verses of Quli Qutb Shah and Faiz's tribute to his forerunner's poetic diction that employed the same rhyme scheme:

*piya baj pyala piya ja'e na
piya ja'e bhi to suna ja'e na*

or

*sukhan dard ka ab kaha ja'e na
kaha ja'e bhi to suna ja'e na*

Or the young Nayyara Noor, singing Faiz's more experimental poems in avant-garde musical settings such as "Aj bazar men pa ba-jaulan chalo" (Today Come in Fetters to the Marketplace):

*chashm -e- nam jan-e-shorida kafi nahin
tohmat-e-ishq poshida kafai nahin
[...]
dast afshan chalo, mast o raqsan chalo
khak bar sar chalo, khun ba-daman chalo*

*rah takta hain sab shehr-e-janan chalo.*⁷

I've never heard a living poet of any language referred to with such familiarity - no, a mixture of awe and familiarity - by so many, the way people speak of Faiz, naming him with that one syllable, ending in a diphthong, that is his name. Again, the grandeur and the simplicity of the man and the poet are conveyed by that terse sound.

I remember an encounter with Faiz that serves as an illustration of the poet and the man's approachability. Unusually, I can't remember the year. But I do remember it was winter: we had coats on and it was raining, and I remember the place, Conway Hall in Red Lion Square. It was one of those deeply nostalgic occasions that expats and exiles arrange, and the hunger of the audience for their language was apparent. Faiz, looking tired but gracious, read his poems and answered questions with his usual generosity; among the poems the audience requested he interspersed the poems he had most recently written, collected in *Mere Dil, Mere Musafir* (My Traveller, My Heart). But most of the evening was taken up by the speeches of others, and - if memory serves me - amateurs reading out their verses. My clearest memory is of a suburban lady rising to recite - or rather sing - Faiz's ghazal, "Sham-e- firaq ab na puch" (Don't ask of the night of separation) . She had a strong East Punjabi intonation, and couldn't pronounce the *ghain*, *khe* and *qaf* sounds in the couplets. When we went to greet Faiz at the end of the event, my mother asked the poet how he managed to keep a straight face when people mangled his words. (I knew, from an earlier conversation, that his favourite renderings were Noor Jehan's.) He smiled and explained that a reader's love of a poem made it, in a certain way, her own. And then he patted my mother's shoulder and said: "tum khud ga letin" (Why didn't you sing it yourself?). He evidently remembered her singing. And as a storyteller, I hoped it was these verses, which long ago she had set to music, he remembered her singing:

tum a'e ho na shab-e-intizar guzri hai
*talash men hai sahar bar bar guzri hai*⁸

⁷ Not enough the tear-stained eye, the storm-tossed life,
Not enough the secret love, suspicion's brand
[...] Walk with waving hands, run in a drunkard's dance
Clothes besmeared with blood and head begrimed with dust!
All the loved one's city is watching by the road. (trans. Kiernan 1971: 231)

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We went out into the wintry London streets, singing to ourselves.

⁸ You haven't come nor has the night of waiting ended
Time after time the dawn's gone by in search for you.