

Logical Placement of the Poetic Language: Coloring Faiz Ahmed Faiz's *Zindan Nama*¹

By Dr. Waseem Anwar

There can be several ways of celebrating Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poetry, but one under discussion is an attempt to synchronize with the logical placement of his poetic language. It might not sound really thoughtful, given the poetic experience be treated as a profound inspirational experience, but the linguistic variety of the poets like Faiz, metaphoric or metonymic or imagistic, needs to be explored if one wants to enjoy the depth of the enigmatic lure of such poetic ventures! In general, there could be multiple theories regarding the use of vocabulary in poetry and its coloring of moods and feelings, and in Urdu poetry in particular, yet the colors and shades that a poetic experience might carry along with its varying tones and moods start becoming imaginable and at times even visible if not literally tangible. I do not necessarily initiate a theory to underline the power of any such poetic experience, but my point here is to argue that an honest reading of poets like Faiz and their literary and linguistic backgrounds helps the readers develop a viewpoint and add meaning to their understanding, the readers' poetic experience after the poet's own, the interpretation or the hermeneutic extension after inspiration!

If we are tempted to relate connections between interpretation and inspiration of the poetic experience, the words, the images and tones and moods that they might bear or carry, critics and writers generally recognize that as the fundamental dimensions of human expression the visual and the verbal arts develop an inter-disciplinary or cross-referential impact that is well-established between these two forms. Virginia Woolf's: ". . . though they must part in the end, painting and writing have much to tell each other" and Earnest B. Gilman's: "The order of experience in painting (seeing first then reading) is superficially the reverse of the literary experience . . ." support my idea (See Gilman, *The Curious Perspective: Literary and Political Wit in the 17th Century*). In many ways, the written medium seizes the techniques of the visual to foreground that the imaging

¹ Based on author's M. Phil. thesis "The Use of Color Vocabulary in Some Colonial and Postcolonial Literary Works" in 1994 at the University of the Punjab (Lahore), a smaller version of the paper was published in 2006 issue of *Patras*, the literary magazine of New Hostel of G C University (Lahore).

and coloring much fall under the civilization of the written word. To extend the argument J. Hillis Miller also in his *The Linguistic Moment* relates the importance of the needle's eye that enfolds transience of spatial images for eternity, while Jurij Lotman in *The Structure of the Artistic Text* talks about the iconic principle involved in the visual arts.

Besides shapes and forms, colors are also cardinal to visual arts, and most colors have several meanings related to the cultural significance attached to them. As commonly black stands for death, underworld, mourning, elegance, while gray stands as colorless, figuratively as well as literally. But overall, a color is unlikely to have one rigid meaning. Like other artists, writers also exploit colors and color theories through the literary medium, word. Wendy Steiner in *The Color of Rhetoric* maintains the ways writers use different periods and genres for any inter-art analogy. Also in his detailed study *Color and Human Response*, Faber Birren explores the biological, visual, emotional, aesthetic and psychic responses to color by referring to both the ancient symbolic use of colors as well as their application in the modern environment.

Generally speaking, the writers of modern and contemporary times are inheritors of discontinuous polyglot traditions. Historians as well as literary critics find examples of imperial oppression and hegemonic designs in today's postcolonial societies, their literatures, their education plans, and even in their use of languages. The Martinique critic Frantz Fanon claims: "to speak language is to take on a world, a culture." Like all other great writers, the postcolonial literary writers also manipulate vocabulary, color vocabulary, and color models. Specified color-vocabulary as transformed into a metaphor for the colonial experience refers to the darkness of a depressing experience that the underlings face, while it also exposes the devilish deeds of despots. The juxtaposition relates to a synonymity between color and its semantic levels. In his 1986 foreword to Fanon's book *Black Skin, White Masks*, Homi K. Bhabha comments: "The Black presence ruins the representative narrative presence of Western person-hood; its past tethered to treacherous most experience under coercion."

In the literature written against a coercive background or one that deals with the theme of slavery and colonialism such direct, indirect, suggested or implied meanings attached to colors reinforce various racial, religious, regional, ethnic, cultural, colonial or imperial discriminations. When "historicized," as says Frantz Fanon, the aesthetic, symbolic, and traditional presence of black color in English literature and the literatures in English is essentially linked to the history of humanity in general and to that of slavery in particular. The blackness of the soul that belongs to the white villain rather than to his black victim prepares

the ground for manipulating the darkness of Africa beyond regional, racial, geographical boundaries, making this dark-continent a symbol for all the struggling freedom-lovers. There is a sense in which Africa has become, like the rest of the Third World an outer space, one of the last battlefields where white men struggle for the future of mankind. The African arena is still regarded as a perfect setting for trials of strength, a theatre for ideological battles and the potential last holocaust.

Within the context of postcolonial-ism a reading of Faiz Ahmed Faiz's *Zindan Nama* (1956) and some other poems about the theme of resistance plays around the foresaid *logical placement of poetic language*, its verbal and visual connections, its coloration. In Faiz's poetry color-vocabulary, with its universal significance, becomes a powerful medium and is exploited to the maximum to raise the fundamental East-West polarity around haves and have-nots and many other related paradigms. In his works, above all, there is a constant struggle against the prevailing oppressive systems. Resistance in consequence to deprivation is the result of the colonial rule or lack of freedom, while for Faiz the role of poetry for liberating the oppressed against slavery or system symbolically becomes a stylistic coloration. Like Roque Dalton, a poet from El Salvador, Faiz also attempts "Poetry...not made of words alone" or like Onésimo Silveria, the Cape-Verdian poet also writing in Angola and Mozambique, "A poem without children nourished .../ On the black milk of aborted time."

With reference to the postcolonial problems and the difficulties of independence, democracy, development, destiny and persecution of intellectuals, Edward Said names Faiz Ahmed Faiz as one of the victims of "system." Postcolonial-ism is certainly an offspring of the colonial culture, while culture reflects the experiences of a society. Though Faiz always tried to define Pakistani culture from a more geographically specific and regional angle, he also tried to find reasons for identity crisis in the region. But, of course, here we are more interested in tracing how he experiences oppression and then expresses it through his poetic experience through the *logical placement of poetic language* and its related coloration.

Verbally as well as visually, the use of black as a color connected with coercion is traced in the literature of the Sub-continent. In his works Allama Mohammad Iqbal also exposed the hidden blackness under the apparent and superficial whiteness during the British colonial rule. Faiz reiterates such connotations with reference to the whiteness and glamour of the West. In his own

manner he traces the real profundity of thought and creed in the Orient and terms the Western world as “Zahir Nuqra,” that is the silver white that turns total black the moment it is touched. In the coloring of their works there is a strong contrast between Iqbal and Faiz; at his most natural Iqbal is ardent, impetuous, direct, Faiz more delicately suggestive.

Through his poetic experience, Faiz traces the struggle for survival against annihilating forces and imperialist designs in universal as well as in local and indigenous terms. His greatest contribution is towards redefining of “love” in the modern political context of his times: “Love do not ask me for that love again.” Faiz, like Silveria, considers poet as a responsible political being and art as a part of the human struggle to survive through misery: “For many years these helpless hands/ Have been clasped to the hard black bosom of the night/ Under the iron corpse of the night?” The central theme of Faiz’s poetry is human emotional and mental journey, a struggle for justice in migration: “my heart, my traveler.” Homeland, Love, Mankind, Liberty, Protest, Banishment, Exile, Struggle, Afflicted and Inflicted Souls are some of the key words as well as major themes of his works. Written in 1956 “Come Africa” elaborates the point well enough. In his foreword to “Dear Heart,” Khawaja Masood writes that Faiz’s works are rooted in the “earth philosophy, drawing a sharp line between right and wrong. For Faiz, peace and independence are beautiful ideals in the post-independence context. Servitude kills the qualities of intellect and intelligence, truth and justice. His poems “Oh City of Many Lights,” “The Window,” “Africa: Come Back” or “Come Africa” from *Zindan Nama*, and “Ink and Pen,” “Tablet and Pen,” “The Hour of Chain and Gibbet,” “Black-Out,” “Solitary Confinement,” “A Prison Nightfall,” “A Prison Daybreak” and many others from different collections are full of such powerful messages.

Faiz’s love for Lahore was not ordinary as well. He termed it a “City of Light.” But later on in “Oh City of Many Lights!” in *Zindan Nama* he talks of the way these lights have waned. Even the “noonday dries up” and skyline is covered with foggy and oozy tide of “blackish misery.” But Faiz is an optimist and in the prevalent darkness of the sooty blackness he finds embers of hope, associated with love: “When I see the shine on my fetters.” In the four poems of the *Zindan-Nama*, Faiz records his experience in the prison houses to link them to the tortures of slavery. Prison is always projected in the image of black night: “How terrible is the night of pain.” Life in a prison house is like an experience of a blind man who lacks in appreciating colorfulness, but then “I imagine that morning has lit up your face.” Faiz talks of: “This Harvest of Hopes” (The last poem in *Zindan Nama*), relating the “roundness of cheeks and the coils of . . . ringlets” of his beloved to his love for the “beloved homeland.” The “Trees of the prison

courtyard” stand “With drooping head” (A Prison Nightfall) and finally the daybreak arrives on the universe. Faiz’s jail poetry is full of colors that represent moods. From confiscation and loneliness to sardonic remarks under confinement he was impressed upon by the darkness of Africa as a strong image that keeps time: “I am Africa, I put on your mask./ I am you, my step is your lion tread./ Africa—come./ Come with your lion-tread, Africa, come!” Faiz’s identification with African lands is his masterpiece, full of hope and beauty to be reborn. Reading Faiz, one is definitely reminded of poets like Iqbal and W. B. Yeats and their stance as national and native intellectuals who join the people of the land to their histories, lost found or re-found.

I would like to end up by offering a humble poetic tribute myself because a poet can best be understood and paid homage to in the poetic discourse:

O Beloved Son of the Sinful “City of Lights!”²

*O beloved son of the sinful “City of Lights...,”
forlorn, splendrous, inspirational!
Amid the millions of leaflets of the publications
thou shalt exile once again,
to remind us of the promises, forgotten,
of the sacrificial homelands, drained to rotten,
with their eternal cries of a shrieking humanity:
Ab hijrat mein hay harj hee kiya
jab hijr ki ratain apnee hon!
(Why worry about migration when the desertion is ours!)
In the banished niche of floating time,
the treadmill of our universal horoscope,
can we promise to be “Faiz-yab” once again,
by making a choice for some “Zindan Nama,”
and see the revival in its darkness,
of the same sunshine that reflects its fetters,
that yet inscribes with its brightest letters,
the silenced celebration of a holy “City...of [many a] Lights,”
of its famished painful black nights,
full of the creepy forms of its sinfulness
that we all proudly carry along!*

² The poem echoes a re-mix of titles of Bapsi Sidhwa’s 2005 edited *Beloved City: Writings on Lahore* (in Pakistan) and *City of Sin and Splendour: Writings on Lahore* (in India) as well as of the OUP’s 2006 publication of Faiz’s selected poetry and biographical notes translated into English by Daud Kamal and Khalid Hasan, *O City of Lights*.