

A Note on the Poetic Aesthetic of Faiz

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Faiz's poetry is replete with motives founded on two kinds of "Ishq". "Ishq" is passion, joy, misery, ecstasy, storm and zeal and much more. For want of a better word in English, 'Love' may be used as a translation of "Ishq". Love for the beloved as well as for the proletariat, working class or the slaves makes his poetry as enigmatic and bifocal as it can be. Faiz's espousal of a classless society has a robust conscious voice in his poetry. Initiated into Marxism at an early stage of life, Faiz champions the cause of the deprived, the underdog "yeh galion ke awara bekar Kutte"¹ in a vindictive and relentless tone marked with a burning spirit of revolution. His voice is robust with optimism, courage and strength. It is evidently the voice of a man who has the taste of hard work and sweat in his protoplasm. Faiz himself recounts that his father was made to work hard not only as a shepherd at the tender age of five in his village KalaQadir and but also as a porter at Lahore. Sultan Bakhsh (later called Sultan Mohammad Khan) survived as the fittest in the Darwinian world and later turned into a Barrister and ambassador of Afghanistan in England². Faiz's initiation into Marxism marks a turning point in his life from educated elite with the awareness of the plight of the poor to a vehement advocate of the rights of the masses. Nevertheless, Faiz could never root out his Oriental romanticism from his heart (as it could be fatal for a poet of the East for the simple reason that it the *raison d'être* of Oriental poetry). Thus, he turned into a poet who feels the perpetual dilemma and a kind the tug-of-war taking place in his heart and mind between his twin predilections. V. G. Kiernan with a marked Orientalist contempt, comments:

Two images jostled each other in his mind: the famished pauper dying of disease in the gutter, the languishing mistress with stained eyelids and powdered cheeks gazing at herself in the mirror of the feudal romanticism. In them he saw life's two opposing magnets, the one

¹Faiz Ahmad FAiz. *Nuskha Hai Wafa*. New Delhi: educational Book House. 2009. P.71

²Raees, Dr. Qamar "Faiz ke Do Ishq". *Shabistan* vol 207 208, New Delhi: Shama. P.69

drawing him by his positive, progressive self, the other by his backward, unregenerate self”³.

Despite having a strong proclivity for egalitarian values, Faiz’s literary instinct could not contemplate writing in an “Urdu coarsened and merged with Hindi into a ‘Hindostani’ lingua franca of marketplace”⁴ and he chose to follow the beautiful yet “winding” road of Persian vocabulary, that led into the heart of Central Asia and into luxurious dream-world of goblet and minaret, rose and houri [sic]”⁵. The language used in Faiz has in no way any aspiration to be simple in the spirit of Wordsworth’s “poetic diction”; his imagery is oriental, full of sensuousness; his allusions are drawn on Semitic tradition with revolution envisioned as apocalypse and his vision of the ideal society Marx-inspired. It is aesthetically appealing and rhetorically most inspiring poetry that embalms and soothes a reader, sick and tired of the mundane and gives her/him one of the best aesthetic experiences available in Urdu, on one hand, and stirs and moves her/him into a revolutionary zeal, on the other.

Faiz’s attempt is to sensitize not only the class of people who are trained and groomed to appreciate and value what is considered aesthetic and cultural capital⁶, but also the real proletariat including the lowest strata e.g. the factory workers and Tonga puller. The message for the downtrodden proletariat to rise up and raise voice against centuries of oppression, exploitation and tyranny is encoded in a language that is an admixture of the simple and the complex. Ironically, it is very much unlikely if not impossible for the proletariat to have the required taste and knowledge to unpack the real potent of Faiz’s message.

It will draw very few instances of empirical contestation to say that taste is a matter of one’s class and one’s social place and that it is an acquired disposition.

³ Kiernan, V. G. (tr.) *Poems by Faiz Ahmad Faiz*. New Delhi: People’s Publishing House (Pvt) Limited. 1958. P.8

⁴ Ibid. p.7

⁵ Ibid. p.7

⁶ Bourdieu *Forms Of Capital*. 1984. Source. *Knowledge Policy*. in J. Richardson (Ed) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (New York, Greenwood), pp 241-258. Tr. By Richard Nice.

<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/bourdieu.htm>. accessed on 08.11.2009.

Pierre Bourdieu in *Distinctions: A Social Critique of the Judgement of the Taste* (1984) says:

Taste is a practical mastery of distributions which makes it possible to sense or intuit what is likely (or unlikely) to befall — and therefore to benefit — an individual occupying a given position in social space. It functions as a sort of social orientation, a ‘sense of one’s place’, guiding the occupants of a given place in social space towards the social positions adjusted to their properties, and towards the practices or goods which benefit the occupants of that position”.⁷

Without any validation for essentialist explanation of the class and taste, it definitely warrants acceptance that inculcation and acquisition of taste is a matter of social orientation according to one’s social space where an individual moves, acts and hinges as a social agent, a part of the social system. The aesthetic taste is not primarily dependent on an individuation process but rather upon a ‘sense of one’s place’.

With this approach to the aesthetic taste, reading Faiz or any aesthetic thinker/ practitioner lead to the birth of certain problems. Faiz’s “Intesab”⁸ with its special tribute to those belonging to the lower strata in the social hierarchy namely the moribund clerks, the postmen, the Tonga puller, the engine drivers, the factory workers, the kingly and divine representative farmers and the sleepless mothers of hungry children enunciates his sincere concern for and occupation with the underdog (pun intended including the literal and figural meanings corresponding to the literal translation of the English phrase into Urdu). Faiz’s burlesque on Iqbal’s “Tarique ki Dua”, “Kutte”⁹ reveals the metaphorical association of the dogs with the hard-working labourers, hardly sentient and cognizant human beings, similar to Arnold’s men living in “a brazen prison”, “With their heads bent o’er their toil, they languidly / Their lives to some

⁷ Bourdieu, Pierre. “Classes and Classifications”. Source. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of the Taste*. (1979) tr. Richard Nice, published by Harvard University Press, 1984, 604pp. – selected from pp. 466-484.

<http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/fr/bourdieu.htm> accessed on 08.11.2009.

⁸ Faiz, “Dedication”. *Nuskha Hai Wafa*. New Delhi: educational Book House. 2009. P.79

⁹ Faiz, “Dedication”. *Nuskha Hai Wafa*. New Delhi: educational Book House. 2009. p.79.

unmeaning taskwork give, / Dreaming of nought beyond their prison wall”¹⁰. In the oriental context, dogs are chiefly looked at with contempt. The pun with the word ‘underdog’ is easily discernible. The play between the sign and the signified privileges the former for the elite aesthete and Faiz comes out with flying colours when rendered into music or even in a common leisurely read or recitation. On the other hand, the full potent of his message escapes the attention of a significant part of his audience. ‘*Dahqan*’ in all probability is unmindful of the fact that he is ‘*dahqan*’ (farmer) and ‘*naib fi arzillah*’ (vicegerent on earth)¹¹. That history has witnessed changes/revolutions in the hands of such people, in no way, warrants a complete shift or transformation in the distribution of aesthetic judgement as a form of capital. As capital is also “accumulated labor”¹² and not only a fickle and freaky incident possible in relation to hard work and chance.

Any hope and prospect about revolution is based upon a Utopian assumption of a “world without inertia, without accumulation, without heredity or acquired properties, in which every moment is perfectly independent of the previous one, every soldier has a marshal’s baton in his knapsack, and every prize can be attained, instantaneously, by everyone, so that at each moment anyone can become anything”¹³ barring that aesthetic value inextricably embedded in the Faiz’s message is a part of what is beset with “the set of constraints, inscribed in the very reality of that world, which govern its functioning in a durable way, determining the chances of success for practices”¹⁴. The set of constraints which is not dependent on chance as much as it is on durable practice may hinder access to Faiz’s poetry for a large part of his audience. It is a form of capital that does not depend on accidental occurrences as may happen in a world without any link to the past, a world “without inertia” and “accumulation”. It is a matter of gradual acquisition that may -though not necessarily always- span even lives of generations sometime. If it does not involve generations, at least the luxury of moments of leisure is what is necessary for an individual, busy pursuing, imbibing and internalizing aesthetic taste which is defined by the already elite class people.

¹⁰ Arnold, Matthew. *Whispering Reeds: An Anthology of English Poetry*. Ed. D. K. Barua. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. 1975. p.79.

¹¹ Faiz *Nuskha Hai Wafa*. New Delhi: educational Book House. p.394

¹² Bordieu, *Forms of Capital*.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Education and aesthetic sense are a part of what Bordieu calls cultural capital. Aesthetic sense cultivated and refined has the ability to convert into a form of capital easily in social field. This embodied form of capital gives fame, respectability and position which results in a more transcendental form of capital with more longevity. Set against Philistinism and Barbarianism¹⁵, this refinement carves a durable niche for the social agents. Faiz Ahmad Faiz's Poetry, following the Oriental tradition of beauty and sounds, winding, meandering, and labyrinthine in its signification, in brief, displays a kind of aesthetic which may appeal to the literati and aesthetes of the East. As a matter of fact, this is true about all literature and its definition of an aesthetic. What is considered aesthetic of a time and culture is valued and acquired, endorsed, perpetuated and maintained as aesthetic of the future, blurring the mark between subjective and objective. Thus its acquisition demands more sustained labour and pays in terms of more durable and transcendental capital.

Aesthetic sense is a marker of class, with its close liaison with education and other cultural refinements. Major Is'haaq, Faiz's fellow inmate compares his assignment of writing Preface to Faiz's *Roodad-e-Qafas* with having been given a white elephant, a task too formidable and ambitious for the status of the son of a peasant:

Ek kisan aur khas kar nau aabadiyati mulk ke kisan ke bete ki tarbiyat hi kya hoti hai. Dehati schoolon ki taleem aur woh bhi tawahhum parasti aur jehalat ke ghenaune saayon tale' aise mahol mein jis tarah ghurbaat o naadari ke tufail parhne likhne ki nisbat hal ki lakeer seedhi rakhna' dhurdhnagar ki negahbani karna aur bailon ke liye chara lana zyada qadar ki nigah se dekha jata hai...¹⁶

What can be the standard of cultivation of the son of a farmer and especially a farmer of a newly established country? Education in rustic schools and that too under the darkness of detestable superstition and ignorance, where owing to abject poverty, ploughing and tilling in the right direction and grazing the cattle is perceived as

¹⁵ Arnold, Matthew. *Culture and Anarchy: An Essay in Political and Social Criticism*. 1989. <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/4212>. accessed on 9.9.10.

¹⁶ Is'haaq, Major Mohammed. "Deebacha". *Nuskha Hai Wafa*. Faiz Ahmad Faiz. New Delhi: Educational Book House. 2009. P. 9-10.

more valuable and important works than reading and writing...
(translation mine)

Thus the association of Faiz's poetry with high culture and arts sounds formidable for the humble lesser beings (in which the above quoted writer is definitely not included, for all his modesty).

Nevertheless, in Faiz, there is a celebration of not only the intellect which is often a prerogative of the upper class that can afford time and energy to spend on and devote to the acquisition of intellectual prowess and aesthetic taste; but there is also a bonhomie about physical strength that the proletariat are more associated with as theirs is a real struggle of the body and its sustenance. Hands, mouth and lips, voice, a tall and erect body accustomed to hard work are the main sources of power. This celebration of body with its various manifestations of power, its moment of glory under the sun, its assertion in the form of sweat and blood is also reminiscent of Aristotelian idea that *metics* were ruled by minds whereas slaves by bodies.¹⁷

Faiz's use of the allusion to the Semitic idea of apocalypse in a figural signification of a complete revolution of the proletariat is an evidence of Derrida's proposition "iterability alters"¹⁸. Drawn on the concept of Judgement Day, this apocalypse, a day of revolution is customized by the writer as a day of reward and punishment for the oppressed and the oppressor respectively. The poem with the Quranic title "*Wa Yabqa Wajho Rabbik...*"¹⁹ and the entire description of the event seems to have put forth the concept of Doomsday akin to the Quranic description (e.g. *Quran* 81:3, 99:1) as a more "universal", "normal" and "central"²⁰ case while the Revolution may be considered "peripheral", marginal or "derivative" from the concept of the Day of Judgement. This day of Divine Judgement is a promise given by Quran which may prove a source of great consolation for the deprived underdogs of the human world with an idea of a life

¹⁷ Day, Gary. *Class*. London and New York: Routledge. 2007.p.3.

¹⁸ Derrida, Jaques. *Limited Inc*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. 1977.p.62.

¹⁹ Quran 55:27

²⁰ Balkin, Jack M. "Deconstruction." <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/jbalkin/articles/deconessay.pdf>>

accessed on 05 Feb2011.

hereafter. However, keeping the ideological orientation of the writer in mind, this privileging of the former meaning over the latter dissolves and an earthly and human revolution emerges as more privileged meaning in Faiz's text than the Revelations. The former meaning conflicts with the idea of an earthly and secular day of retribution making the fault lines apparent between the conflicting voices. At the same time it provides with a model for its figural, rhetorical and graphic effects.

As a denouement to this discussion, this is to add that Faiz's poetry enthuses many and is appreciated by many. Some of his poems are in Punjabi aiming at the Punjabi peasantry. However, the question whether Faiz's appeal is really universal, cutting across language, religion and class borders cannot be answered in absolute terms. The aesthetic peculiar to Faiz that he perhaps shares only with Ghalib to a degree, involves an amalgamation of high and low styles and dictions. His conversational style admixes with Arab-Persian lexical chunks, demanding a sustained and durable effort at unpacking the meaning. It is something inevitable for his lack of control of the language that draws its aesthetic conventions from an atmosphere of intellectual hybridity resulting from its historical contact and association with Arabic and Persian, once languages of the intellectual as well as emotional make-up of the learned class of this subcontinent. A reading of his poetry against its grain reveals the fault lines inherent in his aesthetic. It is ironic that crux of his message is for the proletariat of the society who cannot read him with felicity as they lack the pre-requisite literary competence and are beyond the purview and leisure of reading sessions. Major Mohammed Is'haaq's "Roodad-e-Qafas" (Faiz *Zindan Naama* 9), epitomises warring nature of the ideology, theme and aesthetic that inheres Faiz's poetry. Mohammed Is'haaq's sense of honour associated with the task of writing an introduction to Faiz's poetry, his self-alleged plebeian background and his hyperbolic confession of nervousness for the said task (in a language that again belies the said words) affirms the opposing threads of potential interpretations that make apparent that the unity of his voice and theme remain elusive and indeterminate. The question whether Faiz may infuse the real underdogs with the real zeal, ardour and passion, as he talks about the uplift of their lot demands an attempt to affirm an answer or lack thereof. The paper is an experiment with the trailing of the fissures and gaps that leave any interpretation of Faiz's poetry indeterminate without undermining the effect it has on a particular class that controls, defines and patents aesthetic sense.