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Poet of love and rage

Author(s): Sarvat Rahman and Faiz Ahmed Faiz

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Sarvat Rahman

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## Poet of love and rage

Translating Faiz Ahmed Faiz

### I

**F**aiz Ahmed Faiz, arguably the most outstanding poet of the Indian subcontinent in the last half-century, was often compared to his friend Pablo Neruda, the great revolutionary poet of Chile. He was often hailed as an activist for human rights, civil liberties and social justice. Faiz's verse, however, is now less familiar, especially among the younger generation, and to those whose language is not Urdu. For many years his poetry was denied access to the media, radio and television in Pakistan. The conditions were such that he went into self-imposed exile for some years, returning only to die in his beloved city of Lahore.

Faiz, at first a composer of romantic *ghazals*, grew to become a writer with a passion for social justice. Faiz was an officer in the Indian Army in World War II, when his first collection of verse, 'Imprints', (Naqsh-i-Fariyadi), was published in 1941 from Lucknow. The youth of that epoch felt the impact of this entirely new 'voice' on the Urdu-speaking world.

Faiz grew up in the provincial but ancient city of Sialkot near Lahore in undivided India and his upbringing was that of an orthodox

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This essay introduces the author's forthcoming book on Faiz Ahmed Faiz which includes a select 100 poems, translated from the Urdu and presented in a chronological order.

Muslim. As a child he memorized the Quran and was given a thorough grounding in Arabic and Persian. His literary tastes led him early to the study of the Urdu poets and of English literature. His love for the latter was profound (he was at one time a lecturer in English) and he was certainly conversant with other European literatures, in particular, French and Russian.

Faiz was an outstanding example of a syncretic poet, who in today's language, would be described as cross-cultural. A lover of Keats, Shelley and Browning, he often adapted the sonnet form in his early poems. A translation of a poem by Browning figures in an early edition of *Imprints*.

These European influences were rapidly assimilated by the young poet into his own tradition, in which he was a master. The early poem 'Nocturne' which was written in the late twenties, though published only in 1941 in *Imprints*, is an example of this syncretism at work. It is, as the poet says himself, the poem of a young man looking at a moonlit garden, and perhaps dreaming of someone. For the first time in Urdu literature, a poet contemplates the night and the moon (hitherto conventional and frequent figures of speech) looking at them with his own eyes and records his sensations. In the very first line he states his feeling of self-forgetfulness, overwhelmed by the spectacle of the silent moonlit scene. His perception is personal and subjective and yet he retains his conventional Persian-derived descriptive style:

Midnight, the moon, and self-forgetfulness.  
 The past and present are faded, afar;  
 A supplication shapes the stillness  
 Dimmed is the sad assembly of stars.

Although the second line is translated, for reasons of homogeneity as 'The past and present are faded, afar', Faiz himself says this less directly as, 'The courts of past and present are desolate,'. These references are to the courts and assemblies (line four) (*bazm*, *mahfil*), social gatherings where Urdu and Persian poetry expressed itself. However, in lines three, five and those that follow, the poet interiorizes his perceptions and finds new and appropriate images for them:

Silence wraps all, the sound of a cascade,  
 An ecstasy all things seems to pervade  
 It is as if life were part of a dream  
 The whole wide world but a mirage would seem.

Silence becomes the supplication, perhaps that of his own heart, more explicitly expressed in the closing lines of the poem:

Mute melodies from my heart strings arise,  
 Fill me with heady ecstasy apace  
 Yearnings and dreams, a vision of your face.

The description of silence by its opposite—sound—in the scene appears to be from a world of dreams, and the poet experiences a sense of the unreality of existence. Such direct and personal apprehension of reality is new in Urdu poetry, and is the lesson of the Romantics for us. It makes this charming poem the Urdu pendant of say, Shelley's *I arise from dreams of thee*, which has graced the Golden Treasury of English Verse since the nineteenth century.

But Faiz belongs to the twentieth century and the moonlight's weary voice, sleeping on the tree-tops, shows us how he added the startling images of European surrealism, which had just been launched in France, to the traditional surrealistic images of Urdu and Persian poetry. 'The Milky Way', reciting the credo of Love's desire to please (requited love is rare in Urdu poetry), irresistibly brings to mind the celebrated verse of Guillaume Apollinaire, where this great French poet addresses the Milky Way and calls her "the shining sister of the white bodies of beloveds"—

Voie lactée, o soeur lumineuse  
 Des blancs ruisseaux de Chanaan  
 Et des corps blancs des amoureuses.

In later poems Faiz evolved his own style of free verse where modern influences blend perfectly with his classical traditions. Sensitivity to nature remains a constant in Faiz's work, at least in his happier moments. Thus even in prison (1953), a beautiful evening is described with the night descending through the maze of stars, and the light of heaven mingling with the earth's dust. Again, in a poem as sombre as 'Mourning for time' (1979) a description of the dawn figures as a prelude to his poetic introspection.

In a contrary movement, Faiz turns to the classical traditions which have nurtured him in order to make a unique synthesis of these with his socio-political aspirations. This did not take place at once. Thus, in the early poem 'Don't ask me now, beloved' (1941), facing the harsh realities to which his newly found Marxism has opened his eyes, the poet seems in a dilemma. He cannot reconcile these new preoc-

cupations with his love for the beloved who was earlier his whole universe:

Dark fearful talismans, come down the centuries,  
Woven in silk and damask and cloth of gold;  
Bodies that everywhere in streets are sold  
Covered with dust, all their wounds bleeding,  
Bodies that have passed through the furnace of ills  
With putrid ulcers which their humours spill

He seems, almost, to dismiss her. But the true poet in him quickly corrects this *faux pas*. From the depths of his poetic being, imbued with the Sufi ideals of Hafiz and Rumi and all the great Urdu poets, comes the awareness that his earlier quest for the Beloved and his later one for social justice for all humanity, are of the same nature. Both demand of him his utter devotion and ultimately, the sacrifice of his life. He gives them both the same visage to begin with. In the poem 'We who were killed in obscure pathways' (1953) inspired by the letters of Julius and Ethel Roseberg (sentenced to death and executed for their political views) the dead martyrs speak to the One who had inspired them. Faiz gives her the flamboyant beauty of the Beloved of Persian and Urdu poetry, with her long musk-scented tresses, her flashing red lips, her silver-white hands.

Far from our desire, as we hung upon the cross  
The redness of your lips went on throbbing  
Headiness from your tresses went on streaming  
The silver of your hands went on gleaming

The path of her love is also the way to death, to annihilation. But she is Liberty, Liberty who is loved for her beauty, and for whom the dead have died to make that love universal.

In a later stage this synthesis is taken a step further. In the poem 'Be with me' (1963), the love who is addressed here cannot be identified. It may be the personal love that sustains the life of the poet, or his political faith, as he faces (while in exile in Moscow) the rising storm of the night of political oppression and thinks of the irresistible purling of the wine of revolt in his country under the heel of martial law. The love, 'who both life and death bestows', is the Beloved of Sufi poetry. The dual interpretation of this poem is parallel to the *Haqiqi* (divine or mystical) and the *Majazi* (secular or profane) meanings of a Sufi verse.

When nothing can be put right or made  
 No word allowed, no part be played  
 When night blows  
 When bereaved, sinister, black night blows  
 Be with me, love,  
 Who both life and death bestows,  
 Be with me.

Faiz, brought up as an orthodox Muslim, saw himself as an agnostic but a member of Muslim society. He had, in fact, a deeply religious sensitivity. His message is, in a sense, similar to that of Mahatma Gandhi, who said 'Purify your hearts so you can save the country'. So Faiz, carrying the cross of pain, (Christian images are frequent in his verse), in the anguish and hardship borne for the sake of the loved one or the Ideal, perceives the true worth and meaning of life. Thus, in his last *ghazal*, written a few days before he died, he says:

Life gave us much or little, what regrets can there be?  
 The treasure of pain is ours, what matters the quantity?

To the reader of Urdu literature the reference to the treasure of pain evokes, the well known verse of Hafiz:

The Mentor asked me, besides pain, what else can Love bestow?  
 Go your way O sage full of reason, what better gift than this.

Faiz was soon disillusioned by the lack of progress in democracy and social justice in Pakistan, and used both poems and *ghazals* for covert and overt criticism of the oppressors of the people. His later poems express his doubts, but to the last he retained the hope of 'The rising of a sun'. His hope was not for Pakistan alone, but for all suffering humanity, wherever it might be, and without reference to caste, colour or creed. In this, too, he was akin to a true Sufi, and at the same time, a great modern humanist.



Faiz's poetry has since been translated into many languages. Of the translations into English, the best known is that of Victor Kiernan, published in 1971 under the aegis of the UNESCO<sup>1</sup>. It has long been unavailable, even in Paris. Some other translations by American or Australian authors that followed suffered from the disadvantage of a lack of sufficient grounding in the original tongue. Furthermore, the

translation of the *ghazals* of Faiz has only rarely been attempted, but a large part of Faiz's verse is in this classical form of Urdu poetry, which he adapted to contemporary preoccupations. Indeed, it was Faiz's *ghazals*, carried by word of mouth from behind prison walls and, much later, sung by celebrated singers, which brought him immense popularity in the subcontinent.

The book, to which this essay introduces us, presents in chronological order, a choice of sixty poems, ten quatrains and thirty *ghazals* numbered serially. The chronological order, generally neglected by translators, enables one to follow the development and maturing of Faiz's thought and style through the forty years and more, of his literary creation and the eight volumes of his published verse: *Imprints*, 1941; *With the East Wind*, 1953; *Prison Letters*, 1956; *The Hand beneath the Rock*, 1963; *The Valley of Sinai*, 1971; *The Evening of the City of Friends*, 1978; *O Traveller, My Heart*, 1981; and *The Dust of Passing Days*; (undated, posthumous). The chronological order adopted herein is based on the dates of the poems and, when these are undated, on the year of the volume in which they were first published. The order is in general conformity with that followed in *Leaves of Fidelity*, the definitive collection of Faiz's verse *Nuskha ha-i- wafa* published in 1992. The single exception to this rule is the poem 'How Autumn came'. This beautiful poem figures in none of Faiz's anthologies and has not found a place even in *Leaves of Fidelity*.

It was however, among the poems given by the poet himself to Naomi Lazard, his translator. As this author states in her publication *The True Subject*, (Vanguard Books, Lahore, 1988) Faiz chose the poems he wished her to 'translate', explained their meaning to her, which she then rendered into English. The Urdu version of 'How Autumn came' figures on page 20 of *The True Subject*. For reasons of style and the context of extreme political repression, this poem has been included among those pertaining to the period 1960-65. This was a period of government under martial Law and political repression in Pakistan which culminated in the first Indo-Pakistan war of 1965.

The translation of the Urdu *ghazal* into English presents some problems. For the sake of readers unfamiliar with Urdu, it may be indicated that the *ghazal* is composed of a series of distichs, the content of each distich (i.e. two lines) being entirely independent of the others. All that the poet has to say on the subject chosen has to be said strictly and concisely in that distich. However he may, if desired, though only

rarely, extend his thought over two or more distichs, which are then, all together, called a *Qitah*, and indicated as such. The ghazal is, moreover, written according to a fixed rhyme scheme, with a primary and secondary rhyme (the latter following the primary) called *qafia* and *radeef*, respectively. The two lines of the first distich must both rhyme, that is, have the same *qafia* and *radeef*. In the other distichs only the second line carries the rhyme, both primary and secondary. Repetition of long rhyme schemes, though pleasing to ears accustomed to Urdu poetry, may be monotonous in English.

Translation of Urdu and Persian *ghazals* into English was carried out extensively by the English themselves in India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They fell in love with the dominant Mughal culture of the time and learnt both Persian and Urdu. In general their translations were free, that is, rhymed or unrhymed, paraphrases of the original, without any direct verbal conformity. The best known example of this genre is the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam by Edward Fitzgerald, which, after an initial failure to please the public in England, has since become a well-loved classic of English verse.

However, Faiz has said that a verse is based on a rhythm which is first established or occurs to the poet, and on which the poet builds the *ghazal* or the poem. Much of the charm of Faiz's *ghazals* lies in his use of rhyme, and Faiz adopted the *ghazal* in its most classical form. The *Rubaiyat* of Fitzgerald haunts the mind, amongst other things, because of its rhymes. Therefore, instead of a free translation (though much in vogue) an effort was made to render, where possible, the rhyme and rhythm of the original. As example may be cited the *ghazal* 'Save your unsped arrows' where the rapid movement of the original is retained together with the rhyme scheme.

Translation of the poems presented fewer problems than that of the *ghazals*. Faiz invented his own style of free verse which has been much, though unsuccessfully, copied. This style only appears to be 'free', but it is a verse form controlled by both proximate and distant rhymes, cemented together by alliteration and assonance, and varied by changes in rhythm which enhance poetical effect (for example 'Colours in my heart'). The extreme musicality of Faiz's poems can be translated only very partially and is inherent to his poetic genius. An attempt is, however, made to recapture the charm of his style by using as far as possible, similar rhyme schemes and rhythms, in the hope that these may contribute in creating some of the atmosphere of the



original poems. Thus, in 'We who were killed in obscure pathways' the elegiac atmosphere of the poem, where the dead martyrs speak, is rendered by the long slow-moving metre (used by Faiz too), whilst the gaiety of a happy moment in 'Spring has come' is accompanied by a shorter light-tripping measure.

However, there are moments where translation has to ask the reader to turn to the original. An example of this is when Faiz, by the use of Hindi words (see 'In your ocean eyes') creates an inimitable atmosphere and charm, which is lost in the translation, even if the sense and spirit of the original is, it is hoped, conveyed. □



It is as if life were part of a dream  
The whole wide world but a mirage would seem.  
Slumbers the weary voice of moonlight  
Upon the dense dark foliage of trees;  
With half shut eyes, the Milky Way recites  
The sacred text of Love's desire to please.  
Mute melodies from my heart strings arise,  
Fill me with heady ecstasy apace  
Yearnings and dreams, a vision of your face.

*Imprints, 1941*

## Colours in my heart

Before you came, all things were only what they are,  
The sky, end of the view, the road a road, the wineglass a wineglass.

And now, wineglass, road, blue of the sky  
Are colours in my heart rising to ecstasy.  
Now gold, hue of the joy of meeting again  
Now grey, vexed shade of the hour of torment;  
Yellow of autumn leaves, colour of sticks and straw,  
The reds of flowers, of blazing rose-beds,  
Colours of poison, of blood, of night obscure,  
Of the sky, the road, and the wineglass.

Which of these becomes my tears, which an aching nerve  
Which a mirror, changing at each instant?  
Now that you are here, wait, until  
Colours moods and seasons, aspects and objects  
Stay still; and once more  
Everything becomes what it was before  
The sky, end of the view, the road a road, the wineglass a wineglass.

*The Hand Beneath the Rock*

Moscow, August 1963

## We who were killed in obscure pathways

(Poem written after reading the letters of Ethel and  
Julius Rosenberg)

For the love of the flowers of your fresh lips  
The dry tree of agony we were made to array.  
Still longing for the lights of your shining hands  
We were killed in semi-obscure pathways.

Far from our desire, as we hung upon the cross,  
The redness of your lips went on throbbing,  
Headiness from your tresses went on streaming.  
The silver of your hands went on gleaming.

When your ways opened into oppression's night  
We walked on as far as our feet carried us,  
A poem on our lips, our hearts with pain alight,  
Pain that was to your beauty witness.  
Know that we were stead-fast in our testimony  
We who were killed in obscure pathways.

If failure was preordained as our destiny,  
The love we bore you was chosen freely.  
Who complains if the ways of your passion all led  
To parting in the fields of the martyred dead.

Picking up our banners from these fields of death  
Many other lovers will set out on the quest,  
Whose road of suffering, by our foot-steps

Was shortened, and for whom, laying down our lives,  
Of your beauty we made universal the sway,  
We, who were killed in obscure pathways.

*Prison Letters*  
Montgomery Jail, 15 May 1954

## On the martyrs' field

(Qawwali)\*

Where is the end of the path of love, we, too shall see  
The night will pass over us also, this morrow we, too, shall see  
O heart be still, that visage divine, we too shall see.

Those who wish to drink of that wine, let them perfect their thirst,  
How long can they block the ferment's rise, we, too, shall see  
How long can they hide wine cups and bottles, we, too, shall see.

Let the challenge be sent from that street of sin, and reach our  
company.

Whom can they stop with their senseless advice, we, too, shall see  
Who, once gone ahead, dares to come back, we, too, shall see.

We, men of heart, today shall put, our faith and force to the test.  
Let them bring the army of aliens and foes, we, too, shall see  
Let them but come to the martyrs' field, it's a sight  
we, too, shall see.

This last watch of the night, my friends, harsh though it may be  
The light that is hidden in the heart of the night, we, too, shall see  
The star that shines at the break of day, we, too, shall see.

*The East Wind*, 1953.

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\**Qawwali*: a religious song, sung in chorus, usually within the precincts of a sanctuary, and characterized by strongly marked rhythms and refrains. Faiz, here, uses this classical form to express protest and indignation against political repression. He was in prison at the time (along with others) and risked the death sentence.

## You tell us what to do

When upon suffering's vast flood  
We launched the boat of our life,  
What strength there was in our arms  
How red, in our veins ran our blood.  
It seemed two strokes of the oars  
Would take us to the other shores.

It was not so. 'Neath each current  
Ran many an unknown tide;  
Our boatmen were too ignorant  
And the oars untried.

Now, sift all this as you wish,  
Find fault and blame whoever you wish.

The river is the same, and the boat too  
You tell us now what we should do  
How can we get across?

When in our heart we first received  
The wounds of the country  
We had much faith in Vedic medicines,

Knew many prescriptions of the Unani  
In but a little while, we believed,

All these sufferings would be relieved  
And our wounds be healed.  
It was not so, for our ills  
Were so old that with all their skills,  
Vedic doctors were of no avail  
And magic mantras all did fail

Now, sift all this as you wish  
Find fault and blame whoever you wish;

It is the same boat, and the wounds too  
You tell us now what we should do  
How can these wounds be healed.

*The Dust of Passing Days*  
London, 1981.

## **Be with me**

Be with me, love  
Who both life and death bestows,  
Be with me  
When night like a storm blows,  
Having supped on the blood of skies  
When black night blows,  
With her musk-scented balm  
And diamond daggers,  
Weeping and wailing, laughing and singing,  
Brass anklet-bells of pain, ringing.

When hearts long sunken in despairs  
Look toward those  
Hand that were in sleeves concealed,  
And hope repairs.

When the purling of wine  
(Like to a child in sleep disturbed  
Who, disconsolate, will whine)  
Cannot be stayed;  
When nothing can be put right or made  
No word allowed, no part be played,  
When night blows,  
When bereaved, sinister, black night blows,  
Be with me, love,  
Who both life and death bestows,  
Be with me

*The Hand beneath the Rock*  
Moscow, 1963.