



EVOLUTION OF FAIZ AHMED FAIZ AS A POET

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ABSTRACT:

Faiz Ahmed Faiz was a very fine poet who combined in his poetry depth of feeling, warmth of thought, vitality of imagination and revolutionary idealism. But this progressivist's zeal is inevitably punctuated by a strong element of hope and optimism. And so what we miss in his poetry is a sense of the tragic. But in the last phase he comes closer to it in some of his poems which are "Heart Attack", "Let Me Think" and "In this Abode of Non-Being". In these poems, the ecstasy of love is a thing of the past and a bewildering sense of reality encompasses him. Awareness of old age and of impending death characterise these three poems. Here the poet expresses his feelings quietly. These poems also exhibit a deeper self-knowledge and the poet does not offer any solutions to complicated existential problems.

KEYWORDS: Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Ghazals, Naqsh-e-Faryadi, Persian, Urdu Poetry,

Karey na jag mein alaa-o tau

shair kis masraf

Karey na sheher mein jal thal tau

chasm-enam kyaa hai

What good is a verse that does not

light up the world?

What good a tearful eye if it does not

wash away the city?

– Faiz Ahmed Faiz



Faiz Ahmed Faiz was born in Sialkot a hundred years ago, with official records showing February 13, 1911 as the date of birth. He shared his hometown with Pakistan's national poet, Allama Muhammad Iqbal. Faiz's father, Sultan Mohammad Khan, was a poor shepherd boy, the son of a landless peasant in Kala Kader, Sialkot, who taught himself Persian as well as Urdu and English and, by a fortuitous combination of hard work, intelligence and luck, eventually rose to become the then Afghan king's personal interpreter and senior minister.

After completing his early education in Sialkot, Faiz went on to Lahore's prestigious Government College on the personal recommendation of Allama Iqbal. The latter had heard the teenage Faiz's poems in local recitals, and had once awarded him a prize in a poetry competition. By his own account, Faiz had read many of the classics of Urdu and English literature and poetry while still in school. He described his particular fascination for the poetry of the old masters – Mir Taqi 'Mir', Mirza Rafi 'Sauda' and Asadullah Khan 'Ghalib', whom the young Faiz found mostly impenetrable. His familiarity with the masters of traditional Urdu ghazal and poetry is the reason he is perceived not only as the last of the classical poets in Urdu, but also as the 'hinge' between the classical and modern ghazal.

The internal or the real reasons for Faiz's immense popularity and impact are not so easy to define, as these lie in the fine and admirable qualities of his poetry itself. They lie in his vision and range, his lyricism and fine imagery, his fine perceptions, his imaginative grasp of the complicated problems of life and ability to translate them in poetic forms, his ability to transform classical images and symbols, and endow them with new meaning. His humanism, warm and compassionate approach to life, along with his revolutionary fervour, the fine perception and subtle nuances of his poetry, and harmony of thought and feeling in his poems. He was a poet par-excellence of both the ghazal and nazm forms, which also added to his stature. Majaz, Jazbi and Makhdoom too, wrote both the ghazal and nazm, but their range is not so wide and their total output not so massive and impressive.

And now we may turn to selected poems—nazms—of Faiz Ahmed Faiz to see these qualities reflected in them to advantage. The salient features of his poetry, his major themes and concerns can be discerned from his selected poems also. And for this purpose the very first poem in his earliest poetry collection "Naqsh-e-Faryadi" which is described simply as 'couplets', should be a good starting point. It is striking in its intensity, simplicity and freshness of imagery. The poet says that the night before the lost memory of his beloved quietly entered his heart, and it was like the spring coming silently in a wilderness, or the morning breeze passing through a desert. It was also like a sick person experiencing relief without knowing the reason. This short poem expresses the poet's feelings with sincerity, economy and artistic force. It is particularly admirable as one of the earliest creations of a young poet.



Other early poems in this collection, which absorb our attention for their fine qualities, are “Sarod-e-Shabana” (Night Melody), “Ek Manzar” (A Scenery) and “Tanhai” (Loneliness).

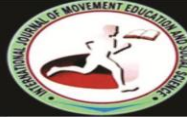
“Night Melody” is a love poem, distinguished by its transformation of feelings into pictorial imagery, like the “waterfall of silence”, the “moonlight sleeping on the thick trees”, “the whole world in a state of ecstasy” and the Milky Way trying to utter the message of love. Translated into English the images lose some of their charm, but in the original poem, they are beautiful and expressive.

“Ek Manzar” is a delicate and moving poem. Its pictorial imagery is symbolic and expresses elusive feelings and half-realised thoughts. “The river of pain flowing in the sky”, “the sad story of the moon, enveloped in the dust of the highway”, “The melody of the rabab (a musical instrument) of life reciting an elegy in low tones” is some of the striking metaphors of this poem. Indeed the poem itself is an extended metaphor.

But the finest poem in this group is “Tanhai” which has a complex structure, a psychological dimension, and depicts the interior monologue of the poet or the “poetic persona” who is lonely, hoping that someone would come. He/she is startled by every noise but then realises that it was only a passerby going to some other destination. It is late at night and the stars are gradually turning into bright dust, even the waiting road is sleeping silently, and the flowing wind has covered the footmarks of earlier passersby. And now the poetic persona says that he/she should extinguish the candles, remove the wine cups and the goblets and shut the sleepless doors, for no one would now come, absolutely no one. This poem is not only more moving but its symbolic imagery also embodies the contradictory feelings of desire and hopelessness, delusion and self-knowledge, the wounded ego and courage, and other elusive emotions. We can see the early poetic style of Faiz Ahmed Faiz at its best in this poem, in which the poet does not express his feelings but embodies them in symbolic imagery. The images and contradictory feelings are so vivid that we can consider them as dramatic characters, and the poem as a symbolic drama. Above all, it is a very personal poem which has the power of becoming the personal experience of every reader.

The second group of poems, some of which are in “Naqsh-e-Faryadi” and the others in his second verse collection “Dast-e-Saba” are written from a different style and are considerably longer and more explicit. In these poems personal feelings are modified and seen in the perspective of his political ideology and humanist concerns. These poems include “To the Rival”, “Two Loves”, “Don’t Ask Me For The Earlier Love” and “The Poetic Subject”.

In “Don’t Ask...” the two aspects of love—at that time and now at the present—fail to blend with each other, but it contains some memorable couplets. In “To the Rival” the love experience is more intense and subtle and the imagery too is delicate and unique. It was admired widely, because it presents an image of the rival which is entirely different from the traditional concept of the rival in Urdu poetry. In “Wait For A Few More Days” although the poet has not been able to harmonise his love experience with his progressive ideology, the intensity and sincerity of both these aspects make it acceptable. The poem also contains some memorable lines like:



Life is perhaps the gown of a poor person

Which has to be constantly mended

With patches of pain.

In this group of poems “The Poetic Subject” is more successful. Here too, the poet juxtaposes two aspects, but the love experience and beauty of the beloved is given pride of place for, according to the poet, this is the true subject of poetry.

As pointed above, some of these poems appear in the second verse collection “Dast-e-Saba” However, the finest poems in this collection are “Subah-e-Azadi” (Morning of Freedom), “Zindan ki ek Shaam” (An Evening of Prison) and “Zindan ki ek Subah” (A Morning of Prison). They are not love poems, and have a political theme. But their canvas is wider and their humanist vision is enriched by deep feeling and fine perception.

The “Morning of Freedom” written soon after August 14-15, 1947, is one of the finest poems. It is a “mini-masterpiece”, distinguished by concentration, sensitive perception and evocative nuances. It is not simply a description of the situation. It tries to go deeper into it and raises disturbing questions, embodied in symbolic imagery and meaning-laden metaphors.

“An Evening of Prison” is remarkable in the sense that even in the midst of hardship and inhuman restrictions, Faiz has managed to save the purity of his feelings, the light of hope and his fine sense of beauty. And he gives them creative expression.

“A Morning of Prison” is more down to earth but also more meaning-laden. The poet’s humanist vision is at its best when he describes the personal miseries and deprivations of the prison guards and sympathises with them. The imagery of this poem, too, is bold, perceptive and unique. Altogether it is a fine expression of passionate thought.

In the next poetry collection of Faiz, entitled “Zindan Nama” (Story of Prison), the number of ghazals is larger. But it also contains some admirable nazms (poems) like “The Friend with a Scented Hand”, “The Pain Will Come Quietly”, “The Meeting”, “The City of Lights” and “Come Barefoot in the Market”.

In “The Friend with a Scented Hand”, which was presented to an unknown lady who sent him the gift of perfume (flowers), delicate feelings are enveloped in the warmth of thought and a passionate tribute is paid to the universality and permanence of love.

In “The Meeting”, the event of meeting the beloved after a long time, is translated in poetic form with ecstasy and fervour. External facts and internal feelings, personal and universal experiences, abstract concepts and elusive nuances, sorrow and happiness are immersed in each other and the ideological commitment is enlivened



by a humanist vision. It too has rich and varied imagery but its central theme is light and darkness, which holds together its complex structure.

“The City of Lights” too is remarkable in its concentration and shapeliness. Here, too, the poet has been able to give creative expression to his political thought and painful personal experiences by blending them in harmony.

“We, Who Were Killed in the Dark Alleys” is one of the most famous poems in this collection. It was written about the political tragedy of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, but its canvas is wider, and it is a moving tribute to all martyrs of revolution, and here the poet’s revolutionary faith is akin to a profound passion. It also contains some memorable couplets.

“Come Barefoot in the Market” is also a very popular poem. It is a revolutionary lyrical poem in which the poet, the poem and the listeners seem to blend into a unique harmony. This poem has been set and rendered to music by a Pakistani artist, and this has enhanced its impact.

The four poems mentioned above are political poems. But the poet’s political ideology is deepened by a humanist vision and enlivened by imagination. And so we may agree with one of his admirers that Faiz Ahmed Faiz was not a propagandist, but a singer of revolution.

And now, before winding up this discussion we may turn to the later love poetry of Faiz, which is quite different and more moving than his earlier creations in which the experience of love is often seen in the perspective of his revolutionary ideology. This later poetry is more personal and deepened by psychological insights. The style of this group of poems is delicate, subtle and characterised by concentration and economy of poetic resources. It is also more evocative. Faiz admitted that in these poems he was influenced by the poetic style of Nazim Hikmet, Mirza Tarsun Zade and Rasool Mirza. However, the influence of Nazim Hikmet is more striking.

The finest poem in this group is “The Colour Of My Heart”. In this poem very personal and elusive feelings of the love experience are translated into a delicate expressive form. With the arrival of the beloved everything changes—meaning and colour—and the lover’s ecstasy touches the point of bewilderment, and he pleads to the beloved to stay for some time so that things may assume their original shape and colour. The imagery of the poem is unique and impressive, and a fine blend of feeling and imagination gives it its special flavour.

Another love poem entitled simply “Manzar” (Scene) is also moving and artistic. Here the delicate experience of love is presented against the manifestation of Nature; and the repetition of “aahista” (slowly) makes it very appealing.

“Be Close To Me” and “In Your Ocean Eyes” too are love poems written in this mode, reflecting a significant change in Faiz’s outlook and his apprehending of the experience of love.

Finally we may say that although Faiz is widely admired as the “Poet Par-Excellence” of the Progressive Writers’ Movement, he avoids the extremist tendencies and aggressive stances for which the movement is often



blamed. His poetry is genuine, personal and passionate and his artistic sense guides it. And this, indeed, is the secret of his unfading charm and continuing popularity. Not only this, he is also receiving more attention from serious critics and historians of literature who too, more often than not, consider him to be the finest poet of the Progressive Writers' Movement. Faiz's poetry, like progressivism as a whole, still represents a degree of formal and thematic experimentation that can be more productively understood as a part of Urdu modernism, than its opposite.

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