

The Revolutionary Spirit

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No one quite personifies the revolutionary spirit of twentieth century Pakistan as the Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911-1984). According to N. M. Rashed, Faiz stands at the juncture of romanticism and realism, having redirected the subject of the *ghazal* (a love poem consisting of rhymed couplets) from the solitary romantic lover to suffering humanity (8). Faiz was incarcerated by the government of Pakistan on spurious charges of treason and spent years in solitary confinement, which only lifted his poetry to greater heights, earning him world-wide fame. His verses, cherished by millions, continue to be sung in films and on stage.

Faiz learned Arabic during his religious education in childhood. His father, who died while Faiz was a university student, had served as the ambassador of Afghanistan in London. Persian was spoken in his family, giving Faiz an early start in that language. Faiz completed a master's degree in English and another in Arabic during the 1930s. This rich confluence of languages enabled him to synthesize seemingly disparate worlds, reconciling socialism with Islam, and traditional diction with modern awareness, as Faiz observes in an interview:

To me the old and the new, the traditional and the contemporary fall in their proper places in the larger composite tradition of literature. The great advantage- or miracle- of the *ghazal* form, for example, is that you can use it to render traditional themes in traditional diction and still be in tune with contemporary reality. The traditional struggle between the mystic and the sermonizing priest is also a contemporary humanistic struggle between authority and the ordinary man ("A Conversation with Faiz" 1981, lix).

As a university student in the early thirties, Faiz discovered the great Russian novelists. After completing his studies, he became a college lecturer in Amritsar, where he read the Communist Manifesto and became inspired by the socialist experiment underway in the Soviet Union, as can be seen in "On the Anniversary of the October Revolution":

The night flapped its wings

like a stricken bird

Dawn's first ray flashed
from one horizon to the other.
All the doors were opened
on this day.
The seven skies
shone like polished mirrors.
Dungeons were smashed.
Citadels razed to dust.
Every vestige of the corrupt past
was wiped out.
Such was the resolve
that chains of slavery melted like wax.
Vision was restored to the blind.
The dead were resurrected.
Men learnt to breathe again.
A new age was born
on this day.

Beginning in the late thirties, Faiz was associated with the Progressive Writers Movement, which deeply shaped intellectual thought in the Indian subcontinent. The following decade, he became an ardent trade unionist. From 1947 to 1951, he served on the Punjab Labour Advisory Committee and in 1951 he became the Vice-President of the left-leaning Pakistan Trade Union Federation, then one of the two major trade union federations in Pakistan. In "The Icy Flames of Dawn," Faiz highlights the power of people acting in unison:

I am
the multitude -
the vengeance of tigers.
Freedom is the marrow
in my bones.
My heart
is the hermitage of saints.

The sea rages in my blood.

I am the hammer.

I am the nail.

I am the one they crucify

from generation to generation.

Take courage from me -

take hope.

I am the multitude -

invincible!

The poem abounds in passionate imagery with several contrasting metaphors. The heart of the multitude, as still as a hermitage, resembles the eye of a hurricane, with the sea of blood raging about. Paradoxically, the multitude is both the crucified and the crucifier. These suggestive images, expressed in spare language, make this poem take flight.

Within a decade after independence, Pakistan had become a client state of the United States. Those who cherished the preservation of cultural memory, those who believed in an open and tolerant society, were targeted for persecution and imprisonment. Even under ostensibly civilian governments, the military called the shots. In 1951, Faiz, then editor of the *Pakistan Times*, was accused of treason and forced to spend four years in solitary confinement in what was known as the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case. While he was in jail, in 1954, the Communist Party of Pakistan was banned. Although not a party member, Faiz was nonetheless close to its leadership.

After his sentence was commuted in 1955, Faiz went into exile in London. In 1958, General Ayub Khan seized power in a coup and began to consolidate his control through the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency. While in exile, Faiz experimented with different literary forms, including writing the screenplay for a film called *The Day Shall Dawn* (1958), which was promptly banned by the newly installed military regime. Although it was scripted in Urdu, the film featured the struggle of Bengali fishermen in East Pakistan. When the film premiered in London, the military government ordered the High Commission for Pakistan in London not to attend the screening, but the diplomats did so anyway. The neorealist film—rare in Pakistan—won a Golden Award at the first Moscow International Film Festival, in August 1959.

Faiz met the Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet at the first Afro-Asian Writers Conference, which took place in Tashkent in 1958. Faiz translated some of Hikmet's poems into Urdu, including "For Vera," among many poems that Hikmet dedicated to his wife, Vera Tulyakova:

A voice said

Come

Stay

Smile

Die.

I Came
Stayed
Smiled
And died.

Like Hikmet, Faiz will be remembered as a poet of both revolution and love.

Faiz won the Lenin Peace Prize in 1962, placing him in the company of such renowned writers as Jorge Amado, Bertolt Brecht, Rafael Alberti, Miguel Angel Asturias, and Pablo Neruda. In his acceptance speech, Faiz said, "All can visualize that peace is reflected in the wheat field, in poplar trees, in the bride's veil, in the laughing hands of children, in the poet's pen, in the artist's brush" ("I Am Convinced" 1984, 17). In his eloquent plea for peace, Faiz observed that the wars between impoverished nations were being fomented to serve the interests of imperial powers.

Faiz's poetry summons the deepest spiritual longings and traditions of his people. Although in Pakistan he was accused, rather unsurprisingly, of being an atheist on account of his Marxist beliefs, Faiz was nonetheless deeply religious. The Scottish poet and playwright Howard Purdie, who met Faiz during a visit to Pakistan in 1983, recalls that Faiz said to him: "Love and religion are inseparable. Why should we isolate humanity, love and beauty from Islam? In Sufi poetry, all is love-poetry: love at its highest is inter-linked with religion" (4). In "Prayer," Faiz writes,

Let us lift our hands in supplication
We who have forgotten the ritual of prayer
We who have abjured all idols, all gods
And remember only the poignancy of love.

The four translations published here have not been collected in any volume of Faiz translations. They are among the seventy two Faiz poems that Daud Kamal (1935-1987) translated during the nineteen eighties, many of which were published in three posthumous volumes after Kamal's death. In a letter to Faiz dated February 8, 1983, Kamal wrote, "You have given me a meaning, a direction and, above all, the strength to bear the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune'" ("Letter to Faiz" 1983).

Works Cited

Daud Kamal, "Letter to Faiz Ahmed Faiz," Feb. 7, 1983.

Faiz Ahmed Faiz, "A Conversation with Faiz." Interview by Muzaffar Iqbal. June 4, 1981. In *The unicorn and the dancing girl*. (Ed. Khalid Hasan. New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1988, liii-lxvi.)

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