

REMEMBERING FAIZ AHMAD FAIZ

DR. SATYAPAL ANAND

MY PERSONAL REMINISCENSES

On a one-to-one basis, my personal contact with Faiz has been fewer than a dozen times. All these meetings took place in London during the seventies of the last century. One last meeting with him was in 1983, a year before his demise at the relatively young age of 73. Let me explain. I have never publicized my friendly contact with him and, therefore, much has remained hidden. I shunned *Mushairas and Mehfiles* organized by local Urdu elite in London and kept my distance. It was either he or Chacha Mulk who gave me a phone call at my residence in Milton Keynes where I was a research associate at the British Open University. Chacha Mulk (the renowned novelist Mulk Raj Anand) didn't drive himself and he would ask me to bring my small Morris Minor, pick him up from Indian High Commission's Guest House and take him to Faiz.

Faiz was twenty years my senior; Chacha Mulk was twenty-seven years older than me. Another example is Saqi Farooqi who was a quarter century junior to Faiz as also to Noon Meem Rashid and yet had a warm and intimate friendship with both. Let me add in haste that friendship is neither bound by age nor by gender. It only partakes of common interests, concerns, conversation topics – and most important of all, participating partners' level of intellect, education, mental caliber and parlance of conversation. I believe that he was more akin to me in this respect than to Mulk. Maybe one reason was that Mulk just garbled his Urdu and was never adept in speaking that language.

The one and only exception to my rule of no public display of our sporadic contact and my reverence for him or his affection for me was the irreverent poem I wrote about him the same day that I met him 1983. I published the poem six years after his death. Titled *Aik Nadaar Mulk ka Shair*, this poem is included in my poetry collection *DAST E BURG* (1990). It was written in a somber mood. When I met Faiz that evening, I found not his usual assured self, but a fearful, broken man lurking in him. I forthwith knew that he was shattered both in his life-long belief in Communism as also in his health. His conversation with me bore testimony to this loss of faith.

He was suffering from Fistula and was in pain. He had come back from a visit to Soviet Union which was at the brink of dissolution and the chaos before its final break into bits and pieces across Europe and Central Asia. This time he was staying not at Zohra Nigah's house, but at a different location. If my memory serves me right, it was an apology of a house (so small it was!) in Bamsbury, across Kings Cross Road where it changes its name to Euston Road. Just whose property it was I never enquired. Alys, his wife and Muneeza, his daughter, both were with him. Salma wasn't there. As we know, his two daughters were married to two Hashmi brothers, Shoaib and Humair.

Leaving my personal reminiscences of Faiz's personality to the later installments of this article, I will now take up the most important aspect – his poetry, as I evaluate it now.

FAIZ AS A 'MODERN' POET

(a) IMAGERY.

The first quality of Faiz's poetry that strikes me is its visual imagery that permeates into the essential musicality of his verse. After Iqbal, Faiz has this quality in abundance; the difference is *baland aahangi* (loud tenor) in Iqbal and the silk-like soft and sometimes cloyingly sweet tenor of Faiz. This quality is less apparent in other *Taraqqi Pasand* poets. Faiz cultivated the *ghazal* format in a neo-classical or post-romantic *genre* – and he brought a marriage of convenience between the classical and romantic modes. It is in this context that the second generation of Progressive poets took their content, communicability, style and even the Faiz-inspired parlance of *ghazal* to its zenith. It became almost a fad with poets. "Thus Faiz's poetic felicity, choice of words, coinages, allusions, neo-classical reliance on the true-classical patterns of *ghazal* became order of the day."

The quality that differentiates Faiz from, say Josh Malihabadi, both in his nazms and *ghazals*, is that that he leaves things unsaid or half-said or just hinted at or given a symbolic or metaphoric treatment to achieve shareable quality of modes of poetic experience with the reader. Josh, on the other hand, doesn't leave anything unsaid. I would use the words "poetry as a slogan" and "poetry as a sweet whisper" in the case of these two poets.

(b) IS HE A 'MODERN' (EXPERIMENTALIST)?

Now we will see how and why Faiz was not as new-fangled as Noon Meem Rashid. It can be said that Faiz was tradition-bound not only in the poetic parlance used by his predecessors but also in the socio-political and socio-cultural context in the post-partition days. This is borne out by his *ghazals* as also his *nazms*. A random selection of *ghazal*'s stock-in-trade metaphors will bear this out.

اک طرزِ تغافل ہے سو وہ ان کو مبارک : اک عرضِ تمنا ہے سو ہم کرتے رہیں گے
Ik tarz-i-taghaful hai, so woh un-ko Mubarak: Ik arz-i-tamanna hai so hum karte raheN-gey

Let (my beloved) willfully enjoy the stance of ignoring me: My duty is to keep on expressing my avocation of love

(Subject: Beloved's inattention and neglect. Stock-in-trade metaphors are "tarz-i-taghaful" and "arz-i-tamanna".) عرضِ تمنا - طرزِ تغافل - Indeed both are worn-out clichés.

For the source of this *mazmoon*, one might refer to Ghalib's couplet: وہ اپنی خو نہ چھوڑیں گے ہم اپنی وضع کیوں بدلیں
Woh apni khoo na chhoRen gey, hum apni waz'ae kioN badleN

She (the beloved) would never give up her neglect: Why should I change my habit?

ستم کی رسمیں بہت تھیں لیکن نہ تھیں تری انجمن سے پہلے : سزا خطائے نظر سے پہلے، عتاب جرمِ سخن سے پہلے

Sitam ki rasmeN bahut theeN lekin no theeN tiri anjamman se pehle: Saza Khataey nazar se pehle, ataab jurm-i-sukhan se pehle.

Countless were the rituals of tyranny but none (as cruel) as in your social get-together: The punishment precedes the crime of my (lovelorn look (at you): the wrath comes before even I speak.

Subject: The crime of being outspoken and the beloved's wrath about this temerity. Locale: the beloved's gathering of admirers (mehfil, anjumman). Ghazal's stock-in-trade clichés. *سختی کی رسمیں* (rituals of tyranny). *جرم سخن* (the crime of being outspoken).

جو چل سکو تو چلو کہ راہ وفا بہت مختصر ہوئی ہے: مقام ہے اب نہ کوئی منزل فراز. دار و رسن سے پہلے

Jo chal sako to chalo ki rah-i-wafa bahut mukhtasar huui hai: Maqaam hai ab na koyi manzil, faraaz-i-daar-o-rasn se pehle.

If you can give me your companionship, do it now, for the path of (mutual) loyalty is not long: There's no place to neither stop, nor (any other) destination, but the height of our martyrdom at crucifixion.

Subject: Togetherness, companionship (of lovers, like-minded political activists). Locale: the journey of life. Ghazal's worn out metaphors. *دار و رسن*، *آتے آتے یونہی دم بھر کو رکی ہو گی بہار: جاتے جاتے یونہی پل بھر کو خزاں ٹھہری ہے۔* *dar-o-rasn, maqaam, manzil, rah-i-wafa.*

Jatay jatay younhi pal bhar ko ruki ho gi bahaar: Aatay aatay younhi pal bhar ko khazaN thehri hai.

The spring might have tarried only for a moment on its way: The winter (autumn) might have delayed its exit for a moment.

Subject, locale and the metaphors too dear to the age-old traditional modes of ghazal bespeak of Faiz's debt to oft-repeated expressions. *بہار، خزاں، دم بھر کو، آتے آتے یونہی پل بھر کو، آتے آتے، جاتے جاتے۔* *bahaar, khazaN, dum bhar ko, pal bhar ko, aate aate, jaate jaate* – these are so commonly used that no one can erase them from the memory register of one's racial unconscious mind in the Jungian sense. However, what might be highlighted is Faiz's unparalleled expertise in wringing the last drop of political or contemporary-contextual overtone of content and meaning in the political sense. While his predecessors had no political message to convey (except for Iqbal who used the straight pulpit style to communicate a politico-religious message to Muslims), Faiz's contemporaries (or immediate predecessors like Akhtar Shirani) had not acquired the subtlety of his style.

The answer to the question "Is he an experimentalist?" is in negative. He is an imagist in the limited sense of the word as it applies to the classical nuances of the ghazal format, but, unlike Noon Meem Rashid, he is neither an experimentalist nor a coiner of new-fangled images like the first and the second generations of poets in the early twentieth century in England.

(c) FAIZ AND RASHID

I began with an alluded comparison between Faiz and Noon Meem Rashid. One might say that they were contemporaries and moved in common circles they were poles apart. For one, Rashid was not a Communist; Faiz was. For another, in spite of a postgraduate degree in English Literature, Faiz never took his cue from modern European poets in general and British poets like Ezra Pound and T .S. Eliot in particular, while Rashid did. For yet another, Rashid was not a ghazal-lover. He shunned it completely. Faiz, on the other hand, not only loved the genre of Ghazal, he brought its traditional mode to nazm also.

names like Meer, Ghalib, Zauq, Hasrat, even Fani and Seemab, and highlights the continuity of tradition of the classical mould. It is, however, his coinages (using these very words) that tell him apart. The irony as well as the tragedy of this innovative quality is that these coinages occur mostly in his ghazals.

حرفِ لطف، سرِ کونے دلفگاروں، پیمانِ جنوں، لبِ مشکبو، خونِ دلِ وحشی، شامِ وعدہ، جنوںِ رخِ زبیا، شامِ نظر، قامتِ جانان، شاہراہِ فراق، خمارِ آغوشِ مہ و شان۔

These words are his own coinages, never used before him in Urdu poetry – and yet they read and sound like they are borrowings from the classicists. This inter-textuality (بین المتونیت) makes his poetry both neo-classic and post-romantic. Added to this is the subterranean level of political meaning which only discerning ears can hear.

FAIZ AS A “POET’S POET”

The term “Poet’s Poet” was first coined by T. Eliot for denoting Edmund Spenser’s influence on a generation of poets who came after him. Faiz could also be termed as a Poet’s Poet. A host of lesser poets followed his pattern but they had to rest contented with repeating some of his coinages and what they did on their own could not win recognition. Many of the lesser poets including Sahir, Kaifi, Jan-Nisar Akhtar, Jazbi, Wamiq, even Sardar Ja’firi who excels Faiz in some of his compositions but by and large remains a camp follower, could not reach his excellence.

One celebrated example is Faiz’s renowned line.

یہ داغ داغ اجالا، یہ شبِ گزیدہ سحر۔ کہ انتظار تھا جس کا یہ وہ سحر تو نہیں!

Lo and behold this spotted, soiled light, this morn with night hanging over it: The morning we had all anxiously waited for – No, it is not that dawn!

These lines can be seen, now in our hindsight, as an echo of Stalin’s refusal to accept the dawn of independence in the Indian subcontinent, the CPP and the CPI’s tirade against “reactionary” governments in India and Pakistan. It makes a lot of sense. But what concerns us here is the coinage *داغ داغ اجالا* never used in Urdu poetry before and the elongated compound *شبِ گزیدہ سحر*. Both expressions found immediate acceptance by the lesser poets writing on the theme of “False Freedom” (words borrowed from Banney Bhai, Sajjad Zaheer). A scholar who made a frequency chart of expressions like these two, as a follow-up program of a project coordinated by the present writer, found its use as many as 249 times by 48 poets of India and Pakistan in three years after these lines were published back in 1948.

A poem that counterpoised one’s (indeed, the poet’s in his first person pronoun!) love for his beloved and his love for the struggle to bring about Revolution (with a capital R) made history in terms of its wide influence on poets of a lesser degree. The poem had these memorable lines but it was the last line that made poets follow suit in their own composition, using the same theme, the same topic and – sometimes - even the same words.

ان گنت صدیوں کے تاریک بہیمانہ طلسم
ریشم و اطلس ہو کمخواب میں بنوائے ہوئے
خاک میں لٹھڑے ہوئے، خون میں نہلائے ہوئے
جسم نکلے ہوئے امراض کے تتوروں سے
پیپ بہتی ہوئی، گلتے ہوئے ناسوروں سے
لوٹ جاتی ہے ادھر کو بھی نظر کیا کیجے
اب بھی دلکش ہے ترا حسن مگر کیا کیجے

In the years after this poem had been published, umpteen Urdu poets used the same subject, a comparison with two avocations so dear to the poet, his love for his beloved and his love for the political activism. It would be of historical interest to a scholar to pin-point such compositions which were written as a crib, plagiarism or wholesale copying of Faiz's poem, changing a word here or a word there. The following lines know for their lucidity and visual image of a worn-out upper garment *مفلس کی قبا* also became the stock-in-trade of these followers of Faiz.

زندگی کیا کسی مفلس کی قبا ہے جس میں.....ہر گھڑی درد کے بیوند لگے جاتے ہیں۔ لیکن اب ظلم کی معیاد کے دن تھوڑے ہیں۔ اک ذرا صبر کہ فریاد کے دن تھوڑے ہیں۔

These lines gave a hope for the future. Bound together in the same couplets a sordid present-day reality and the ray of hope for the future, once again, became the hall-mark of Faiz's poetry and dozens of lesser poets used the same technique.

SOME MORE PERSONAL NOTES

In the beginning of this short essay, I wrote about my personal contact with Faiz. Though short and sporadic, these meetings left an indelible impression of this great man on me. Many people who did not meet him on a one-to-one basis don't know that he had the rare quality of talking in verse. More often than not, Urdu sentences issuing forth from his mouth were lines of verbatim Urdu verse, what is called *fil-badeeh*. When he repaired to English, which he often did like all of us, this quality vanished. I was a student and teacher of English literature and I would often quote English verses from memory. He was very often bamboozled as to how I could do it. He could quote from classical Urdu or even Farsi poets with ease, but when it came to an English poet, and a line or two to be picked out of his memory, he fumbled and then looked helplessly at me to help him out of predicament.

Saqi Farooqi has written much about Faiz's habit of kissing women friends. He has even gone to the extent of saying that when his own wife Gundi took Faiz to show him their house, on the stairs Faiz kept on kissing her with loud smacks. Well, a little that I know is that unlike some other popular poets (Faraz is a celebrated example); Faiz was pretty strict when it came to seriously compromising his standing and stature for the sake of an evening of illicit sex. He would take recourse even to turning his back on such women. I have witnessed at least two such occasions where the female company was bent on winning him over for consensual sex, and he spurned them in a delicate way.

If Faiz had been alive today we would have been celebrating his century of life. Centenary celebrations, after one's demise, do not reach the height and glory of a person when he is alive. I still remember Chacha Mulk once saying that he would live to be hundred years old. Alas, he too could live only up to 99 plus and didn't quite reach the three figure optimum.

Let me end with a couplet from Faiz himself.

حلقہ کیے بیٹھے رہو اک شمع کو یارو
کچھ روشنی باقی تو ہے ہر چند کہ کم ہے