

## **Faiz Ahmed Faiz: Of Love and Rebellion**

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to present Faiz Ahmed Faiz, a talented Urdu poet, for a better understanding of his life and poetry, through various events and issues that shaped his life including his involvement in the Marxist movement, the struggle against colonialism, his participation in the Progressive Writers' movement, and his relationship with the Soviet Union. This paper also focuses on unraveling how love and revolution inspired him for his poetry.

**Keywords:** Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Progressive Writers' Association. Urdu poet, Marxism, Indian writers, poetry

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Woh log bahut kismat thay  
jo ishq ko kaam samajhte thay  
ya kaam se aashiqui karte thay  
Ham jite'ji mashroof rahe  
kuchh ishq kiya, kuchh kaam kiya.  
[Indeed, fortunate are those  
who considered love as their work  
Or loved whatever they did  
I kept busy all my life-  
Pursuing some love, doing some work.]

Early twentieth century witnessed a number of gifted and talented Urdu poets. Among those stars, Faiz Ahmed Faiz was one of the few who shone the brightest. He achieved huge popularity and fame, and became a legend in his lifetime. The life of Faiz Ahmed Faiz could not be portrayed in a truer way than the above lines from his poem, “Kuchh ishq kiya, Kuchh kaam kiya”. Through his lifetime, he thrived to seek love and justice. He showed the world how love and revolution can be the two sides of a coin. He saw love as a revolution in itself and

he drew on the strength of the two for his poetry.

This paper focuses on presenting Faiz's life and his poetry, by contextualizing the issues that shaped his life: the influence of Marxism, the struggle with colonialism, his involvement with the Progressive Writers' Association and his relationship with the Soviet Union. It also throws light on Faiz as a love poet, and how his love for revolution and humanity acted as a major inspiration for his poetry.

Faiz Ahmed Faiz is, undoubtedly, one of the most famous and popular modern Urdu poets. He was born on February 13, 1911 in Sialkot, India (Pakistan now). He first attended a popular regional school in his hometown but later joined the Scotch Mission School for both his primary and secondary education in English. Later he attended Government College and then Oriental College in Lahore where he earned master's degrees in English and Arabic. Since high school he loved reading English novels and during his time in Government College, he fell in love with European literature. But his true passion during that time was poetry. He graduated in 1935 and started teaching at Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental (MAO) College in Amritsar. It was during this time his political 'awakening' took place, which was greatly contributed by the friendship of Mahmuduzzafar and his wife Rashid Jahan and also a reading of *The Communist Manifesto*. After the turning point of his political journey, he delved into a socially and politically involved world until his last breath. He had an important role in the formation of the All India Progressive Writers' Association and became one of the prominent figures to be associated with the organization.

Although Faiz's early poems had been traditional and light-hearted expositions on beauty and love, a shift can be seen in his literary world from concerns of love to concerns of the world, which can be witnessed in his first collection of poetry but nevertheless it was accomplished without breaking away from the traditions of Urdu literature. Faiz's friend Sajjad Zaheer who was also an active member of the All India Progressive Writers' Association wrote:

The values represented by the poet are the same as the values of all progressive

humanity of today. But Faiz has adopted them so well that they neither appear distinct from the best traditions of our civilization and culture, nor is the individuality of the poet, his soft, sweet and lyrical style divorced from them.

It was also during this time in Lahore that he married Alys George, a British woman, with whom Faiz had two daughters. His teaching career did not last long as he decided to join the British Indian Army in 1942, after the Soviet Union got involved in the World War II. For his services, he was conferred with the title of Member of the British Empire (MBE). He resigned from the army after the War and became the editor of 'The Pakistan Times' in Lahore. During this time, he involved himself in many activities - trade unions, journalism and the international peace movement.

The year 1951 proved to be an important year for Faiz Ahmed Faiz in his political and literary career. During this year, he met with some high-ranking officers with whom he worked together during his time in the army, who were unhappy and not satisfied with the political affairs of their state. It was Faiz who set up a meeting with Sajjad Zahir, who was the General Secretary of the Communist party of Pakistan, to discuss the said issues, in Rawalpindi. The members who were present in the meeting decided it was not the right time for any action but unfortunately, they were arrested on the charge of 'conspiracy'. Faiz was eventually sentenced to four years of imprisonment. This period, however, acted fruitful to Faiz's career as his time in prison brought him back to poetry. His second collection of poetry, *Dast-e Saba* (Zephyr's Hand) and the third one, *Zindan Namah* (Prison Poems) both largely consisted of poetry written in prison. Years following his release from the prison, he continued his involvement in the International Peace Committee and his literary fame also grew. Many of his works were subsequently translated into many languages including Russian. In 1962, he was awarded the Lenin Peace Prize, the Soviet State equivalent to the Nobel Peace Prize. He took the opportunity to leave the country and went for a short self-imposed exile of two years in England. He returned to Pakistan in 1964, to spend the following eight years teaching and

working as a Secretary and then the Vice-President of the Pakistan Arts Council. He also wrote plays for the radio and some of his poetry was used in films and entertainment arts.

Faiz used to have disagreements with the policies of the government but the scenario changed a bit when Zulfikar Ali Bhutto took charge, as Faiz agreed with the new government's ideas. He continued giving his contribution to the cultural affairs and arts of the country. Unfortunately, a coup in 1977 forced Faiz to go for another self-imposed exile in Beirut for four years where he worked as the editor of the journal Lotus. During this period, he got involved in a friendship with Yasser Arafat, the renowned Palestinian leader. Faiz even dedicated the last collection of his poetry to Arafat, *Mere Dil, Mere Musafir*. From there, he even travelled to many countries of the world including India, Canada, the United States, Angola and Vietnam.

In 1983, he returned to Lahore permanently. His exiles had already worsened his deteriorating health by then. On 19 November 1984, he died of a cardiac arrest in Lahore's Mayo Hospital, shortly after he was nominated for the Nobel Prize.

Faiz Ahmed Faiz started his career as a poet by writing on the conventional themes of beauty and love. His first collection of poetry *Naqsh-e faryadi* consisted of the typical reflections of a young poet on love, beauty, tragedy, loss and heartbreak. It undoubtedly was on the emotional captivation of youth- love. We can witness the early poems of his career, written from roughly 1929 to 1935 particularly dominated by themes of love.

However, these themes of his poetry got tangled with the larger social and political issues of his time. His poetry started focusing on love and justice. In fact, the true creativity and genius of Faiz Ahmed Faiz can be seen in the way he integrated his own vision of love and justice in his poetry. He highlighted the oppressed, which is the agony of mankind, with the power of love through his words.

Faiz's famous poem, "Do not ask of me, my beloved, that same love", was his first experiment of mixing his 'beloved's love with his love for humanity. In this remarkable and groundbreaking poem, he wrote: "There are other griefs in this world apart from that of love /

And other pleasures apart from that of union”.”””

It is indeed true that Faiz revolutionized Urdu poetry. A very fine product of his revolutionary poetic mind is his poem "Hum Dekhengey":

We shall see

It is certain that we shall see

The day recorded in the eternal tablet,

When the weighty mountains of cruelty and oppression,

Shall be blown about like cotton wool;

When under the feet of the oppressed ones

The earth shall shake noisily,

And over the heads of despotic rulers

Thunder claps will burst...

When the crowns will be toppled,

When the palaces will be demolished...

Faiz's poetry was inspired by many events; which include incidents that occurred to him, and also the social and political events that occurred in other parts of the world during his lifetime. Some of the significant ones that occurred to him was his involvement in the All India Progressive Writers' Association (PWA), his spell in prison and the conferment of the Lenin Peace Prize.

The Progressive Writers' Association came into being, after the 1932 publication of *Angaray*, a collection of nine short stories and a play, written by four young writers namely Sajjad Zaheer, Ahmed Ali, Mahmuduzzafar and Rashid Jahan. Sajjad Zaheer, who was Faiz's good friend and mentor, was the movement's leader. The movement's aims were briefly, as

given in the association's first manifesto:

It is the object of our Association to rescue literature and other arts from the conservative classes in whose hands they have been degenerating so long to bring arts in the closest touch with the people and to make them the vital organs which will register the actualities of life, as well as lead us to the future we envisage.

During Faiz's time at Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental (MAO) College in Amritsar, he became friends with Mahmuduzzafar and his wife, Rashid Jahan. They successfully persuaded Faiz to join the PWA and this proved to be an important turning point in his career and life. After joining the PWA, Faiz wrote,

Joining the PWA opened new worlds to my eyes. The first lesson that I learned was that it is pointless to think of oneself as being apart from the larger world around us. In the end, anyone person, with all their loves, their hatreds, their joys and sorrows is a minuscule being. [I learned that] the sorrow of life and the sorrows of the world are one and the same.

As a result of the infamous Rawalpindi conspiracy case, in 1951, Faiz along with Sajjad Zaheer and some other members were imprisoned and confined to solitary cells. This period of Faiz's life highly stimulated his creativity and it was between these four walls of his prison-cell that Faiz found his voice. With first-hand experience as a prisoner, he could identify with others who were denied of justice and their freedom. But this did not mean that he diminished his hope during his time there. He firmly believed that 'dawn' is inevitable and will surely knock on the door as he wrote in one of his poems: "It whispers, don't give up / Wait a little, dawn is near.

During his lifetime, Faiz always maintained a strong relationship with the Soviet Union. The Marxist influence on him was one of the reasons for this bond. Faiz indeed spent a fair amount of time in the Soviet Union where he was highly respected and very popular. He first travelled there in the year 1958 to attend the first Afro-Asian Writers Conference. The then

government of Pakistan initially felt reluctant to allow Faiz to go there, but eventually agreed to let him attend the conference. Four years later, he returned there again to receive the prestigious Lenin Peace Prize, where he accepted the prize with a speech in Urdu. This prize made him quite popular in the Soviet literary world. A translation of *Dast-e-Saba* had already been published a few years earlier. Over the next few decades, his poems were translated to the Russian language by the major poets of their country.

Apart from being one of the greatest Urdu poets, Faiz was also a teacher, a journalist, arts enthusiast, a trade union leader, a film maker and most remarkable of all, a lifelong committed Marxist. He was a devoted Leftist who saw hope in Communism. Faiz's boundless humanism drove him to advocate the cause of revolution all across the world through Marxism. His poetry and work reflect his voice for the masses of the exploited, against all forms of exploitation and oppression. He was an active member of the freedom struggle's movement against colonialism led by the Communist party of undivided India. The imprisonment of Faiz, along with his fellow comrades, did not diminish his hope in any way, instead, the experience made him stronger than before.

Carlo Coppola, in his book *Poetry East*, wrote about Faiz:

A spokesperson for the world's voiceless and suffering peoples- whether Indians oppressed by the British in the '40s, freedom fighters in Africa, the Rosenbergs in Cold War America in the '50s, Vietnamese peasants fleeing American napalm in the '60s, or Palestinian children living in refugee camps in the 1970s.

There is no denying the fact that much have been written about Faiz Ahmed Faiz and will, indeed, be written in the future about the life and work of this literary genius, social hero and devoted Marxist. Many lessons could be learned from Faiz and his life, and one of them particularly is, for every one of us who aspires for change and better days, to blend the passion of commitment with creativity, just like Faiz himself. In fact, he perfected this with his poetry. He did not break away from the traditional Urdu classical forms but mastered in it and makes



the audience hear the revolutionary message with love and anger at the same time.

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