

Intersection of Poetry and Politics: A Comparative Study Between the Life and Poetry of Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Pablo Neruda

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Abstract

Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911-1984) was a famous revolutionary Pakistani poet who wrote chiefly in Urdu and Punjabi. He is known all over the world for his romantic as well as hard hitting poems and nazms. His “*poetry with purpose*” is sung and read even today to shatter the chains of oppression and hegemony. Pablo Neruda (1904-1973), on the other hand was a well-known Chilean poet and writer. Neruda wrote on a variety of subjects since his tender age and like Faiz, his poems are too tools of intellectual resistance. His poems have too transcended geographical boundaries in equal pace like that of Faiz. Both Faiz and Neruda were friends and had a good rapport. Their poems have been praised not only in their homelands but across territories and won global acceptance. The paper attempts to bring out the commonality between the life and poetry of Faiz and Neruda. The paper also attempts to analyse how their poems were anti-colonialist and anti-fascism.

Keywords: revolutionary, oppression, hegemony, anti-colonialist, intellectual resistance

Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Pablo Neruda were contemporary poets and friends whose poems have ever been tools of intellectual resistance. Their works show major similarities with both being anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist and they both denounced oppressions not only in their homelands but all across the globe in any form. Their poems are sung and read even today to shatter the chains of hegemony. They both were good friends and humanists whose works openly criticised their own governments. Both Faiz and Neruda were arrested for being anti-establishments and their works from prison too show many points of similarity. Faiz wrote for the poor Pakistanis and their aspirations of a “free nation” whereas Neruda, since his adolescence wrote for the ordinary Chileans who were devastated by the Spanish civil war. Neruda was awarded the Lenin Peace Prize in 1953 and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1971 whereas Faiz Ahmed Faiz was awarded the Lenin Peace Prize in 1962 and was posthumously recognised by the Pakistani government for his influential works with the Nishan-e-Imtiaz, the country’s

highest civilian award in 1990. Important works of Faiz Ahmed Faiz include “*Subh-e-Ajadi*”, *Naqsh-e-Fariadi*, *Dast-e-Sabah* and *Zinda-Nama* whereas notable works of Neruda include “*If You Forget Me*”, “*A Dog has Died*”, *Every Day You Play*”, “*Tonight I can Write the Saddest Lines*”, and “*Ode to Tomatoes*”.

Faiz Ahmed Faiz:

Faiz is often described as “a man of wide experience” and had the experience of being a teacher, an army officer as a second lieutenant, a broadcaster and more importantly a progressive writer. He was born on 13th February 1911, in Narowal, Punjab, a province in erstwhile British India. He was born in a well to do family with his father being a barrister. Faiz from his early years was taught secularism and its ethos. Faiz also started reading and learning the holy Quran from a very tender age. He from his childhood showed love for Urdu and Persian language and under the Islamic tradition of his family members, he learnt Arabic. His family first admitted him in a local Madrasa but Faiz was not comfortable in sitting with those who ridiculed him for his neat and clean clothes. He was then admitted in an English medium school. Faiz, in 1926 obtained his BA Honours degree from the Government College University, a prominent research institute in Lahore. He in 1932 also gained his Master's degree in English language and literature from the same University and earned another master's degree in 1932 in Arabic language. He married Alys George in 1941 in Srinagar and the couple had Salima Hashmi in 1942 and Muneeza Hashmi in 1946 as their children. Salima Hashmi, the eldest daughter, grew to be an artist and a staunch critic of the nuclear tests that were carried out by both Pakistan and India. To her, the basic necessities of the humble Pakistanis should have been the prime agenda and not a mad race in producing nuclear warheads. She criticised this by saying, “*It would be so much more fruitful if these energies could be used in producing food to eat, providing shelter, freedom from disease and education for all.*” His younger daughter is a television producer and devoted her life for uplifting the standards of television shows in Pakistan.

Faiz also worked as a military officer in the British India Army and worked for the Army in various provinces. He gained quick promotions but the Kashmir war with India in 1947 disillusioned him that led him to tender his resignation the same year. Faiz had Marxist leanings and advocated for a classless society. He also associated himself with communism and founded the Communist Party of Pakistan in 1947, after his resignation from the British Army. He was also a member of the All Pakistan Progressive Writers Association which was anti-imperialist that supported left-wing politics. His association with the Writers Association made him even more communist and he by then started advocating for equal treatment and social equality. He along with the members of the All Pakistan Progressive Writers Association started writing for the masses and encouraged them to write back to the autocratic regime. The members advocated equal treatment before law and soon gained popularity across Pakistan, with their works being revolutionary and motivating. They aimed to dispel out the deep-rooted social hierarchy in the Pakistani society. Members of the APPWA included Rafiq Chaudhury, Hamidi Kashmiri, Syed Sibte-e-Hasan, Mohammed Ibrahim Baig, Farigh Bukhari and Faiz Ahmed Faiz.

The Indo-Pak war of 1947 saw a massive turn of events for Faiz. The failure of the Pakistani government led by Liaquat Ali Khan to occupy the Indian state of Kashmiri sparked widespread criticism in Pakistan with questions from all quarters about the government’s ability

to secure the sovereignty of the country. Prime Minister Liaquat Ali Khan imposed an immediate ban on the Communist Party of Pakistan. Faiz and other communist leaders faced restrictions in free movement and found it hard to operate the party under Ali Khan's autocratic rule. Faiz along with Major General Akbar Khan and Sajjad Zaheer plotted the so-called Rawalpindi conspiracy. The leftist Akbar Khan, was at the centre of the conspiracy as he was growing frustrated under the regime of Liaquat Ali Khan and more importantly the failure of the government to support adequately the army in the Indo-Pak war in 1947 made him much frustrated. Their plot was subsequently foiled and mass arrests were carried for the attempted military coup against the government. General Akbar Khan, Faiz Ahmed Faiz and many other leaders of the restricted communist party were arrested immediately. Faiz was termed a four year imprisonment. Faiz was again arrested by the then president of Pakistan, Iskandar Mirza in 1958 for being pro-communist.

Faiz, while in prison wrote a number of poems and described his stay and the experience he gained in prison as-

"Prison life, like love, is itself a fundamental experience which opens up a new vista of thoughts and insight. The first thing is that, like the dawn of love, all the sensations are again aroused and the mistiness of the early morning and evening, the blue of the sky, the gentleness of the breeze return with the same sense of wonder. And the second thing that happens is that the time and distances of the outside world are negated; the sense of distance and nearness is obliterated in such a way that a single moment weighs on the mind like the day of judgement and sometime the occurrences of a century seem to be like the happenings of yesterday. The third thing is that in the vastness of separation, one gets more time for reading and thinking and for decorating the bride of creativity."

Faiz also wrote a number of poignant letters to his wife Alys Faiz and described his experience of prison. He wrote on a number of letters from prison and on 25th March 1952, he wrote to his wife from his cell-

"I think pain and unhappiness are distinct and different things and it is possible to go on suffering pain without being really unhappy. Pain is something external, something that comes from without, an ephemeral accident like a physical ailment, like our present separation, like the death of a brother. Unhappiness on the other hand, although produced by pain is something within yourself which grows, develops and envelops you if you allow it to do so and do not watch out. Pain, no one can avoid but unhappiness you can overcome if you consider something worthwhile enough to live for. Perhaps I am becoming pedantic again so I shall leave it."

Pablo Neruda:

Pablo Neruda, born as Ricardo Eliécer Neftalí Reyes Basoalto (1904-1973) was a Chilean poet, writer and diplomat. Neruda was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1971 *"for a poetry that with the action of an elemental force brings alive a continent's destiny and dreams."* Neruda was also awarded the Lenin Peace Prize in 1953 for "strengthening peace among comrades". Neruda was a young prodigy and started to write from the tender age of 13. He wrote on a variety of subjects and his themes included love, romance, politics and history. He also wrote a number of political manifestos and expressed his left leanings through these manifestos.

His works are revolutionary and are often against oppression and hegemony. His works played a major role in defining public sentiments during the Spanish Civil War. The poems of Neruda gained international prominence and are read and studied across boundaries. Harold Bloom in his book *The Western Canon: The Books and Schools of the Ages* included him along with John Milton, Franz Kafka, James Joyce, among the 26 writers that he considered prominent and central to concept of the western canon. His famous poems include “*Chosen Ones*”, “*Discovers*”, “*Dog Has Died*”, “*Finale*”, “*Sexual Water*” and his collection “*Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*”.

Neruda was born in the Maule Region, Chile and was raised by his father as his mother died two months after his birth. His father discouraged Neruda of his hobby of writing; Neruda did never pay any heed to his father’s discouragements. He gained immense support and encouragements from Lucila Godoy Alcayaga, who later on went on to win the 1945 Noble Prize in literature. At the tender age of thirteen, Neruda published his first essay titled “*Entusiasmo y perseverancia*” (“*Enthusiasm and Perseverance*”) and there after he gradually rose to be a writer of prominence in Chile. He is assumed to derive his pen name, Pablo Neruda, from the Czech poet and writer, Jan Nepomuk Neruda. Neruda published his “*Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*” (“*Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada*”), a romantic collection of poems in 1924 and is often regarded as his *magnum opus*. Neruda’s collection was soon translated into various languages including English; despite the collection’s explicit erotic contents, the volume gained widespread popularity and has sold tens of millions of copies till date. The volume is also adapted and appropriated in various languages and cultures with versions including rock music, monologues, being produced. His other later works include his collection “*Tentativa del hombre infinito*” (“*The Attempt of the Infinite Man*”) and the novel “*El habitante y su esperanza*” (“*The Inhabitant and His Hope*”).

Neruda was deeply influenced by the Spanish Civil War that started in 1936, his themes saw a complete turnaround thereafter, from romantic poems and collections to sombre, realistic and war-torn. The execution of his close friends Rafael Alberti and Federico Garcia Lorca in the dictatorial regime of Francisco Franco Bahamonde made him realise the devastations caused due to wars and militancy and this echoed in his several poems in the latter part of his diplomatic life. The wars made Neruda move closer to communism and publicly began to speak for communism and socialism. He even described Vladimir Lenin, the Russian Marxist, “*the great genius of this century*”, and began following Leninism more overtly. Neruda also had close relations with Fidel Castro, Fulgenico Batista, Joseph Stalin, Mikhail Ivanovich Kalinin and Mao Tse-Tung. He had to run from house to house and from country to country to escape his possible arrests and is even today a controversial figure for his abuses and relationships with women in his exiles.

Their legacy:

Though Faiz and Neruda are not alive today, their poems and nazms are cited, read and shared even today and are tools of passive resistance. They were excellent humanists and had always stood and spoke against discrimination and hatred. Their works won them acclaims all over the world and are source of inspiration for the growing young poets and revolutionaries. Their critical works against the hegemonic regimes are often seen as a mirror to the present day’s autocratic rulers and are loved unimaginably by millions and billions worldwide. Their works are

anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist and equally inspiring. Their works in prison also have similarities in theme as both critically examines the power structures. Their works shatters the chains of oppression that we have closely seen in the India's anti-CAA protests. Poems of both the poets were used widely to create unity and their works gave the much-needed enthusiasm and energy to the movement that propelled it to the next level, making it one of India's largest people's struggles.

Faiz's famous Urdu nazm, "*Hum Dekhenge*", and Neruda's "*I'm Explaining a Few Things*" shook the very roots of their discriminatory political leaders. For instance, lines from "*Hum Dekhenge*", "*Hum dekhenge/ Lazim hai ki hum bhi dekhenge/ Wo din ke jis ka wada hai*" and from Neruda's "*I'm Explaining a Few Things*", "*Come and see the blood in the streets/ Come and see/ the blood in the streets/ Come and see the blood in the streets*", unequivocally criticize their oppressors by employing traditional religious imagery. Faiz's nazm was a direct attack on General Zia-ul-Haq, who was a military dictator and a non-believer of Islam and its faiths whereas Neruda, through his lines criticised the Spanish Civil War that killed his friends Federico Garcia Lorca and Rafael Albert and described how the war destroyed all his childhood dreams. He used wide imageries like that of jackals, bandits, vipers, fire, bullet and bloods to highlight the devastations that the war had wrecked on ordinary Chileans. To all the people who questioned him of not writing of the flowers, nature and love, he through the poem answers them all, "*Come and see the blood in the streets*". The lines of this poem were also quoted by Harold Pinter in his Nobel prize-winning speech in 2005.

Also, their poems are intricate and contained several layers of meaning, like Faiz's "*Gulon mein rang bhare/ baad-e-naubahaar chale/ chale bhi ao ki/ Gulshan ka kaarobaar chale*" can be both interpreted in its literal meaning and "real meaning". The sher in its literal meaning refers to the description of a garden whereas in its deeper meaning, the poet talks about the predicaments of his country and calls for a revolution, the word "gulshan", here, means his country. Neruda's "*A Dog Has Died*" can too be interpreted differently by its readers and each interpretation gives more lives to the "Dog" and the poem simultaneously.

Faiz in his sher "*Dil na-umid to nahin nakan hi to hai/ Lambi hai gham ki shaam magar shaam hi to hai*" calls for struggle and resistance so that the ultimate authority of power lies with the masses. The sher is used even today by revolutionaries to push their revolutions against hegemony and cultural oppressions. Neruda's "*Spain in Our Hearts*" is also used to fuel revolutions worldwide and calls for passive resistance to bring peace and harmony. The poem condemns the mass violences that erupted following the civil war. Faiz's "*Aur kya dekhne ko baaki hai, aapse dil laga ke dekh liya*" talks about the pain of a lovelorn because of the unrequited love, whereas Neruda's lines "*Tonight I can write the saddest lines/ To think that I do not have her/ To feel that I have lost her*" also talks of his unrequited love. He in his poem describes the pains of betrayal and highlights his unimaginable love for her. Both Faiz and Neruda in these poems explores sadness and solitude that their loves have "gifted" them following break-ups.

Thus, from their lives and poetry, we see that both Faiz and Neruda are still alive amongst us through their poems and nazms. Their poems give a new dimension to both love and protest at the same time. Not only in their homelands are their works read and discussed,

they are read even more these days because of the growing hate and disillusionments worldwide. In Faiz and Neruda, we see that the East meets the West that creates a new horizon of love, peace, brotherhood and humanity.

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