

Comments by SRF on his childhood reading, in response to questions from Carla Petievich, Sept. 17, 2018:

When I was small, my English wasn't so hot as to enable me to enjoy English novels. Also, we were very poor, and in a small town in the 1940's. There were hardly "native" bookshops, let alone "Vilayati" bookshops.

My first two English novels were "The Vicar of Wakefield" and "Pride and Prejudice". At that time, I was twelve, nudging on 13. I enjoyed them, but the humour and the satire quite escaped me. I had a vague idea that "The Vicar..." was a comic novel and I did enjoy some of the songs. I remember the Chorus lines of one of them still.

By the time I was 14, I began to read English translations of French novels and stories rather plentifully: Maupassant, "Madame Bovary", and I think a few more. By the time I went to College for my B. A., I'd read quite a few detective stories and novels in Urdu translation, Conan Doyle leading the pack. The first English detective novel I read was, if I remember correctly, "The Purple Claw" by some obscure writer. Very soon, I was ensnared by Hardy and remained under his spell for at least a couple of years, but I didn't neglect to read whatever other English novels (and French novels in English translation) that I could find. I particularly remember Samuel Butler's "The Way of All Flesh" and Andre Gide's "The Coiners" (also translated, I think, as "The counterfeiters").

I forget much of what I'd read by that time. But Shakespeare I'll never forget; him I read extensively after writing my B.A. exam. We read only "Twelfth Night" as part of our B.A. syllabus. Ever since, I have been his slave.

As for the proportion of my Urdu reading against English, I must say that with the death of Munshi Tirath Ram Ferozepuri, good translations of detective fiction became very scarce. So I hardly read any, until about 1953 when I became addicted to Ibn-e Safi's "Jasusi Duniya" monthly novels. They were original, that is, not translated, but heavily influenced by a number of English authors. Gradually, Ibn-e safi became more sophisticated.

Frankly, Faiz didn't inspire anyone. He influenced Ahmad faraz, but all others (if any, only felt inspired by Faiz because they saw it was easy to become popular by indulging in "revolutionary" poetry in a feebly classical manner. I am afraid none in Pakistan now stop to think creatively about Iqbal or even Faiz.