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The News on Sunday

Faruqi's world

Aasim Akhtar, Dec. 6, 2015

Eminent Urdu critic, poet, theorist and novelist, Shamsur Rahman Faruqi talks about his models and sources of inspiration

Towards the end of his long life, Goethe said that he had only just learned how to read. In *The Sun That Rose From The Earth*, we are treated to the wisdom and keen insight of a writer who has himself learned, over the course of a long, rich life, to read the world differently. From imagining life in the fifteenth century to the secrets of literary tradition, Shamsur Rahman Faruqi's oeuvre spans a huge range of subjects, cultures, periods and themes, but they are utterly consistent in one key regard: his clear-eyed vision and clearly-expressed prose.

Faruqi's command on classical prosody and his *ilm-e-bayan* are also a map of the human spirit, of our hopes, fears and basic needs; and on a more personal level, a map of the wonderful, searching mind of one of our greatest living writers.

Shamsur Rahman Faruqi (born 1935) is an eminent Urdu critic, poet, theorist and novelist who has nurtured a whole generation of Urdu writers after the 1960s. An expert in *ilm-e-bayan* (poetic discourse), he has contributed to literature with a profundity rarely seen in contemporary times.

Recipient of numerous awards and honours, he was most recently awarded the prestigious Saraswati Samman for his pioneering work *Sher-e-Shor Angez* — a four-volume study of the 18th-century poet Mir Taqi Mir. His other works of acclaim include *Kai Chand They Sar-e-Aasman* (tr. *The Mirror of Beauty*) — a fictional account of the life and times of Wazir Khanum, mother of the famed poet Daagh Dehlavi in 19th century Delhi, and *The Sun That Rose From The Earth*, both translated into English by the writer himself.

Faruqi, light in built, is 80 but looks 60, with an avuncular demeanour. Retired as a top bureaucrat from the Indian Postal Service, he divides his time between home in Allahabad and travel. In the excerpts below, the reverent author talks to *TNS* about his models and sources of inspiration while on a brief visit to Lahore for Faiz International Festival.

The News on Sunday: What was your first introduction to literature?

Shamsur Rahman Faruqi: What should I tell you about my first introduction? I opened my eyes in a household teeming with interest in literature. It was only a coincidence that the household had clerical leanings while the maternal part of the family was academicians and scholars. In the age and culture in India, especially in northern India I belonged to, it was only natural to possess an interest in poetry. And even though poetry writing was not such a commonplace, exchange of poetic verse was part of our lives. As a natural consequence, my father would help me memorise verse. Iqbal was a towering figure in poetry, and my interest in him grew with time.

I always had the temperament to write; I trusted myself to become either a poet or a short story writer. As far

as criticism is concerned, I was too young to discern it. So writing came naturally to me, and by the age of 8 or 9, I had started taking out a paper called *Gulistan*. I would tear out pages from my old notebooks to include in the paper encompassing my poems, short stories and essays. My elder sister who passed away recently had a great penchant for writing, and would write rather well. Sometimes, she would contribute to the compilation. We were our own readers — my younger and older siblings and an occasional family elder. And even though they thought it was sheer waste of time, no one stopped it. The paper survived for 2-3 years, and ceased publication once we came to Gorakhpur from Allahabad.

At that point, I had no clue of fame, popularity or publishing. I used to think that like you eat, drink, sleep and breathe, you should serve literature. That is to say, literature is an essential part of one's daily occupations. I began to write short stories followed by poems and translations but I would still consider myself a simpleton whereas I was nicknamed 'philosopher' by my father.

After some time, I wrote my first novel which appeared as a serial in a magazine, and which I am much embarrassed about to this day. As I became an adult, I decided to look at each poet individually. They used to say that Momin lacks poetical treatment of a topic and Ghalib is difficult and complex to read, and so forth. To probe deeper, I began to read books I had access to which ultimately led to writing criticism. And once, the succession of writings jettisoned into action, it never stopped.

I could never be in agreement with the writers and poets of the Progressive Writers' Movement. In my point of view, they were harmful to literature.

TNS: At the onset of your literary career, which writers played a vital part in shaping your ideas or influencing your thoughts?

SRF: I have been a very ordinary man, totally oblivious of a 'literary career', let alone to the fact that there could be a literary influence. Iqbal, and Ghalib to some extent, were foremost among the writers I had been familiar with. Since I grew up in a religious household, among other books by Maulana Thanvi, I also read *Bahishti Zewar* aimed at the adult reader even though (I confess) I was neither an adult at that time nor did I understand every word of it. I can't call him an early influence because as I said earlier, I never allowed myself to think along those lines. Besides, I believe, one can never learn from one's peers, be it Iqbal or Ghalib. In my opinion, they are there to be read and enjoyed. Therefore, I cannot recall or recount any influence per se.

TNS: What made you turn towards fiction?

SRF: I used to read novels in hiding: the first novel I ever read was *Shamim*, followed by *Anwar*, both by Munshi Fayyaz Ali. These were my early readings what Bernard Shaw refers to as 'literature of adolescence', when I was merely eight or nine years old. (My father used to read these books in hiding, and taking after him, so did I). It was sheer coincidence that there was a bookbinder's shop below our house whose son, Tufail, became my friend. Soon after coming home from school, I would sit with him at the shop and together we'd rummage books, reading them all in turns, good or bad notwithstanding, including novels. Around the same time, detective novels began to fascinate me a lot.

It was only after learning a bit of English that I started to read Jane Austen. Little did I know at that point that she was a great satirist and that there were aspects of societal import in her observations pertaining to the English nobility and bourgeoisie. The first English novel that I read from start to finish was *Pride and Prejudice* by her. I could not comprehend the nuances of satire but I did ponder over her cold and calculated prose contrasted with Munshi Fayyaz's fiery style. What I did like about Austen, however, is the way the

female characters were presented in the novel. Later on, the interest in reading literature widened to detective and non-detective novels. I continued to read Abdul Wahid through my Masters days until the interest gradually faded away.

Around that time, translations of great Russian and French novelists into Urdu were fast gaining popularity. When I was in high school, I had started reading Thomas Hardy. I remember how passionate I was to bring his books home, marvel at their volume when my heart would sink at the thought of reading them. Yet, when I finished reading them, I would wish they had been even longer. There was no philosophy and no agenda behind reading, just plain passion. The idea was to fill your heart with as much reading as you can, and of course write.

TNS: Did you have any particular models in mind when you set out to write the novel *Kai Chand They Sar-e-Aasman*?

SRF: William Makepeace Thackeray was part of our syllabus in MA. What I like about his books (*Vanity Fair* and *The History of Henry Esmond*) is the manner in which the author presented the literary personalities of his time as distinct characters, such as Jonathan Swift and Edison, apart from the coffee house ambience which was not directly linked to the novel but was included to add colour and allure. When it came to writing prose, I realised there was no such example in Urdu literature where the author had reflected on the private life of a writer as a writer concerning the kind of life he'd spent or the kind of environment he'd lived in or about his loves, failures and rivalries in life.

A S Byatt is a great writer. Her novel *Possession* possesses both qualities: she sketches out the particulars in painstaking detail, what she also admits to be her forte. In the novel, a middle-aged Victorian man falls in love with a much younger woman than himself. He writes her letters in verse in Victorian English. The author has carefully mapped out the minutiae coupled with Victorian English, bearing in mind the nature of poetry. I had my heart sold out to that novel.

I also read a lot of Walter C Scott, and responded emotionally to his novels. Then there was *Chatterton* by Peter Ackroyd about a young eccentric poet who commits suicide. The older models were *Dilli Ki Aakhri Shama* by Mirza Farhatullah Baig and *Mirza Ghalib Se Aik Mulaqat* by Malik Ram. When I first read Baig, I refused to believe it was an anecdote and instead thought it was a real incident. Likewise, Malik Ram wrote in the first person. It was so convincing that one thought he was Ghalib's contemporary. I kept these aspects of writing before me when I started to write. I was like an untethered bull, hitting anything that would come my way.

TNS: What kind of a relationship did you have with your teacher Mohammad Askari?

SRF: Askari Sahab was never my teacher. However, if you may consider him my teacher in essence, it won't be out of place. Together with Karimuddin Sahab, he had a major influence on me despite the fact that I tended to argue and debate anything that the latter said, and still do but for the fact that his manner of speech was candid, I respect Karimuddin Sahab. He was straightforward and undaunted in what you call in English 'the minority opinion'. Since then up to now, it's been my credo that he who hesitates in voicing the minority opinion is not a genuine man. He was a unique prose writer whose prose sounded like verse, so well organised was his expression and so lucid his prose, even though I did not necessarily subscribe to his ideas.

On the other hand I tend to agree with most of Askari Sahab's ideas. When he quotes references from Western writers, it appears he's actually read them and that whatever he's saying is coming from the source. He came under fire by the critics who branded him a third rate newspaper reporter and accused him of

recounting to his colleagues whatever he had read the night before, which is absolute rubbish. Askari Sahab was a profoundly learned man. I learnt a lot from him, and I truly regard him as my essential teacher. There were teachers at school who impressed me with their training skills, erudition and encouragement but I never took any help from them in my literary career.

TNS: How did *Sher-e-Shor Angez* evolve?

SRF: Mir Taqi Mir is talked about as much today as in my times. I decided to read Mir when he became talk of the town, back in the 1960s. I could not find his *Kulliyat* (collected works) anywhere, and had to rely on *Intakhabat* (selections). I felt that on account of those selections, I couldn't somehow picture him to be a great poet whereas the critics had held him to be great and divine-spoken. I was lucky enough to find an edition of his *kulliyat* six years later, compiled by Abbasi in 1965-66. After reading it I realised that his was a world apart. I also felt that he was an oppressed poet who nobody had ever struggled to do justice to, including both his die-hard admirers and lesser admirers who, in any case, held him inferior to Ghalib. It became indispensable to bring before the literary world the real Mir. For doing that, I saw no point in making a fresh selection with all its intricacies and subtleties. After all, every single couplet by him had a philosophical point that a common reader may not have been able to decipher on his own without a guide. This is how *Sher-e-Shor Angez* evolved.

TNS: Why did you decide to name your literary journal *Shabkhood*, and what was your relationship with the Progressive Writers like?

SRF: Writing had become weak and people were disappointed with it. There was a lack of vitality that made people say, "We are the last ones after the deluge". Others, especially the peers, had done their bit and had nothing much to look forward to. To stimulate the masses, we decided to choose a name for our journal which could speak as an emblem for the fact that there was still a lot more to be said: you must wake up and witness it. Some thought we were launching a detective novel. I meant to tell them that it was a lot more than that; that it's going to be a discovery of new writers and will help new trends in writing rise to the fore and generate renewed interest.

I had an amicable relationship with, more or less, all groups of writers and intellectuals. They were all kind to me.

However, I could never be in agreement with the writers and poets of the Progressive Writers' Movement. In my point of view, they were harmful to literature. The short story or poetry they presented had a specific objective and a specific school of thought to forge ahead. One could not talk about plain emotions or express feelings of frustration because this was against their agenda. "There will be a morning; the morning will dawn while you may expire in waiting for that morning to dawn". To convince oneself to tell lies, and to convince the reader in turn to believe in lies, and to write verse with a special intention, is to kill the purpose of literature.

Many like Abdul Haleem and Sajjad Zaheer struggled to put the record straight but their biggest issue that they could not resolve was that you cannot sacrifice didacticism for literariness and vice versa. They should walk together, hand-in-hand. But how will they meet? They could not devise a prescription. Those who forced out a solution had to be forced out of the group like Askari Sahab and Manto. There is yet to be a solution whereby oil and water can mix together.

TNS: Why do you think Mushafi, the poet, should still be read today?

SRF: Think of a man who is Mir and Sauda's contemporary; who has trained Aatish; who may have proven his style before Nasikh and confessed that he would like to write verse *intheir* style because it's a novel style. Can you find such a man today? One who has had a long practice, who had tested, read, thought and written about the temperament of the new breed of poets as well as the old; who had gone so far as to declare that Aatish, the child prodigy who was his shagird will be his ustad in future, and that he would be emulating his style. He is an odd confluence in our literary history.

Talk about 'bad press' now. Who didn't get it aplenty? It was rumoured that even though Mushafi tries very hard, he can't get rid of Amroha pun; that he had no manner or mode. They never used to talk about manner or mode in those days. It's us who started it after reading English. One could write whatever pleased one. If your verse carries nuances of Mir or Sauda or Ghalib, let it be. There was no concept of individuality in Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian literatures, not even in Greek.

It was an invention of the Romantics who passed it on to us. Let's surmise on the viewpoint that ghazal can have many different modes, and if you wish to witness the spring of ghazal, read through *Kulliyat-e-Mushafi*. You can pick a couplet of your choice, be it erotic or amorous. There is no experiment that you can't find in Mushafi. It's facetious to claim that Mir, for instance, had a specific mode that you can't find in Sauda. I can pick 500 couplets from Sauda and swear by them if you could tell the difference!

Each era has its own style. We had two characteristics: ingenuity and excellence. By the first it was meant to overpower your art. It was obligatory for all. *Apney fun per hawi ho ja, to tu us ka hakeem ban ja*. Once you have knowledge, excellence is in God's hands. Mushafi wrote eight divans of ghazal, one compilation of masnawis, and two more divans, yet we are adamant that he had no style or manner of his own, and that he imitated Mir. He is a bridge between his time and ours that spans over a hundred years of change and continuity.

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