

The Pursuit of Urdu Literature

A Select History

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Zed Books Ltd
London and New Jersey

1992

14. Faiz Ahmad Faiz – Poetry, Politics and Pakistan

The poetry which the Progressive Writers' Movement produced did not reach the heights which the short story did. But one poet secured for himself an important place in Urdu poetry and upheld some of the major values of the progressives for nearly half a century, from the middle thirties right up to his death in 1984. This was Faiz Ahmad Faiz. By the middle fifties he was already recognized as the leading Urdu poet of Pakistan, and rapidly became the most popular Urdu poet of the whole subcontinent.

As we shall see, it was not solely the excellence of his poetry that won him this position, but his poetry is nonetheless his most important legacy to us and demands our main attention.¹

Faiz began his career as a poet at a time when different categories of poets catered for different, and often conflicting, tastes. First were those, mainly *ghazal* poets, who were content to continue virtually unchanged the classical tradition and regarded any departure from it as a departure from poetry itself. Two other groups wrote in conscious response to what they felt to be the demands of new times and new conditions. One comprised the progressives and their sympathizers, whose viewpoint has been discussed in the previous chapter, and the other those equally self-conscious innovators whose major organization was the *Halqa i Arbab i Zauq* (Circle of Men of Good Taste, or, more literally, Circle of Possessors of Taste). The tone of this somewhat pretentious title captures very well the lofty disdain that they generally felt for their numerous contemporaries who had not been blessed with 'good taste'. Their quarrel with the progressives stemmed from their view that art and propaganda were mutually exclusive, and that art must be for art's sake alone. (It must be said that some of the progressives provided ample fuel for this fire, producing verse which, if clearly progressive, was equally clearly not poetry. However, it should also be said that some of the 'men of taste' made the opposite mistake and assumed that anything that was presented as a poem and was clearly not propaganda must therefore be art.) The progressive school included some whose hostility to the 'men of taste' was matched by a hostility to the *ghazal*, which they regarded as an outmoded, medieval form.

Faiz from the very beginning held himself aloof from all these extreme views. His poetry of all periods shows a certain catholicity of taste and a command of a wide range of skills which enabled him to win acceptance and esteem from the audiences for all three trends. *Ghazals*, poems on overtly progressive

themes, and 'modern' poems which do not, however, express anything inconsistent with progressive values – all are to be found in his collections of verse. So too are poems in the tradition of the *qavvali* – popular devotional Muslim verse – and of the *tarana* – rousing verse embodying the sentiments appropriate to popular political campaigning. Faiz maintained this breadth of range to the last, and it is one of the bases of his exceptional popularity.

Eight collections of his verse were published in his lifetime. The first, *Naqsh i Faryadi*,² was published in 1941, and includes poems dating from 1928-29 onwards. The last dated poem in his last collection, a *ghazal*, was written in November 1984, only a matter of days before his death. *Poems by Faiz*, a good selection of poems with parallel verse translations by V.G. Kiernan, was published under the auspices of UNESCO in 1971. Almost all the poems, Kiernan says, 'were chosen by Faiz himself, and all the translations have been discussed with him,'³ and Kiernan has added an introduction⁴ and notes. The selection covers the first four collections, and a few poems from (at that time) uncollected verses. Although these four collections comprise only about half of Faiz's total output, most of the poems I discuss in this chapter are taken from them. There are two main reasons for this. The first is that Faiz's best-known poems (and in my view almost all his best ones) are included in these first four collections, while the last four have relatively few. And a second, rather more mundane one, is that *Poems by Faiz* (which was recently republished⁵) provides the maximum help both to those who are able to study his verse only through the medium of English and to those whose study of Urdu is still in its relatively early stages. Kiernan's translations are appreciably better, and certainly closer to Faiz's originals, than any of those by subsequent translators, and for students of Urdu, there is the help afforded by the Roman transliterations and the literal translations which the book provides.

Three of the first four collections include forewords by Faiz himself, and in the forewords to the first and the fourth (*Dast i Tih i Sang*) he tells us something of their themes and of the varying backgrounds against which they were produced. Almost all the poems of the period 1928-29 to 1934-35 were the product (to use the coy words of his introduction to his first collection) of a *muayyan* ('established') emotion. One guesses that by 'an established emotion' he means one generally recognized as being commonly experienced – that is, love – and this is confirmed by his description of this in the introduction to his fourth collection, where, speaking of these same early poems, he describes them, in words only a trifle less coy, as springing from 'that affliction of the heart which befalls most people in their youth.' Numbers of these, not surprisingly, are in the *ghazal form*.

The earliest of his most famous poems, *mujh se pahli si muhabbat, meri mahbub, na mang*, 'my beloved, do not ask of me my former kind of love' (No. 6 in Kiernan's translation where it is entitled 'Love, Do Not Ask') begins the second part of *Naqsh i Faryadi* and marks, he tells us, the beginning of a new consciousness, an awareness that a man's love for a woman cannot be the be all and end all of life, and that he must be aware of, and deeply affected by, the

suffering of the poor and exploited. A better poem is 'To the Rival' (No. 7 in Kiernan). In the traditional *ghazal* the rival is a stock character, the type of the false lover whose professions of love, all too often accepted by the poet's beloved as sincere, are in fact a deception, practised to achieve his own selfish ends. In Faiz's poem by contrast he is one whose love is as sincere as the poet's own, and one with whom the poet feels a common bond, and indeed a common bond stronger than he could feel with any other, since both he and his rival have forged it from identical experience. Faiz goes on rather abruptly to say that from this experience 'I learned to be the friend of suffering creatures' and that now whenever he thinks of the suffering and the exploitation that is their lot, a fire over which he has no control sets his heart aflame. In *Poetry's Theme* however, (No. 12 in Kiernan) he declares that, aware as he is that the sufferings of the poor afford themes for poetry, the charms of his beloved are such that only they can be the theme of his poetry. But it seems that he did not always feel like this. Only a few poems before *Poetry's Theme* comes one of his best directly political poems, *Speak*. In Kiernan's translation (No. 11 in his selection) it reads:

Speak, for your two lips are free;
Speak, your tongue is still your own;
This straight body still is yours –
Speak, your life is still your own.

See how in the blacksmith's forge
Flames leap high and steel glows red,
Padlocks opening wide their jaws,
Every chain's embrace outspread!

Time enough is this brief hour
Until body and tongue lie dead;
Speak, for truth is living yet –
Speak whatever must be said.

I shall return to this poem below.

Naqsh i Faryadi was published in 1941.⁶ A second collection, *Dast i Saba*,⁷ did not appear until eleven years later, in 1952, and presumably includes all the verse he had written over these eleven years. These were years in which he had acted on the conclusions he had reached in the mid-thirties and played an active part in social and political movements. He had been a leading light in the Progressive Writers' Association from the start. In June 1942, convinced now that with the entry of the Soviet Union into the Second World War it was the duty of progressives everywhere to support the war effort, he joined the army, in which he served until December 1946, leaving with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel, and (in 1943) having been awarded the MBE. From February 1947 to March 1951 he edited simultaneously two progressive daily papers, the English-language *Pakistan Times* and the Urdu *Imroz* – the duties of an editor in Pakistan being perhaps rather less onerous than Western readers might

suppose. He also publicly identified himself with the trade union movement, and in 1951 was Vice-President of the Pakistan Trade Union Federation. In the relatively free political conditions that prevailed up to 1951 he also served in posts to which he was appointed by the Pakistan government, going to San Francisco in 1948 and Geneva in 1949-50 as a member of the Pakistan government delegations to the International Labour Organization (ILO).⁸

But independence had not brought into being the kind of regime that could maintain the unity of all those who had fought for it, and, both in India and Pakistan, the new rulers began to turn with increasing ruthlessness against the mass of the people whose support had brought them to power. The strength and depth of Faiz's feelings on political issues had evidently increased over the years, and in *Dast i Saba* poems on political themes occupy a prominent place. Despite his earlier disclaimer in *Poetry's Theme*, he has now found in these themes the inspiration which produces true poetry no less effectively than themes of love. In 1952, when this collection appeared, only five years had passed since the political settlement of August 1947 which brought independence to the subcontinent and its simultaneous partition into the two states of India and Pakistan. Two of Faiz's best poems express the widespread disappointment which the aftermath of independence had brought.

To a Political Leader (No. 14 in Kiernan's selection) reproaches the type of leader at whose call his followers have fought against almost impossible odds to achieve their aims, whose whole political capital consists of this heroic, self-sacrificing support – and who now wants to curb the forces which he himself had mobilized, even if by so doing he jeopardizes all the gains that have been won. *Freedom's Dawn* (No. 19 in Kiernan's selection) speaks directly of the August 1947 settlement, described in its first line as

یہ داغ داغ اُجالا، یہ شب گزیرہ سحر

'This much stained radiance, this night-bitten morning', and goes on to say that this is not the dawn that those who had fought for freedom had laboured so hard to bring. Our new rulers, says Faiz, tell us to rejoice because the struggle is over now. Not so, he says,

Night's heaviness is unlesened still, the hour
Of mind and spirit's ransom has not struck;
Let us go on, our goal is not reached yet.

These two poems, and the earlier poem *Speak*, exemplify a marked characteristic of Faiz's progressive poetry. He never speaks, as some of his contemporaries do, in the strident tones that raise the hackles of all except the converted, but maintains what I have called the universality of the traditional *ghazal*, which enables it to speak to different people's different conditions. (And indeed this is a quality of much of the world's great poetry.) I have read (somewhere that I cannot now recall) that *Speak* was written soon after the outbreak of the Second World War, and reflects the very widespread indignation of politically articulate

Indians at Britain's high-handed declaration of war on India's behalf, and at the restrictions of political liberties imposed in the name of wartime needs. But nothing in what the poem actually says restricts it to that situation (and in the notes, Kiernan, quite properly, does not think it necessary to tell us anything of the circumstances in which it was written). Moreover, the poem tells its audience to speak, but doesn't tell it *what* to speak. And so it remains a spirited call to all free men, in any country and any age, to speak out boldly what free men have a duty to say, even though they risk imprisonment if they do so. *To a Political Leader* has the same sort of universality. Readers encountering it for the first time when *Dast i Saba* came out in 1952 would almost certainly assume that it was addressed to the leaders of the new post-independence states. But Kiernan's note tells us that it was the mass uprisings of August 1942 that had inspired it.⁹

Freedom's Dawn has the same universal quality. Some of Faiz's left-wing critics have criticized it for an alleged ambivalence, arguing that *anyone* who is dissatisfied with the post-independence regimes of India and Pakistan can identify with it. But that view is quite untenable. The poem's theme is the disappointment of those who had fought for independence – and not of anyone else; and it captures admirably the sort of helpless restlessness after 1947 of millions of people who had felt that independence would see the birth of a brave new world without quite knowing what that brave new world would be like, and who now felt that whatever independence ought to have brought, it was certainly not this. Faiz's left-wing critics would presumably have wanted him to produce a poem which would have told its readers *why* independence had not brought the results they had hoped for and what must now be done to remedy the situation. But I know of no Urdu poem which has done this, and I very much doubt whether this kind of demand is one that poetry can meet. Poetry demands what one may call a certain generality; greater specificity belongs to the domain of prose.

It is about half-way through *Dast i Saba* that we find the poem in which he at last completely harmonizes the love one feels for a lover, with its demand for self-sacrifice, with the wider, more inclusive love that makes similar demands. In *Two Loves* (No. 29 in Kiernan) Faiz expresses his equal dedication to his mistress and to his still recently established country, Pakistan, speaks of all that he has suffered in his love for both, and concludes

Yet my heart feels no regret for either love
My heart bears every scar but that of regret.

This stand is one which thenceforth he never abandoned. And though *Two Loves* does not explicitly say so, it is clear from other poems that when Faiz speaks of his commitment to his country he means first and foremost commitment to the cause of the poor and exploited masses of its people.

The poetry of the years to 1952 constantly reflects an awareness of dangers that lie ahead, speaks of the risks of suffering, imprisonment and even execution that those who fight for the cause of the people will be obliged to face, and calls upon them to be steadfast in the fight. By the time it was published Faiz was himself in gaol. In March 1951, he, a number of leading communists, and a

group of army officers had been arrested and charged with taking part in a conspiracy to overthrow the Pakistan government. It was not until just over four years later, in April 1955, that he was released on bail. (He was acquitted in September 1955.) Most of the poems in *Dast i Saba*, and all the poems of Faiz's third collection, *Zindan Nama* (Prison Writings), published in 1956, were written during his imprisonment. One of Faiz's fellow-'conspirators' in the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case, as it was called, was Major Muhammad Ishaq, and in a long and valuable introduction to *Zindan Nama* he gives us a fairly detailed account of Faiz's imprisonment. He was arrested on 9 March 1951, and for three months held in solitary confinement in Sargodha and Lyallpur (now Faisalabad) Gaols and deprived of writing materials. Then, until July 1953, he was in Hyderabad gaol. The 'conspirators' were then split up and sent to different prisons. Faiz and Muhammad Ishaq were among those who were allocated to Montgomery gaol, and it was from there that Faiz was released in April 1955.

Faiz, in a short essay prefaced to his fourth collection *Dast i Tih i Sang*,¹⁰ has described what the experience of imprisonment did for his development as a poet. He says that the verse he wrote in gaol continues that strand in his poetry which began with *Love, Do Not Ask*,

But the experience of imprisonment, like that of love, is in itself one of fundamental significance, and opens up new windows of thought and vision. Thus in the first place, all one's sensations are again heightened, as they had been at the onset of youth, and the sense of wonder at the coming of day, the shades of evening, the deep blue of the sky, and the feel of the passing breeze comes back once more. Another thing that happens is that the time and distance of the world outside become unreal. Things that are near seem far away, and far away things seem near, and the distinction between tomorrow and yesterday vanishes so that sometimes a moment seems like an eternity and things that happened a century ago seem to have happened only yesterday. And thirdly, in the leisure of isolation from the world outside, one finds time for thought and study, and time to devote more attention to adorning the bride of poetry.

— in other words, time for polishing one's verse.

Both Faiz and Ishaq speak of different distinctive periods ('moods', as Ishaq calls them) of the verse of these four years of imprisonment. The first, says Ishaq, was that of the three months of solitary confinement, where Faiz composed and memorized the short poem that now stands first in *Dast i Saba*. Kiernan's translation of it reads (No. 17):

If ink and pen are snatched from me, shall I
Who have dipped my finger in my heart's blood complain —
Or if they seal my tongue, when I have made
A mouth of every round link of my chain?

and his note on it tells us that it is 'one of several poems that Faiz composed in solitary confinement, when deprived of writing materials, and was only able to

write down several months later.' Ishaq says 'Faiz Sahib used to say that in those days he felt greatly inspired and all manner of themes would come to mind; some poems he could not remember afterwards, but those he could are included in *Dast i Saba*.' He then lists seven of them. Kiernan's selection includes three of these, numbers 17 (just quoted), 25 and 28. All three express courage in the face of every danger, and confidence in what the future will bring. Thus in *Tauq o Dar ka Mausam*, This Hour of Chain and Gibbet (to use Kiernan's title), he calls the time

This hour of chain and gibbet and rejoicing
Hour of necessity and hour of choice.

and tells his captors

At your command the cage, but not the garden's
Red rose-fire, when its radiant hour begins;
No noose can catch the dawn wind's whirling feet,
The spring's bright hour falls prisoner to no net.

Others will see if I do not, that hour
Of singing nightingale and splendid flower.

For some reason Faiz himself in the essay just quoted is silent about these first three months, and speaks of only two periods — the Hyderabad one (June 1951 to July 1953) and the Montgomery one (July 1953 to April 1955).

He says of the verse of the two-year Hyderabad period that it is dominated by the — "sense of wonder", and instances one of the last poems in *Dast i Saba*, A Prison Nightfall, (No. 33 in Kiernan's selection) as an example.

Step by step by its twisted stairway
Of constellations, night descends

Graciously on that roof's high crest
The moonlight's exquisite fingers gleam;

.....
One thought keeps running in my heart —
Such nectar life is at this instant,
Those who mix the tyrants' poisons
Can never, now or tomorrow, win....

Ishaq says of this period that 'all the physical comforts that are possible in jail were provided,' and that although there were a number of charges against them that carried the death penalty, the 'conspirators' were in excellent morale and confident that somehow victory would be theirs. But Faiz, on 14 July 1952, suffered a heavy blow when his brother, who had come to visit him in gaol, died of a sudden heart attack.

In July 1953 when Faiz, Ishaq and others were allocated to Montgomery Jail, Faiz was first sent for two months to Karachi to undergo medical treatment, and it was not until September 1953 that he began his almost continuous stay in Montgomery. (For three weeks in March 1954, Ishaq tells us, they were sent to

Lahore to have their teeth attended to.) Faiz says that these years were a period of 'boredom and fatigue'. Almost all the poems in *Zindan Nama* were written during these two years.

Ishaq says that Faiz felt the constraints of prison life in Montgomery all the more keenly because in hospital in Karachi he had been relatively free. 'His friends had no difficulty in coming to see him [and] these were reasons why he came to feel intensely the blessings of freedom.' When he came to Montgomery Gaol, therefore, he felt the extremity of the contrast. He began, too, to feel more keenly what must be the plight of other political prisoners in other countries. He salute to the freedom fighters of Africa, *Africa, Come Back*, belongs to this collection. Already in *Dast i Saba* he had written *To the Students of Iran Who gave their Lives in the Struggle for Peace and Freedom* – expurgated in Kiernan (No.30) to read *To Some Foreign Students...* and to omit all references to Iran (and with an anxious note "...this poem should be taken in a general sense, not as referring to any particular place or time."¹¹) Ishaq says that in Montgomery gaol they read in the American periodical *Time* an account of the shooting of Iranian students in prison, printed alongside pictures of the place where they had been killed. 'Faiz feels a special love for (Iran), the country of Sadi and Hafiz. He was upset and disturbed for several days,' and eventually gave expression to his feelings in a poem *The Last Night*, in which he portrays the ...'thoughts that pass through the mind of a prisoner on the night before his execution next morning.' (This poem for some reason is, as far as I can ascertain, not included in any of Faiz's collections.)

In *Zindan Nama* too is a poem, *We Who Were Killed in the Dark Street*, written in May 1954 after reading the letters of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the American couple who were executed, despite worldwide protests, after being found guilty (wrongly, as many believed) of betraying atomic secrets to the Soviet Union. Ishaq regards the poem *Darica* (The Window) as the most complete expression of Faiz's mental state at this time. Faiz himself singles out *O City of Lights* as typical of this period. Both are included in *Poems by Faiz* numbered respectively 36 and 35.

The Window begins

In my barred window is many a cross

and goes on to list some of the things that are crucified on these crosses

On one the heaven's spring cloud is crucified

On one the radiant noon is crucified

Yet every day they return, revived to be crucified again.

Zindan Nama is only the third of Faiz's eight collections of his poems, but the first three collections provide ample materials for a study of all that is best in his poetry, and I shall make only occasional references to later poems.

I have hitherto spoken mainly of Faiz's political poems, because I believe these to be his best. But as I said at the outset, there are also poems of other kinds. Some of the best are his love poems, often, though not always, in *ghazal*

form. The very first poem in *Naqsh i Faryadi*, comprising only two couplets and headed simply *Ashar* (Couplets) but in Kiernan's translation entitled *Last Night*, is one such poem. This translation reads:

Last night your faded memory filled my heart
Like spring's calm advent in the wilderness,
Like the soft desert footfalls of the breeze,
Like peace somehow coming to one in sickness.

Another short poem, also in *Naqsh i Faryadi*, is in Kiernan's translation (No.22) headed *Her Fingers* and reads:

The softness of her fingers is in this dawn-wind's hand;
And as it stirs, the fancy comes to lay to my mind
That her soft hands are searching through the ranks of our friends
To find what are their heartaches, to feel where are their wounds.

A *ghazal* of five couplets in *Zindan Nama*, unusually simple in its language and with a long, strongly rhythmic line

— — — — — | — — — — — | — — — — — | — — — — —

begins

When are you not with me in memory? When is your hand not in mine? A
thousand thanks that as night follows night, no night is a night of separation.

The *ghazal* ends

If you gamble in the game of love, stake as much as you like – why be afraid?
If you win, what happiness! And even if you lose, all is not lost.

Another poem of two couplets in *Dast i Tih i Sang* is headed *Tanhai* (Solitude) and reads:

Today loneliness like a well-tryed friend
Has come to be my evening wine-pourer.
We sit together waiting for the moon to rise
And set your image gleaming in every shadow.

Finally there are poems which are neither political poems nor poems of love. It is a striking feature of his poetry that he is not afraid to portray in a poem any emotion that he feels deeply. Such poems are clearly not 'propaganda' (and this allows the 'Men of Good Taste' to approve of them) and though most have nothing in them to offend progressives either, some of them do. For progressives – or at any rate the most puritanical among them – it is a cardinal sin to despair. Well, Faiz sometimes felt a keen sense of despair, and since he felt it, he expressed it. His poem *Yas* (Despair) is on that theme and nothing else, and contains no sop to the puritan progressives (such as, for example, an expression of regret, confession of weakness and so on); it belongs to the late 1920s, the days of the great world economic crisis, days in which, says Faiz, graduates looked in vain for employment, 'days when suddenly children's laughter died,

when ruined peasants left their fields to work as labourers in the cities, and when respectable women took to prostitution.' It was written in the period before Faiz became a revolutionary, but he quotes it in his foreword to his fourth collection, *Dast i Tih i Sang* published in 1965, without any adverse comment, and evidently did not include it in those poems of his youth which (as we shall see) he regarded as not reaching a 'tolerable' standard.

Faiz himself says that 'The period after *Zindan Nama* was one of some mental turmoil. I had lost my profession of journalism. I had again to go to gaol. The period of martial law arrived...' (In September 1955 Faiz had resumed his post as editor of the *Pakistan Times*, but in December 1958, in the early days of Ayub Khan's martial law regime, he was again imprisoned and the *Pakistan Times* and associated newspapers were in 1959 taken over by the military regime.) Faiz continues, '...and in the mind and atmosphere of that environment alike, conditions gave rise to a feeling that once again the road ahead was to some extent blocked and one must look for other ways forward.' It was a period, he says, of 'stagnation and waiting'. He is writing, presumably somewhere around 1964 or 1965, because although the piece is not dated it appears as a sort of foreword to *Dast i Tih i Sang* and, one imagines, was written to serve as such. He continued to live and write for another twenty years, and one wonders whether he ever really emerged from the mental state he describes. At all events, 1955 marks the beginning of a new period. To the best of my knowledge he never wrote any account of his development over these years to continue his account of the period 1928 to 1955; so we do not know what he thought about it.

I have already said that I shall not in this chapter discuss more than an occasional example of his verse of this period. I shall, however, say something of his role both as a poet and as a prominent figure in the public life of Pakistan; and this requires some further discussion of the 1934 to 1955 period as well.

At the beginning of this chapter I said that it was not solely the excellence of his poetry that won him the pre-eminent position he came to occupy. We should note here some of the other factors that contributed to his standing. Generalizing them, one might say that Faiz was always, both in politics and in literature, sufficiently identified and sufficiently unidentified with a number of different groupings to get the best of a number of worlds. To say this is not to question his sincerity – a quality which is not the exclusive property either of the committed or of the uncommitted – but simply to state a fact. Let us first take the literary field.

Faiz was a Panjabi, but like most Panjabi Muslim writers, he always chose to write in Urdu which, since the decline in Persian, has been the dominant language of culture of the Muslim community throughout the subcontinent. (The few poems which he wrote in Panjabi towards the end of his life do not significantly alter the picture.) His attainments in Urdu were such as to excite both the pride of his fellow-Panjabis and the admiration of the *ahl-i-zaban* – the people of Urdu mother tongue. The first were proud that one of them could write

Urdu well; the second admired the exceptional attainments of one who was *not* one of them; and no poet of Urdu mother tongue could have won this kind of esteem from both publics.

Secondly, as we have already seen, he wrote in a way which enabled him to appeal to each of the (broadly speaking) three different audiences for poetry.

Two factors outside the field of poetry also contributed to his prestige. Firstly, in 1941 he married an English wife; and secondly although his sympathies were with the poor, he was not one of them, and lived a decent, respectable, reasonably comfortable life which his respectable contemporaries recognized with a feeling of satisfaction as being very much like their own. (In my experience these essentially snobbish attitudes held by people in South Asia – and, for that matter, elsewhere – are not perceived as being in any way inconsistent with advanced revolutionary views.)

Faiz's imprisonment as one of the accused in the Rawalpindi Conspiracy case brought, along with the hardships, an enhanced fame; so that when he came out of gaol he had a larger and more appreciative public than when he went in.

Finally, by this time he was the leading progressive poet in Pakistan, a sort of personal embodiment, unique in Pakistan, of the by now virtually defunct Progressive Writers' Association.

Thus conditions that came into existence independently of his will or his contriving, brought him to the fore. He was a highly intelligent man and, as the words I have quoted above imply, now began to take stock of his new position.

It seems to me that from the time of his release after the Rawalpindi Conspiracy trial Faiz made up his mind that he was not again going to do anything that could land him in prison, and that he was going to lead as comfortable a life as possible, proclaiming the same message in his poetry as he had always done, remaining in the limelight, but refraining from any dangerous political activity. At all events, he suffered imprisonment only once after that, when Ayub Khan established his martial law regime in 1958. (He was in gaol from December 1958 to April 1959.) I am told that far from being imprisoned on Ayub Khan's instructions, he was gaoled without Ayub Khan's knowledge by an over-zealous subordinate who thought that Faiz's imprisonment would please the Americans, and that pleasing the Americans was an important part of Ayub's policy. My informant tells me that when the officially approved organization of Pakistani writers protested, Ayub Khan told them that he had given no orders for Faiz's imprisonment and gave immediate instructions for his release. After that, until the end of his life, Faiz lived a life of considerable material comfort, surrounded by rich and influential friends who would entertain him lavishly and treat him to the whisky of which he was so fond.

His position in the political and social life of Pakistan was somewhat similar to his position in poetry – one of an avoidance of full commitment to any clear cut stand and one which therefore enabled him to steer clear of anyone's strong disapproval. Always on the left, but never either a Communist Party member or so close a fellow-traveller as to be identified with it, his stand may be fairly described as a blend of Marxism with a kind of secular Pakistani nationalism, a blend of a kind which made him close enough to the communists to win their

praise and respect, but not so close as to forfeit the friendship of the more liberal elements of the Pakistani establishment, or indeed of that establishment as a whole in its more liberal moments. In international politics too he came to occupy a similar position, especially during the years when Pakistan moved from its one-time stand of clear and uncomplicated alignment with the West in the early days of the Cold War. Thus, Faiz indeed contributed, both as a poet and as a citizen, to the cause of peace and friendship between nations, but one doubts all the same whether he would have been awarded the Lenin Peace Prize in 1962, and whether Pakistani opinion would have been so pleased at his receiving the award, had he been either closer or less close to either of the two positions between which he stood. His standing internationally contributed further both to his fame and to his comfort. During his sojourns in the Soviet Union he was provided with all the comforts of the life to which he had accustomed himself – and so also, though less frequently, in China, Cuba, the USA and other countries he visited.

Other features of Faiz's behaviour contributed to this sort of blurring of the lines. Kiernan says that in his personal relationships he is famous for his silences (p.26) and one could say the same of him in the political field. Even his friends would, I think, find it hard to tell how far these were the silences of uncertainty and how far the deliberately ambiguous silences of political tactics. His travels abroad had something of the same character, so that one of our mutual acquaintances once said to me in some exasperation, 'When Faiz ought to stay in Pakistan he comes out, and when he ought to stay out he goes back.'

His acceptance of government posts, in the conditions of relative political liberty which existed until 1951, is, I think, both understandable and justifiable. His continuing acceptance of them in later years is, to say the least, rather less so. Under the Bhutto regime of 1971-77 he was Cultural Adviser to Bhutto and continued to hold this post until Bhutto's overthrow by Zia ul Haq, long after Bhutto's savage and vindictive nature was inflicting imprisonment, torture and humiliation of the most shameful kind upon those who crossed him. In 1977, when General Zia ul Haq again established martial law, Faiz thought it best to leave the country; but nobody forced him to: he went of his own free will to take up a well-paid post of editor of a Soviet-supported literary journal. He remained abroad until returning to settle in Lahore in November 1982, two years before his death.

All this brings one back to his role as a poet; for this sort of ambiguity represents, in a way, a somewhat novel development of an old tradition. In the old quasi-feudal autocratic society the *ghazal* poet was, amongst other things, the licensed critic of the establishment, and was protected by two generally accepted conventions. The first of these was the nature of the *ghazal* itself, which permitted many of its verses to be interpreted simultaneously on several planes of meaning, some more 'dangerous' than others. The second was the convention that in his poetry he had a right to be as unambiguously rebellious as he pleased – but at the price of having his words regarded as 'only poetry', and not to be taken seriously outside the poetic symposium – the *mushaira* – where they were uttered. Faiz took full advantage of this time-honoured convention. But he

did more than that. Whether by conscious design or not, he in some degree succeeded in extending the range of operation of this convention beyond the bounds of the *mushaira* into society at large, and brought into being a situation in which his role as a poet enhanced his role as a politician, and his role as a politician enhanced his role as a poet – but in politics too, reaping the same advantages and paying the same price for them as the classical poet did in his more restricted field of operation. (Not that he pushed his luck too far. I was intrigued when a banker, a co-speaker with myself at a condolence meeting for Faiz in London soon after his death, said that he disagreed with Faiz's political views – views which, however, he had never heard him express except in poetry.) Given the present stage of development of Pakistani society, to do what Faiz did was not too difficult a task, but Faiz's success was all the same remarkable. And having said all that, one must add that Faiz's poetry reflects very faithfully the feelings of vast numbers of his radically inclined fellow-countrymen, including most of those whose favourite arena of radicalism is the drawing-room.

This, as it may appear, rather harsh-sounding judgement can be supported both by the similar judgement of his close friend and fellow-'conspirator' Muhammad Ishaq, which I shall quote below, and, more importantly, by reference to his poetry.

There is a lot of Faiz's poetry that does not appeal to me; but I should hasten to add that I can say the same of almost all the poetry I have ever read. I read a poet's work, feeling as I do so that much of it is eminently forgettable, and some is enjoyable – and, occasionally, with a thrill of delight, 'This is real poetry.' I feel this, for instance, in reading Mir, whose *best* poetry I love; and I think that it is a poet's best poetry that he deserves to be judged by. Mir's best poetry puts him in the first rank of poets. I don't think that Faiz's does.

To do him justice, Faiz was of the same opinion, at any rate about his first published collection *Naqsh i Faryadi*. He begins his foreword:

The publication of this collection is a sort of admission of defeat. A few of its poems are perhaps tolerable, but a few tolerable poems don't make up a publishable book. In principle I should have waited until I had accumulated poems of this kind in sufficient number, but it has begun to seem pointless to wait any longer.

Later in the same foreword he speaks of 'the commercial reason' for not omitting his early verse. He says that the poems in the first part of the collection (occupying 36 pages of its total of 72) are mostly love poems (described, as we have seen, as a *muayyan* ('established') emotion which made it easy to write in established forms). He says that he experienced it when he was young, and adds that 'the roots of the experiences of youth are not deep' – on which one feels inclined to comment, 'the roots of the experiences of youth are not deep' – on which one feels inclined to comment, 'Speak for yourself'. However, the roots of the experiences which these early poems of Faiz express are indeed not deep,

and one feels that when he and Kiernan made a selection for the UNESCO-sponsored translation they were right to exclude almost all of them. Even the few that they included cannot for the most part be numbered among his best poems.

This seems to be the point at which to say that 'commercial reasons' continued to weigh with Faiz throughout his life. The sort of ambiguity which one encounters in every aspect of his life is in evidence here too. He wrote verse which appealed, and, one feels, was consciously designed to appeal, to each of the three audiences I have described, and perhaps all the more so to the first two – the 'traditional' and the 'modern' – because in general he took his stand with the progressives, and his 'traditional' and 'modern' poems therefore made a greater impact than would have been the case if all his verse had been in a single style.

Of poetic tradition he wrote towards the end of his preface to *Naqsh-i-Faryadi*, 'I have not thought it appropriate to depart unnecessarily from traditional styles', adding that he had made only minor departures from the traditional rules of metre and rhyme. 'Quite right!' one thinks. 'He has had the good sense to reject the view that the traditional forms, and above all the *ghazal*, are outmoded, "feudal" forms that no progressive poet should employ.' But when one looks at his *ghazals* one cannot help feeling that along with good and effective ones in which the best *ghazal* traditions are used to express age-old but still powerfully relevant feeling, or are without violence adapted to wholly contemporary themes, there are others of the kind that any competent versifier could have written at any period of the *ghazal*'s history. One such *ghazal* is that in *Zindan Nama* which begins

گلوں میں رنگ بھرنے بادِ نو بہار چلے

Let colour fill the flowers, let the breeze of early spring blow.

It is one in the repertoire of one of South Asia's most popular *ghazal* singers, Mehdi Hasan, and, one feels, finds a place in it because it expresses in easily intelligible language, well-worn and wholly unremarkable themes to which any popular audience can at once respond. Any *ghazal* which singers as popular as Mehdi Hasan sings gains a currency which contributes substantially to the fame of its author, and one feels of not a few of Faiz's *ghazals* that he wrote them for him, and a number of other famous singers, with that sole aim in view and not because he had anything much to say in them.

One has much the same mixed feelings about poems on which Faiz's appeal to the moderns must have been based. Faiz knew very well that a progressive poet has emotions which are shared by others who would not call themselves progressive but are not the less valid and not the less valuable for that, and that these can often be most successfully expressed in forms (including free verse) which had no place in the classical canon. Poems like *Solitude* (No. 8 in Kiernan) and *Despair*, which I have already quoted, are good examples of the best that he produced in this style. But in others the 'modern' trappings seem to be

everything. Thus in *Evening*, the overall impression is one of outlandish, obscure, and pointless comparisons – 'Every tree is like a temple, a ruined... temple'... 'The sky is like a (Hindu) priest... It is as though some magician is seated behind a curtain...' Here and in other poems Faiz seems to be imitating the unnecessarily difficult diction, and the fashionable, pretentious, culturally snobbish and pointless obscurity which characterizes the worst of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot and their imitators, and where what is said, wherever it is intelligible, seems to be not worth saying. And there is no doubt that there were, and are, among Faiz's readers quite a number who like this kind of poem for exactly these spurious qualities. Faiz himself evidently liked this poem, for he included it in the selection which Kiernan translated. Kiernan, perhaps, was less impressed, for he notes on the comparison of the sky with a Hindu priest, 'I give the meaning as explained by Faiz, but the image, taken straightforwardly, is a curious one.'

Faiz's poetic diction, one feels, is often just a bit too much. What is wrong with it is well illustrated by his remarks already quoted, that the enforced leisure of imprisonment gave him the opportunity 'to devote more attention to adorning the bride of poetry.' This pretentious manner mars a lot of his verse. Many in the audience of a popular poet are dazzled by poetry that abounds in Persianized vocabulary and Persian constructions, and Faiz is all too fond of high-flown language; and the result is sometimes ridiculous, as where the barking of dogs is expressed as *ghogha e sagan* which may be reasonably translated as 'the clamour of canines.' Even in his best poems one finds this kind of thing. To describe freedom's dawn as *shab-gazida* ('night-bitten') is disconcerting rather than striking. If he had left 'the bride of poetry' to exercise her appeal by beauty unadorned we should have had better poetry.

The content of his verse, too, leaves one with a sense of something lacking. I have already remarked on his comment that the roots of youthful love are not deep. Where Faiz is concerned, judging by his poetry *his* love never did become deep. His beloved is, to me, a singularly unattractive person. In the appealing *ghazal* in *Zindan Nama* which I quoted above there is a couplet that reads:

The field of love is not a king's court. Here no one asks your name and lineage. The lover has no 'name' and love knows no caste.

But if this was Faiz's view of the lover he seems to have taken a different view of the beloved. His beloved is not simply a woman; she is a lady – a lady with plenty of money and plenty of leisure to spend on make-up, fine clothes and rare perfume, and it is these rather than any intrinsic qualities (for he rarely mentions any) that Faiz seems to find attractive. No wonder that in *Freedom's Dawn* it is the restraining arms of rich ladies reclining in their sumptuously appointed bedchambers (*khvab-gah*) that tried to hold him and his comrades back from participating in the freedom struggle. Nor does Faiz's discovery announced in *Love Do Not Ask* impress me much. The realization that there are other things in life besides love of women which must engage a mature man's attention, and that no one can be forever insensitive to the sufferings of the poor and oppressed is surely not so world-shaking that it needs to be announced with a fanfare of

trumpets. However, my rather lukewarm response to this poem reflects my own personal development, in which concern for the poor and oppressed preceded the experience of passionate love for a woman, and it never at any time occurred to me that there was any conflict between the two. I realize that this is not everyone's experience, and that others who are not lacking in the capacity for wider human sympathies can go through a stage in which these sympathies are dormant, and love for a woman can be so all-consuming that nothing else seems to matter – even in a country where stark poverty confronts one inescapably on every side, as it does not, or need not, in the developed countries of the world. I suppose that I also expected more of a poet who was at home in the *ghazal* tradition, in which love is all-embracing and it is taken for granted that love for woman (or man), love for humankind, love for God, love for high ideals – all these are aspects of a single, indivisible love. Faiz seems to attain to this realization rather tardily in *Two Loves*, and that too after the relapse announced in *Poetry's Theme*.

The other of his 'Two Loves', his country and its poor and oppressed inhabitants, is portrayed, like his lady beloved, in terms of external appearances; and in this portrayal Faiz shows a propensity to dwell upon scenes that evoke disgust rather than on things that arouse sympathy – let alone that admiration and solidarity which are the indispensable basis of the revolutionary social change that Faiz preaches. Thus in *Love, Do Not Ask* what he contrasts with the charms of his beloved are diseased bodies, with pus flowing from festering sores. In *Dogs*, where dogs are clearly a (not very apt) symbol of miserable, oppressed humanity, the picture is one of people who live and die in filth, begging and stealing in order to live, bearing every humiliation, and when they fight at all, fighting one another.

Ishaq, then, is right when he says that 'the blood and sweat of the working people of Pakistan' is not much in evidence in Faiz's poetry, and that 'his poetry still has to emerge from the drawing room, the school and the college and spread to the streets, markets, fields and factories.' It is in the drawing-rooms and colleges that Faiz felt most at home, where it is my experience that revolutionaries (both those who see themselves as such only in fantasy and those who are more fully committed) rarely want to know the real human beings whose cause they champion and whose role they seem to see (consciously or unconsciously) as that of admirably applauding them and doing as they tell them.

Faiz's rather lukewarm style of loving and his concern never to commit himself too unequivocally seems to have entered into his soul, so that even in poems where the expression of stronger feeling would have posed no risk, that feeling is surprisingly absent. His poem on Iqbal, an incomparably powerful influence both for good and bad, says almost nothing, though it was written after Faiz had formed his progressive outlook. A literal translation reads,

To our country came a sweet-voiced *faqir*. He came, and passed through singing his *ghazals* in his own style. He filled the empty roads with people, and the deserted taverns began to come to life. Only a few had the vision to penetrate to him, but his song went deep into the hearts of all. Now that king

in beggar's clothing has gone far away, and the roads of our country are again despondent. A few dear ones have one or two visions, but his song dwells in the hearts of all. The beauties of that song will never fade. Its exuberance, its fervour, its deep feeling – this song is like the fierce flame of a volcano. Caught in its leaping fire, the heart of the wind of non-existence melts [whatever that means]. It is like a lamp that does not fear the rage of the desert wind, like a candle oblivious of the coming of morning.

A poem, in short, that could apply to any poet who exercised a great influence on his contemporaries, and tells us nothing whatever about the qualities which made him great and influential or about Faiz's assessment of him and his message.

Even where we would expect the expression of deeply felt personal emotion one does not find it – and if Faiz felt it, he did not succeed in conveying it. His 1982 poem in memory of his comrade in imprisonment, Major Muhammad Ishaq, has echoes of Ghali's lament for his dearly loved adopted son Arif, with its *radif* 'koi din aur', and abounds in stilted phrases that convey no real emotion.

Faiz did not rely simply on fortunate circumstances to maintain and enhance his popularity. He and his admirers created myths about his political commitment in which truth mingles with stories which, if not wholly untrue, include substantial elements of 'suppression of the true and suggestion of the false.'

Thus, there is much popularity to be gained outside Pakistan if people know that, in Kiernan's words, Faiz had been jailed 'sometimes' (p.283, n.17) 'in solitary confinement...deprived of writing materials', and on one occasion on a charge that could have carried the death penalty (p.284, n.25). These things make a special appeal in Britain, for once a subject people has actually been victorious in its struggle for independence the British generally feel a retrospective sympathy for that struggle which they were far from feeling at the time; and in the same way they have a ready sympathy for political prisoners when it is no longer they who are doing the imprisoning. This is a deserved popularity – and it remains unalloyed if one does not know, what is also true, that the conditions in which he lived in jail were, for three-and-three-quarters of his four-year term, not anything like as harsh as Kiernan's words would naturally lead his English readers to suppose. They would be surprised to learn what Faiz's fellow-prisoners, Sajjad Zahir and former Major Muhammad Ishaq, tell their Urdu readers in their foreword to *Zindan Nama*. Thus Sajjad Zahir recalls how when Faiz's second collection of verse *Dast i Saba* was published, 'we got permission from the authorities to hold a party in which all of us prisoners congratulated Faiz on its publication.' Ishaq writes of conditions in Hyderabad Jail, where they were held during the first stage of court proceedings against them.

The court building was inside the jail. The court sat from 8 a.m. to 12 noon. Saturdays and Sundays were free. In the afternoon our lawyers would come to consult us from time to time, but the rest of the time was our own....We

made our own provision for our meals. Two prisoners...who were excellent cooks had been assigned the duty of cooking for us, and we ate in regular style, as though we were dining in the officers' mess....In the evenings we would play volley ball or badminton....*Mushairas*, *qavvalis* and dramas generally took place in our compound. When we went to see Sajjad Zahir on our free mornings he would entertain us to coffee and biscuits and we would talk about literature and politics.

I have already quoted his statement that in Hyderabad Jail 'we had every bodily comfort which is possible in a goal.' In Montgomery Jail, he says, 'we had pretty well all the facilities we had had in Hyderabad.' I shall say more about all this below.

Similarly, the impression has been given that Faiz was forced into exile when Zia ul Haq came to power, though this was not so.

An almost ludicrous example of what can result from this myth-making can be found in Naomi Lazard's introduction, headed 'Translating Faiz', to her recently published translations of Faiz's selected poems.¹² After a greatly exaggerated picture of Faiz's standing throughout the South Asian subcontinent ('Anyone who knows any poetry at all in that vast region knows of Faiz') she says:

Faiz became a spokesman for his people in another way too. Instead of struggling for a literary career, instead of taking high posts as lecturer or professor, he dedicated himself to teaching illiterate people. He was blasé in his disregard for the blandishments of life. He identified himself with the masses of the poor, the exploited, the victims.

Such statements, based, one must presume, on what Naomi Lazard was told by Faiz himself, can only provoke sarcastic laughter in those who know the truth.

Faiz was also at pains to conceal as far as possible personal habits which he thought potential admirers would disapprove of. In the sense which 'everyone' bears in such statements, everyone knew that he drank; but he was at pains not to let this general knowledge become more general than it already was. When Kieman was preparing his translation for publication I was shown a draft of his introduction in which there was a very mild reference to Faiz's drinking. I spoke of this to Faiz, who told me that there would be no such reference in the finally approved draft; and, sure enough, the published introduction includes no such reference.

All of this has given rise to some bitterness in those progressives who avowed the same political views as Faiz but were denied, or denied themselves, the opportunities to combine this avowal with a life of such material comfort as he enjoyed. One of them told me emphatically, 'Faiz has absolutely nothing to do with the mass of the people,' and another, 'Faiz will never set foot in any house where the floors are not covered with the most expensive carpets.' When he was approaching the end of his self-imposed exile some young progressives in Islamabad alleged to me that he had now begun to write poetry in which there was nothing to which General Zia ul Haq could object.

I have written these last pages because I think that they deal with an aspect of Faiz and his place in the cultural and political life of Pakistan which needs to be understood. But having said that I would stress that there are even more important things that should be understood.

Firstly, even if Faiz can be fairly accused of a too wholehearted concern with building his own image and seeking his own safety and comfort, it ill becomes people who have never had to experience imprisonment for their political beliefs or lived under the threat of a death sentence to adopt a lofty moral tone towards one who has. Those who have not undergone the stress of that experience can only *hope* that if they did they would have the strength to emerge from it ready to react with more consistent courage than Faiz seems to have reacted. If for most of the years of his imprisonment he lived in relative comfort, imprisonment is nevertheless imprisonment; and moreover not all his time in prison was spent in such comfort. The solitary confinement in which he had been held for a full three months, Ishaq tells us, 'had had so profound an effect upon him that even after he came to Hyderabad he could not bear to be alone.'

Secondly, the most important thing about Faiz is his poetry. It is Faiz the poet, much more than Faiz the man, that has made a more significant impact on Pakistanis, both in Pakistan and in the numerous other countries where they have settled, and upon thousands of others in the Urdu-speaking community; and there is no reason to think that this impact will not continue many years after his death.

Thirdly, if the best poetry is written by those who, like Mir, for example, live a life in which they consistently feel, think and act as they and their audience would wish them to, and somehow convey this unmistakably in what they write, there are also poets who present themselves not as they are but as they wish they *could* be, and where that aspiration is strongly and sincerely felt, the poetry it inspires is, or can be, good poetry.

And finally if Faiz's warmest admirers are not the effective revolutionary force one would like them to be, they are nevertheless, in the Urdu phrase – *ghanimat* – a good deal better than nothing. Faiz's poetry gives their feelings and aspirations the expression that they need and deserve, and it will long continue to inspire others with a hatred of oppression, a sympathy with the downtrodden, and the desire for a better world.