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Tunnel Vision

a celebration of
Progressive Urdu Poetry

Anthems of Resistance

Raza Mir
Ali Husain Mir



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Voh subha kabhi to aayegi.

— *Ali Husain Mir*

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– Raza Mir

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A NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND TRANSLITERATION

The issue of what is gained and lost in translation has been elaborately discussed in a number of places. Rather than add further to that discourse, all we want to say is that while our translation choices have been contingent and personal (aren't they always?), we have tended to err on the side of being literal rather than poetic.

A number of transliteration schemes have been developed by Urdu academics, some of them highly precise and consistent. However, they tend to be somewhat intimidating to the eye. To maintain the 'popular' flavour of the book, we have chosen to go with an informal style. For instance, a standard transliteration scheme would write this line from a Hindi film song thus: *Har fikr kō dh̄ūēN mēN urātā čalā gayā*. We have instead transcribed it as *Har fikr ko dhueñ meñ uđaata chala gaya*.

We have made the following formal stylistic choices for the transliterations:

- 1 The nasal 'n' has been transliterated as 'ñ'. This is important because the full 'n' sound is longer than its nasal

equivalent. For example, the word for blood has to be pronounced sometimes as *khoon* (with the full 'n' sound at the end) and at others as *khoon̄* (with the nasal 'n' at the end). Substituting one for the other interferes with the rhythm of the poem. We have, however, used a simple 'n' even if the sound is nasal in the cases where it is followed by a hard consonant, since the word will invite the reader to pronounce it accurately. So the word for colour is written as *rang*, not as *raṅg*.

- 2 The words for 'I' and 'in' have been transliterated as 'maiṅ' and 'meiṅ'.
- 3 'aa' has been used to indicate the long vowel, except when the word ends with it, in which case we expect that the reader will naturally tend to draw out the sound.
- 4 The guttural 'kh' and 'gh' have been underlined. If 'kh' and 'gh' are not underlined in the transliterations, the 'h' sound has to be aspirated. This helps the reader differentiate between, say, *khaana* (to eat) and *khāana* (house, dwelling, room, compartment, drawer), between *ghani* (thick, dense) and *ghāni* (wealthy, rich, opulent).
- 5 The hard 'ṭ' and 'ḍ' sounds have been underlined to help differentiate between words like *dar* (door) and *ḍar* (fear), *taal* (musical measure) and *ṭaal* (delay, evade).

A note to our fellow Hyderabadis: while we have, in the interests of the larger readership, reluctantly transliterated the two different letters of the Urdu script as *kh* and *q*, feel free to pronounce them alike, for:

*Qaaf aur kḥai meiṅ hai kya farq, hameṅ kya maaloom
Hum zabaān apni chalaane ko zabaān kahte haiṅ*

PREFACE

*Utho aur uth ke inhiṅ qaafiloṅ meiṅ mil jao
Jo manziloṅ ko haiṅ gard-e safar banaaye hue*

Arise, and join those moving caravans
That have left several destinations in their wake

Our father's voice would boom in the small room where we slept, while we, less interested in joining caravans than in getting a little more time in bed, would try in vain to ignore it. It was his ritualistic way of waking us up every school morning. Even though the couplet was usually an unwelcome intrusion into our slumber, it planted itself firmly in our psyche, along with scores of others that routinely adorned daily conversations in our home and community. The oral tradition of Urdu poetry was an essential part of the structure of feeling of old-city Hyderabad. People unselfconsciously emphasized a point or illustrated a mood by drawing upon a couplet here and a quatrain there, to say ordinary things in extraordinary ways.

Our parents had an impressive command over a massive repertoire of classical and contemporary poetry and would

harvest it periodically. Both of them had grown up during the heady days of the independence struggle, at a time when the Urdu poets of the Progressive Writers' Movement strode majestically on the stage of cultural production in the country. Josh Malihabadi, Sahir Ludhianvi, Israr-ul-Haq Majaz, Kaifi Azmi, Ali Sardar Jafri, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Majrooh Sultanpuri, and Makhdoom Mohiuddin were household names and we learnt to appreciate the spirit of their powerful verses. Their poetry – critical, insightful, angry, passionate – helped inculcate in us a sense of social justice, mediated our understanding of reality, and offered us a framework to interpret social and political conditions.

A Faiz poem 'Lahu Ka Suraagh' (Trace of Blood) thus came to mind when an obscure statistic about 11 September 2001 caught our attention. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimated that on the same tragic day when the towers came crashing down in our adopted city of New York, around 35,615 children starved to death across the world. This everyday, routine tragedy quietly bypassed the world's consciousness. No editorials were written denouncing it, no flags flew at half-mast, no impassioned speeches were made, no war was declared on poverty and hunger. Faiz's poem compellingly drew our attention to this 'banality of evil' through the following lines:

*Kahiñ nahiñ hai kahiñ bhi nahiñ lahu ka suraagh
Na dast-o naakhun-e qaatil, na aasteñ pe nishaañ
Na surkhi-e lab-e kharjar, na rang-e nok-e sinaañ
Na khaak par koi dhabba, na baam par koi daagh
Kahiñ nahiñ hai kahiñ bhi nahiñ lahu ka suraagh*

*Na sarf-e khidmat-e shaahañ ke khood-baha dete
Na deñ ki nazr ke bayaana-e jaza dete*

*Na razmgah meñ barsa ke mo'atabar hota
Kisi alam pe raqam hoke mushtahar hota*

*Pukaarta raha be-aasra yateem lahu
Kisi to bahr-e sama'at na waqt tha na dimaagh
Na mudda'i na shahaadat hisaab paak hua
Ye khood-e khaak-nasheenañ tha rizq-e khaak hua*

Nowhere, nowhere at all, is any trace of the Blood
Not on the murderer's hands, fingernails or sleeve
No blood reddens the tongue of the blade nor brighten the tip of the spear
No blood marks the soil or stains the rooftop
Nowhere, nowhere at all, is any trace of the Blood

This blood wasn't shed in the services of kings that it could receive recompense
Nor was it sacrificed at the altar of religion that it could be rewarded
Neither did it spill on in the battlefield that it could be honoured
Or memorialized on a battle standard

It cried out, this helpless, orphaned Blood
But none had the ability to listen, nor the time, nor the patience
No plaintiff stepped forward, no one bore witness and so the account was closed
While the blood of the dirt-dwellers seeped silently into the dirt

Faiz's verses indict all those who stand silent, indifferent to everyday human suffering. His call to action is expressed even more explicitly in 'Aaj Baazaar Meñ Pa-bajaolañ Chalo':

*Chashm-e nam jaan-e shoreeda kaafi nahiñ
Tohmat-e ishq-e posheeda kaafi nahiñ
Aaj baazaar meñ pa-bajaolañ chalo*

Not enough to shed tears, to suffer anguish
Not enough to nurse love in secret
Today, walk in the public square fettered in chains

This demand to declare one's politics explicitly and publicly was made at a time when Urdu poetry offered a significant space for the articulation of resistance against exploitative systems – a space that seems to have shrunk considerably in our times. Today, Urdu itself occupies a precarious position in India, and while it continues to be spoken by a large number of people, it is largely exoticized as an aesthetic commodity, vilified as the language of the Other, or relegated to the realm of nostalgia. And in Pakistan, while not in any danger as a language, its progressive literary movement is a shadow of its former self, the victim of post-colonial politics at the national and international level. The voice of the progressive Urdu poets that resonated during the anti-colonial struggle, that sought to hold the newly formed state to its promise of an egalitarian and just society, and that attempted to forge a solidarity with peoples' movements across the world, is a faint memory. Sahir is now remembered mainly as a film lyricist. Faiz continues to have an iconic status, but only insofar as he has been assimilated into the tradition of the classical poets. A handful of other voices remain, some stronger than others. However, the passion and anger of Josh, Majaz, Kaifi, Makhdoom, Jafri and others who explicitly wrote about exploitation and oppression, about justice and equality, and about resistance and struggle is largely forgotten.

This book grows out of a desire to reverse this 'willful loss of memory' and to reclaim the legacy of the progressive poets in an age when their words, insights, and politics continue to be relevant. As the subtitle of the book – 'A Celebration of Progressive Urdu Poetry' – makes clear, ours is not a dispassionate, 'objective' account. It is an attempt to retrieve the spirit of resistance that once roamed so freely in the landscape of Urdu literature during the progressive writers' movement.

In that sense, this book is more than a recounting of a bygone age; it is our own political project. It is not just a history of the past, it is a history of the present, and hopefully, a history of the future as well.

*Mataa-e lauh-o qalam chhin gayi to kya gham hai
Ke khood-e dil mein duboli hai ungliyaan main ne
Zabaan pe mohr lagi hai to kya, ke rakh di hai
Har ek halqa-e zanjeer mein zabaan main ne*

So what if my pen has been snatched away from me
I have dipped my fingers in the blood of my heart
So what if my mouth has been sealed; I have turned
Every link of my chain into a speaking tongue

- Faiz Ahmad Faiz