

How not to read Faiz Ahmad Faiz

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How not to read Faiz¹ does imply how Faiz must not be read, or how Faiz be read. But this is not what is intended here. To say how Faiz be read or how it should not be read sounds prescriptive, and it is not the role of criticism to be prescriptive. There are readings and readings. Faiz is a popular poet and who can tell his admirers how to read and how not to read Faiz. It is besides the point that there is no dearth of critics who take such stance without realizing that their writing is neither of any use for literature nor for literary criticism. Notwithstanding, the poetry of Faiz is read by all sorts of readers, and the graph of his popularity stays pretty stable. It is also understandable that the camp-followers of a particular breed use the poetry of Faiz to shield their own shortcomings. Popularity has its own downside, because the crowd of admirers comprises majority of those who do not know why they like their hero. Do they admire him because of their genuine appreciation of his text or simply because others admire him? The popularity of Faiz, intact even today, was established in the second half of the twentieth century, and this is not a short period for the firming of a poet's significance. During this period, much has been written about Faiz, but it is a sad fact that many of his admirers admire him for wrong reasons; they have written little about his poetic worth. In this regard, Faiz deserves our sympathy.

The poetry of Faiz deserves appreciation from those as well who understand the dynamics of reading and how poetry functions. Reading is an open-ended project and the problem arises only when a lobby insists on a particular reading so much so that that reading restricts the semantic play of the text. To say the least, it is a disservice to the poet. Faiz no doubt is a committed poet and nobody can deny his ideological leanings. But mere ideological readings do not fit his aesthetic structure and the main question is

¹ Faiz Ahmad Faiz (1911-1984).

that how this structure signifies within the framework of his ideological project. As reading implies freedom, by employing a negative 'how not' we are not impeding the free flow of interpretation, rather stressing that conflict within the ideological project needs to be attended to, and any reading that avoids conflict in the ideological project is restrictive and does not do justice to the appreciation of Faiz.

Popularity is usually the result of several factors, such as personal charisma, romantic image, biographical data (especially if it involves political confinement or exile or any such restriction). However, when the cruel hand of time creates a gap, all such subjective signages are washed away, and what remains is the spotless spring of the text; and it is this which is not fully considered by admirers of Faiz. If they do consider, they do so in a cursory manner. True poetry is a world in itself, but if literary criticism is not open to dissent and difference in interpretation, then the door of the magic of the poetry cannot open. In my earlier writings, I have alluded to the sensuous nature of the aesthetic effect in Faiz's poetry along with its peculiar semantic range. There is no need to repeat all that now. In this piece, I would like to point out briefly that in reading a text, one must not only pay attention to the presence (of words) but also heed to the silences and absences in the text, in the way as Pierre Macherey or Roland Barthes usually suggest. This in my opinion is a necessary prerequisite to appreciate the aesthetic dynamics of Faiz's poetry.

It should be noted that ideology as discussed by Althusser is not an abstraction which people carry around in their minds or a treatise of abstract ideas. Instead it refers to human beings' necessary condition of action in a social formation. He had argued that ideology is represented by discourses governing the practices how we live our lives, i.e., it is in the condition of human existence. It is characteristic of the ideology that in a social formation at one end of the scale lies the ideology, on the other is science & technology, and somewhere in between is the world of art and literature marked by the aesthetic effect. All the three domains are inter-dependent yet relatively autonomous. Science leads to the 'knowledge effect', ideology to the 'ideological effect', and art and literature

to the 'aesthetic effect', and this last effect holds the key to the appreciation of Faiz. All the three effects, while each playing an autonomous role in its domain in the superstructure, do overlap and play a determinant role; and despite the inconsistencies and contradictions inherent in them, they do tend to resolve the inherent conflict². Having said this, now let's turn to the text of Faiz. Let's see how it is usually read and whether or not such reading is incomplete or misleading.

Merleau-Ponty, an important interpreter of phenomenology who has been almost forgotten by the moderns, had noted :

“But what if language speaks as much by what is between words as by the words themselves? As much what it 'does not say' as by what it 'says'!”

In other words, it is beyond doubt that it is the characteristic of language that what it says through words, it also says through gaps and silences. Probably, from the point of view of meaning, this is a clear parallel to the oriental concept of '*bain-ussutoor*' (lit. between lines), but perhaps no one in the oriental rhetoric ever tried to theorise this. Mark it that we are not talking of mere silence between lines or words, rather what is intended is the silence between the absent and present meaning. If we read once again what Merleau-Ponty said, we will appreciate the inference that words speak through what they reveal, as well as through what they hide or do not reveal. As if the dark areas of language are as instrumental in evoking meaning and aesthetic effect as the bright areas. Let's take a look at Faiz's poem "*Dast-e Teh-e Sang Amada*" (A Hand Trapped Under a Rock) from his collection with the same title. (The translation is deliberately literal so that it stays as close to the original as possible) :

*Bezaar faza,
darpa-i aazaar saba hai
Yun hai ke har ik
hamdam-i dairina khafa hai*

² For details, see : *For Marx* by Louis Althusser, New Left Books, London, 1977; and "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, by Louis Althusser, New Left Books, London, 1977.

(The morning breeze hurts,
and the atmosphere is displeased;
It seems as if every old friend
is angry [with me].)

Haan baada kasho
aaya hai ab rang pe mausam
Ab sair ke qaabil
ravish-i aab-o hava hai

(Yes, fellow drinkers,
the time is just right for drinking;
The weather appears just right
for a stroll through the garden.)

Umdi hai har ik simt se
ilzaam ki barsaat
Chhaai hui har daang
malaamat ki ghata hai

(The rainstorm of accusations
is gathering fast;
The clouds of reproach
spread in every direction.)

Voh cheez bhari hai
ke sulagti hai suraahi
Har kaasa-i mai
zehr-i halaahal se bhara hai

(The flask simmer
due to its contents;
Every cup of wine
brims with deadly poison.)

Haan jaam uthaao
ke ba-yaad-i lab-i sheerin
Yeh zehr to
yaaron ne kai baar piya hai

(Let's raise our glasses
in memory of sweet lips;
We have drunk this poison
many times before.)

Is jazba-i dil ki
na saza hai na jaza hai
Maqsood-i rah-i shauq
vafa hai na jafa hai

(The emotions of heart
are neither to be punished, nor rewarded;
The destination of the journey of desire
is neither love nor misery.)

*Ehsaas-i gham-i dil
jo gham-i dil ka silaa hai
Us husn ka ehsaas hai
jo teri ata hai*

(The gift of the feelings of the heart
is grief itself:
A generous gift
of your beauty.)

*Har subh-i gulistaan hai
tira ru-i bahaarin
Har phool tiri yaad ka
naqsh-i kaf-i paa hai*

(Every morning of the rose garden
is your fresh face;
Every flower:
a footprint of your memory.)

*Har bheegi hui raat
tiri zulf ki shabnam
Dhalta hua suraj
tira hunton ki faza hai*

(Every wet night
is the dew of your tresses;
Every setting sun:
the scene of your lips.)

*Har raah pahunchti hai
tiri chaah ke dar tak
Har harf-i tamanna
tira qadmon ki sada hai*

(Every pathway
leads to the door of your love;
Every word of desire:
the sound of your footsteps.)

*Ta'zeer-i siyasat hai
na ghairon ki khata hai
Voh zulm jo ham ne
dil-i vehshi pe kiya hai*

(It is neither the punishment of events,
nor the tyranny of adversaries:
This tyranny, we have inflicted ourselves
on our poor untamed heart.)

*Zindaan-i rah-i yaar main
paa-band hue ham
Zanjeer ba-kaf hai
na koi band-ba paa hai*

(We are trapped in the prison
of the longing for our beloved;
We wear neither handcuffs,
nor are shackled.)

Majburi-o va'daa-i
giraftaari-i ulfat
Dast-i tah-i sang aamda
paimaan-i vafa hai

(Helplessness and
the pledge to be captured by love:
They are nothing,
but a hand trapped under a rock³.)

On the surface, there is no complexity in the poem, which towards the close cites the ghazal verse of Ghalib: the pledge to love is nothing but a hand trapped under a rock. If one is helpless in love, then the pledge to love means nothing, as one makes a pledge by one's own freewill, and here there is no freewill. Metaphorically, the hand is trapped under a rock, and this is what the pledge is. The pain and agony of the hand under a rock suggests a terrible feeling of helplessness. In short, there is no choice, only helplessness as the hand is trapped under a rock. There are many aspects of helplessness, and Ghalib is a poet of that calibre, where as said by Meer⁴, every word has many dimensions to it. Instead of trying to further dilate the literal meaning, I merely want to hint that the poem, which revolves around the helplessness of love, is not a love poem, nor it is an overtly political poem. Let's note that before tagging Ghalib, Faiz had established the following semantic field in the poem :

Every pathway
leads to the door of your love;
Every word of desire:
the sound of your footsteps.

It is neither the punishment of events,
nor the tyranny of adversaries:
This tyranny, we have inflicted ourselves
on our poor untamed heart.

³ These four lines are tagged from a ghazal verse of Ghalib (1797-1869)

⁴ Meer Taqi Meer (1723-1810), generally regarded as the 'God of Urdu Poesy'.

We are trapped in the prison
of the longing for our beloved;
We wear neither handcuffs,
nor are shackled.

The leading of the pathway to the door of love, punishment of events, prison of the longing for beloved, wearing handcuffs: these references undoubtedly evoke a picture of love for a cause. It goes without saying that what is being implied is the love for some ideal, some commitment, maybe freedom of country from army rule or any such oppression. These meanings may suggest themselves at a close reading. Now, let us see the beginning of the poem again :

The morning breeze hurts,
and the atmosphere is displeased;
It seems as if every old friend
is angry (with me).

Yes, fellow drinkers,
the time is just right for drinking;
The weather appears just right
for a stroll through the garden.

The rainstorm of accusations
is gathering fast;
The clouds of reproach
spread in every direction.

Once the parameter of love changes from personal to social, and it is realized that Faiz is a poet with social consciousness, it becomes easy to multiply the obvious with the metaphorical. After such realization, effortlessly every figure of speech starts revolving around a socio-political axis in accordance with expectations. For example, 'displeased atmosphere' becomes the tyrannical environment, the 'breeze that hurts' becomes the unjust order and its oppression, 'fellow drinkers' are fellows with social consciousness, and the 'old friends' are either those not in synch with the revolutionary creed or those who are content to become part of the anti-people regime. Since 'madness and humiliation' are something to be proud of when one is in love (as per the Indo-Persian poetic convention), 'the rainstorm of accusations' and 'the clouds of reproach everywhere' are quite in keeping with the patriotic expectations. Further, the

cup and the flask are evoking the passion for freedom. In the act of reading, much has been said about the role of expectations of the reader; besides the text these expectations as well may be generated by the name, creed or ideology of the poet, or by the title or subtitle of the poem. The tagged verse of Ghalib, as suggested before, also has its role.

In this discourse, it is not intended to go into the details of the psychology of reading; nonetheless, we have already seen that in the first place we could not have read Ghalib's verse in any other way than as a romantic verse, but when tagged to Faiz's poem, its semantic axis changed, and in this context it now reads for revolutionary zeal and suffering for a social cause. In other words when we started reading the poem with expectations of reading a text loaded with ideology, the non-political nature of Ghalib's verse changed in keeping with the interpretation of the key words in the poem. At one time, Ali Sardar Jafri⁵ and his progressive friends used to discuss with fervor the concept of 'revolutionary romanticism'. I wish at that stage if they had paid a little attention to the poetic implications of either romanticism or revolution, the Urdu world would have been spared from the one-dimensional flat poetry that flooded in the forties and fifties.

Let's once again turn back to the obvious or not so obvious meanings of Faiz's poem. Is the poetry of Faiz important because it is the poetry of the given political meaning? If the answer to this question is in the affirmative, then it will be very difficult to defend Faiz as a great poet. Does everyone read Faiz because he is a poet of the given or of the obvious or of preconceived ideas? In our humble opinion, the answer to this question is in the negative. Matters of like and dislike of poetry are complex, similar to the matters of beauty and love. We have discussed earlier that in good poetry, words say as much as what they do not want to say. In the dynamics of poetic aesthetics, both the said and the unsaid interact and intermingle to create a touch of mystery. Does any such thing happen in the poetry of Faiz? If it does, then is the poetry of Faiz only confined to

⁵ Ali Sardar Jafri (1913-2000) was one of the last leaders of the Urdu Progressive Writers' Movement.

the meanings discussed earlier and which our friends with preconceived notions like best?

Undoubtedly the obvious meanings are what have been discussed, but the matter does not end there, because if it were so, then Faiz would have been an ordinary poet, and the roots of his popularity would not go very deep. The meanings discussed earlier are clearly motivated by given political agenda, or ideology. As referred to earlier, ideology is not a treatise of doctrine or abstract theory of beliefs. It is also not the official document of social truths, nor the manifesto or 'partynost' done by an Andrey Zhdanov. Perhaps few will disagree that the progressive ideology of the times of Faiz was not much different from the nationalist ideology of the period of struggle for freedom; it was not in conflict with cultural aesthetics generated at the level of the elite which favoured nationalism. Because of this, the progressive ideology in the subcontinent was not restrictive; its real conflict was with oppression, colonial exploitation and denial of freedom. In this context, the obvious meanings discussed above are the given meaning. However, we should not forget that the aesthetics of Faiz was entrenched in the oriental tradition, so much so that it was rooted in the classical Farsi and Indo-Persian influences. Strictly speaking, in leftist terminology, this aesthetics is 'bourgeois', and thus supposedly is in conflict with the ideological project. But the fact is that Faiz had inherited and was the guardian of a tradition of aesthetics, whose blood was flowing in his veins. It was part of his conscious, as well as a part of his sub-conscious mind. The ideology is a matter of choice, the rejection or acceptance of which is in one's conscious control. But the aesthetics is not optional as it is part of the creative personality or the sub-conscious mind. Althusser, whom we quoted earlier, has pointed out that ideology and art and literature play relatively independent roles in social formation; and let's not forget that while overlapping with each other, they also define each other. Ideology by nature tends to discourage difference, and its relation to any sort of play of freedom, be that of aesthetics, is that of repression. The silences and absences find their way into the text because of this repressive relationship. In this context, if we re-examine the poem of

Faiz, we shall discover a whole range of repressed meanings. Although it is argued by some that devices of poetic expression, such as figures of speech, similes, metaphors, etc. which are used to create play of meaning and aesthetic effect, are part of baggage of bourgeois pleasure, Faiz is not burdened by this argument, rather it is in this expression that the appeal of Faiz's poetry lies. Needless to say that the aesthetics of Faiz is grounded in the metaphorical edifice of the oriental tradition. This aesthetics is part of his sub-consciousness, and penetrates profusely into his poetry, often moulding his ideological concerns into its own cast. For example, after establishing the political underpinning of the poem with the rainstorm of accusations, clouds of reproach, etc., Faiz comes down to the gay abandon of the sub-conscious, and the wine in the flask of aesthetics spills over, thus weaving a magic and casting a spell. To say the least, if such style were taken away from his poetry, Faiz could not be recognized. After the opening three stanzas, read the following :

Let's raise our glasses
in memory of sweet lips;
We have drunk this poison
many times before.

The emotions of heart
are neither to be punished, nor rewarded;
The destination of the journey of desire
is neither love nor misery.

The gift of the feelings of the heart
is grief itself:
A generous gift
of your beauty.

Each morning of the rose garden
is like the charm of your fresh face;
Every flower:
a footprint of your memory.

Every wet night
is the dew of your tresses;
Every setting sun:
the scene of your lips.

Every pathway
leads to the door of your love;
Every word of desire:
the sound of your footsteps.

It hardly needs stressing that the above lines form the core of the poem. The core thus is drenched in the aesthetic flavour of Faiz, and this cannot be denied that without which Faiz simply is not Faiz. It is not just the matter of ideology yielding to the aesthetic call, there is much more to it. It is worth examining why the ideological project allows repression by the so called 'bourgeois' aesthetics, thus creating silences in the text. What the French literary critic Pierre Macherey says discussing the fiction of Jules Verne is not irrelevant here:

“If Verne’s 19th century readers did not identify the repressed in the text, if they did not recognise the silence with which the work finally confronts its own ideological project, it was because they read from within the same ideological framework, shared the same repressions and took for granted the same silences.”⁶

So if we are used to the silences in the repressed ideological project, it is firstly because of the fact that the act of our reading is within the same framework; secondly, we tolerate the repression because we ourselves derive aesthetic pleasure in the process. The central portion of the poem begins with “Let’s raise our glasses in the memory of sweet lips.” Glasses of what? Here, the reference is not to the glass of wine. It can be said that the meaning of wine has been repressed. Similarly, ‘sweet lips’ should invoke the lips of the beloved, but the human beloved is not being referred to here. The image of the form and beauty of the beloved, which sneaked in through the doorway of aesthetics, wants to take over the poem, but the ideological project represses it. The repressed meaning wants to come to surface; but when it cannot, its form changes. Repressed by ideology it turns into absence or silence. For example, consider : “A generous gift of your beauty”. Whose beauty? Or: “Each morning of the rose garden is your fresh face. Every flower: a footprint of your memory”. Whose fresh face? The flower of whose memory? Consider further: “Every wet night is the dew of your tresses. Every

⁶ *A Theory of Literary Production* by Pierre Macherey, translated by G. Wal, Routledge & Kegan, London, 1978

setting sun: the scene of your lips". The dew-touch of whose tresses? The scene of whose lips? The answers to these and other such questions lie hidden in the silences and absences of the text. One can say that Faiz permits repression in his poetic expression because the rhetorical conventions of the oriental aesthetics are an integral part of his consciousness. It is known that Faiz as a poet had made his mark with the publication of his first collection *Naqsh-e Faryadi*⁷. The later collections *Dast-e Saba*⁸ and *Zindan Nama*⁹ completed the poetic identity of Faiz. There was all along an inner contradiction within Faiz himself, even if he wanted to close the hidden door of subconscious or the innate pull of the Indo-Persian aesthetics of ruby lips and rose garden, he could not do so. As a result, those portions are most compelling where the repression runs wild, or where absences and silences speak in their repressed language, or where the text between-the-lines glows with pleasure. The effect in such cases is fascinating.

It should be noted that what has been said is not limited to the *nazm* (poem) under consideration. Most of the other poetry of Faiz is replete with these characteristics. Further examples in defence of the discourse are not necessary.

I would like to make one last point: The Indo-Persian aesthetics is the aesthetics of peeping from behind a curtain. Consider the following segments of a *nazm* from *Naqsh-e Faryadi* :

*Unka aanchal hai ki rukhsaar ki pairahan hai
Kuch to hai jis se hui jaati hai chilman rangeen?*

(Is it the scarf, the face, or the robe
That makes the reed-curtain so colourful?)

Sandali haath pe dhundhli si hina ki tahreer

(The faint marks of henna on the sandal coloured hands....)

⁷ The first poetry collection of Faiz, first published in 1941

⁸ The second poetry collection of Faiz, first published in 1953

⁹ The third poetry collection of Faiz, first published in 1956.

These fleeting images can best be described by the phrase, / *saaf chupte bhi nahin saamne aate bhi nahi* / (she doesn't hide herself either, nor does she come in front')¹⁰. This is the hide-and-seek of an aesthetics, which becomes all the more compelling in an environ of repression. Roland Barthes, the author of *The Pleasure of Text*, writes:

“Is not the body's most erotic zone there,
Where the garment leaves gaps?”

As far as Faiz's repressed aesthetics bursting through the ideological seams is concerned, it does not need any further elaboration. The seams in Faiz generally come undone, exposing the pull of aesthetics. No doubt, Faiz enjoys the construct too. This is the act of the eloquence of silence. If such were not the case, Faiz would not have dwelt so much on the wildness of the untamed heart :

It is neither the punishment of events,
nor the tyranny of adversaries:
This tyranny, we have inflicted ourselves
on our poor untamed heart.

It can be said that the act of repression and peeping through of aesthetics, having its own peculiar effect, creates the allure and beauty that the poetry of Faiz is known for, and which undoubtedly enlarge the circle of his admirers. The popularity of Faiz deserves further attention, but the current discussion is, as explained earlier, restricted only to the conflict between his ideological project and the subconscious aesthetics that

¹⁰ Reference to an Urdu ghazal verse by Daagh Dehlavi (1831-1905):

*Khub parda hai ke
chilman se lage baithe hain
Saaf chhupte bhi nahin
saamne aate bhi nahin*

What strange modesty: she sits by the reed-curtain;
Doesn't hide herself completely, nor does she come in front.

finds its resolve through undone seams. The ghazal¹¹ in which Faiz speaks about his poetic 'style' becoming accepted as the 'mode of expression in the rose-garden', also has a reference to the tyranny of the cage of the bird-trapper and the flower-picker. It is a matter of subverting expectations. This verse, which is against political oppression, can also be read against the oppression of ideology. No matter how strong an ideology may be, no matter if aesthetics is condemned as bourgeois, the subconscious has its own ways of resolving conflicts. To write poetry or to enjoy poetry, one must accept the pull of aesthetics, yield to a mystery within. Despite the harshness of the so called bird-trappers and the flower-pickers, the fragrance of the rose and the song of the nightingale could not be stopped. Faiz celebrates life, and it is in the course of this spontaneous celebration that the seams come undone and the silence speaks.



(Translated by Baidar Bakht from the original Urdu)

¹¹ The two verses of the ghazal referred to here are given below followed by literal translation :

*Dast-e saiyaad bhi aajiz hai, kaf-i gulchin bhi
Bu-i gul thehri, na bulbul ki zabaan thehri hai*

(The hands of the bird-trapper are as helpless as those of flower-picker;
The fragrance of rose can't be arrested, nor can the song of the nightingale.)

*Ham ne jo tarz-i fughaan ki hai qafas main ijaad
Faiz gulshan main vohi tarz-i bayaan thehri hai*

(Faiz, the style of wailing that I invented in the cage
Has now become the mode of expression in the rose-garden)