



Urdu Studies

An international, peer-reviewed,
bilingual research journal
ISSN: 2583-8784 (Online)
Vol. 4 | Issue 1 | Year 2024
Pages: 186-192

“Film aur Saqāfat”

Faiz Ahmad Faiz

Introduced & translated by

Mubashir Karim¹

Abstract. The Introduction familiarizes the reader with the different aspects of Faiz Ahmad Faiz’s work and life. It delves into the social and the political milieu of the times, and how those circumstances became pivotal in turning him into a writer he is today remembered for. The biographical details and references further support in contextualizing the writings and accentuate his position within the literary scene and his response to the changing world around. Faiz’s poetry has been translated widely but his prose hasn’t received attention. The essay selected here for translation deals with the ideas of film production in South Asia and its culture and has been precisely selected for the above-mentioned reason, as well as for the fact that, through it, one becomes aware of an unusual aspect of Faiz’s aesthetic. As he inclines himself, like other conte Progressive writers, with a new aesthetic, he figures it would become seminal in broadening the scope of the Progressive Movement.

Keywords. Film, culture, morality, social responsibility, social reality

Introduction

Faiz Ahmad Faiz (1911-1984) was a Pakistani Urdu and Punjabi poet considered by many as one of the most prominent personalities of South Asia. He was born in 1911 in Sialkot, in undivided Punjab, now in Pakistan. His father, Sultan Mohammed Khan was a well-known barrister working for the British Government. It was through his father’s engagement with literature and politics that Faiz developed an intellectual and literary acumen. He earned his Bachelor of Arts in 1931 from Murray College, Sialkot, and his Master of Arts in English Literature in 1933 from Government College Lahore.

From an early age, Faiz was influenced by literary giants like Hafiz

¹ Dr Mubashir Karim works as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English, Amar Singh College, Cluster University Srinagar (Jammu and Kashmir).

Included in UGC-CARE List since October 2021

Published on August 11, 2024

<http://www.urdustudies.in>

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/?ref=chooser-v1>

Shirazi, Maulana Rumi, Mirza Ghalib and Allama Iqbal. Despite these varied influences, one can, even from his early poetry, notice his singular style of effortlessly blending social realism and political issues with his romantic sensibility. Faiz's poems would gradually, as Agha Shahid Ali puts it, attain the blended "color of patriotic feeling and socialist feelings" (xvii) and that his genius would lie in balancing "his politics . . . with his aesthetics without compromising either" (xvii) of the two. Around the mid of the 1930s, he found himself drawn towards the Left politics where commitment to the Marxist and Socialist cause for uplift of the proletariat remains indispensable. In 1936, Faiz officially joined the Progressive Writers Movement led by Syed Sajjad Zaheer and other politically inclined intellectuals who were committed to using Literature as an essential tool for the emancipation and awakening of the social cause in society. In fact, this is something that Faiz would resolutely believe in the later years of his poetic career as well, that "art should never be divorced from social reality." (Kumar viii) As early as the 1930s, Faiz would ruminate on how Mahmuduzzafar would hand him the book that would become for him "the key to the treasure of the unknown."² The book would be none other than Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's *The Communist Manifesto*.

Although, in the same period, he took to teaching as a professional career, in colleges in Lahore and Amritsar, it was the radical, Marxist in him that led him towards Journalism. He served as editor of *Adab-e Latif*, an esteemed literary magazine, and later joined *The Pakistan Times* as its founding editor in 1947.

It is however, during the Partition of the subcontinent that we find Faiz engaging intensely with the politics of the region. Similarly, his poetic oeuvre would also undergo an unswerving movement towards radical politics wherein he would become a vocal advocate for social equality and workers' rights. As Naomi Lazard succinctly puts it, Faiz, "was blasé in his disregard for the blandishments of Life. He identified himself with the masses of the poor, the exploited, the victims." (xi) His poem *Subh-e-Azādi* ("The Dawn of Freedom") fitfully depicts his anguish, resentment and disenchantment with the Partition and violence accompanying it and the urgency of coming to terms with a vision of politics that incorporates people from every walk of life.

In 1951, Faiz was implicated under the Pakistan Safety Order Act in the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case³ mainly because of his communist leanings. Despite his imprisonment he continued to write and stood by his ideals. His

² Quoted in *Love and Revolution: Faiz Ahmad Faiz* by Ali Madeeh Hashmi. New Delhi: Rupa, 2019. pp. 74.

³ The Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case was allegedly an attempted coup planned in 1951 by military General Akbar Khan, Faiz Ahmad Faiz along with Sajad Zaheer and many others to overthrow the government of Liaquat Ali Khan, the first Prime Minister of Pakistan. The trial of the case went on for more than 18 months with Faiz incarcerated for almost 4 years, that is, from 1951 to 1955.

collection of poetry *Dast-e Sabā* (Touch of Breeze) and *Zindāñ Nāma* (Prison Chronicle) were written during this period of incarceration. Through these works, Faiz upholds the right and longing for freedom, his dire experiences of captivity and an unflinching hope for a better future. After his release from prison in 1955, he continued to resist the system and further nurtured his literary and political pursuits. Thereafter, Faiz served as the editor of the international literary, cultural, and political journal, *Lotus*, that would help him establish his political career beyond South Asia. The magazine's first issue came out in the year 1968 with the help of Afro-Asian Writers Association (AAWA). The magazine's primary motive was to solidify Afro-Asian solidarity among writers. Faiz remained its editor from 1979 till his death. The trilingual content of the magazine, as Ali Madeeh Hashmi notes, "provided Faiz with another opportunity to pursue his lifelong passion: showcasing the best anti-colonial and anti-imperialistic writings" to make the people across the world aware about, "the freedom struggles of oppressed nations" including the special place that AAWA had for the "Palestinian people's struggle for freedom" (241). Faiz's commitment in his personal ventures, as well as through this international magazine, enabled his recognition as an indispensable member working indefatigably for international solidarity and responsively critiquing imperialism. During this period Faiz traveled extensively to Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. With these travels one can recognize the changing political narrative within Faiz's work. The commitment that birthed with the rise of anti-colonial sentiments against British imperialism and later communal politics in India would gradually provide space within his poems to problems of the masses across the world including Palestine, the rise of Zionism and with it, the creation of Israel. With the onset of General Zia-ul Haq's martial law in 1978, Faiz self-exiled to Beirut, Lebanon from where he continued as the editor of *Lotus*. It was in exile that he met Pablo Neruda, Yasser Arafat, Edward Said and Eghbal Ahmad. Faiz would also discover here the poetry of the Turkish 'romantic-communist'⁴ poet Nazim Hikmet whom, later in his career, Faiz would translate in Urdu as well, to honor the poet owing to the literary debt he owed to him. In 1962, Faiz was awarded the Lenin Peace Prize by the Soviet Union for his efforts to establish peace and solidarity among nations. His poetry collection titled *Nusḵha-hā-e Vafā* (Prescription of Fidelity) remains, even today, one of his most widely read collections. Although predominantly celebrated as a poet, Faiz wrote prose, pen-sketches, memoirs, and travel literature too. Although Faiz's poetry has been translated by many, including Victor Kiernan, Naomi Lazard, Baran Farooqi, Shiv K Kumar and Agha Shahid Ali, his prose writings haven't received attention.

Faiz's death in 1984 in Lahore, Pakistan marked the end of an era and "his admirers all over the world felt as though a literary era had come to an end." (Kumar vii). He left behind a rich legacy for aspiring writers encouraging

⁴ The term was originally referred to Nazim Hikmet by Stalin's daughter Svetlana Alliluyeva.

generations to keep working for justice, equality, human dignity and human rights across the world.

This essay has been translated from the Urdu “Film aur Saqāfat” (Film and Culture) and has been taken from his prose collection *Mīzān* (Balance). Faiz ruminates on the medium of Film and the vocation of filmmakers. He proceeds by citing reservations on terming filmmaking as a business and not as an art. He believes that film incorporates the rest of the arts, and filmmakers thereby, need to understand that they have a greater responsibility to shoulder as their art directly concerns the taste, ethics, and moral sensibilities of a society. As such, if filmmaking becomes a money-making venture, without maintaining certain standards and values, it will be reduced to an industry, and society would certainly suffer predominantly on ethical, moral and aesthetic fronts. In this essay, we see Faiz as a flagbearer of reform, one who chides those who reduce art to a mere business prospect. It is pertinent to mention here that Faiz wrote the screenplay for A J Kardar’s film *Jāgo huā Saverā* (Awake! it is Dawn) in 1959. Faiz’s indulgence, here, within the realm of film cannot be overstated as many of his contemporary compatriots within the Progressive Writers Movement would use film screenplays, notably Ismat Chughtai, Khwaja Ahmad Abbas and Sajad Zaheer, (especially of those novels and short stories that dealt with social, political causes) and film songs, particularly Sahir Ludhianvi and Kaifi Azmi, as essential tools to popularize their ideals of freedom, equality, and revolution among the general masses. Raza Mir and Ali Husain Mir aptly put it:

The progressive Urdu poets . . . also staked a substantial claim in the realm of popular culture, particularly in the arena of Hindi films. Several poets of the association such as Sahir Ludhianvi, Kaifi Azmi, and Majrooh Sultanpuri (and to a lesser extent, Ali Sardar Jafri and Jan Nisar Akhtar) made a name for themselves writing lyrics for films, thus occupying a prominent place in the public space (10-11).

Although the film was based on a short story written by the Bengali writer Manik Bandopadhyay (1908-1956), Faiz wrote the screenplay for the film as it dealt with the lives of the ordinary fishermen who are duped by some loan-giving sharks. Bandopadhyay was a member of the Progressive Writers Association; he later joined the Communist Party of India in 1944 and remained its member until his untimely death in 1956. Most of his literature which includes novels and short stories are replete with the themes of social realism, human resilience, and a vehement criticism of the colonial legacy. At this stage in his life, Faiz desperately wanted to work on a cultural front rather than something that tended to be acutely political and this yearning would lead him to films. As Victor Kiernan puts it:

He helped to make a film, which won international awards, about the lives of the fisherfolk, whom he visited and greatly liked, among the rivers of East Pakistan. He had plans for a national theatre, and with his wife sponsored a variety of local dramatic

experiments (25).

Though this was Faiz's only engagement as a screenplay writer, the essay, nevertheless, displays his serious understanding of the medium and its influence and impact on the public at large due to its dissemination in cultural spaces.

“Film and Culture”

It is somewhat a strange matter that in our society, every art is called art but film is called industry. Not even craft but industry, as if making shoes and making films is similar business! If someone is affluent enough, it depends on one's choice whether one makes a film or a shoe. Moreover, to make shoes one needs some kind of expertise, however, for films no such condition is necessary. Indeed, in one sense everything comes within the domain of business today. An image sells, a shoe sells, a couplet sells as does even a bicycle. A song sells too and a matchbox as well, but no one calls painting and music industry. Up until now, such a predicament has not arrived whereby rich people would open painting factories or open workshops for writing poetry, then why is it that only film has received this kindness? A reason for this could possibly be that it requires a lot of money to make film; that it is a result of a collaborative effort of people and that it leads to monetary benefits. All these matters are purely commercial and have nothing to do with art, culture, or aesthetics. If you don't demand art and culture from a shoemaker, why do you expect a filmmaker to grow ecstatic over your taste instead of amassing profit for himself? Even if one accepts this, for the sake of argument, a good shoemaker and a good bicycle maker necessarily keep in mind the merits of their product. If one is making a shoe, one will definitely try that he crafts shoes that are fashionable, durable and comfortable. If one is making a bicycle, one will ensure that its color and its whole machinery and appearance are pleasing. There are certain standards attached to good or bad shoes or good and bad bicycles in the market and on these rests the success or the failure of one's business. The tale of films runs contrary to this. Here filmmakers are neither concerned with the distinctive merits of film nor are they perplexed that their ignorance or the fact that carelessness can harm the business. The standard of commercial film is that if a film generates revenue, it is good and if it doesn't, it is bad. If a film that makes money is obscene, according to the artistic standards and pernicious, from the moral perspective, it hardly matters! Art and morality for them, are not affairs concerning their business. This is the first foundational obsession in the world of commercial films. Surely, such a perspective has not been completely accepted by any society. Everyone agrees that films and filmmaking are not merely business propositions but related to the thought and practices of a society. Accordingly, the way a chemist, in the name of business, cannot sell poison to somebody – in the same manner nobody, in the name of industry, can be exonerated from the charge of corrupting

society. Acknowledging this reality, for film, there exists yet another mechanism of accountability in almost every culture and country. But more often than not, institutions of this kind, instead of paying attention to artistic and cultural merits and demerits of a film, indulge themselves in political and moral concerns. This kind mechanism of is not altogether satisfying.

The foundational argument is that communitarian and social values are universal issues. Art or beauty or culture are in themselves moral values and their existence or absence, necessarily influences the morality of society. The thing that lowers the taste of a society lowers its moral standards as well. Everything that corrects society improves its moral standards as well. According to this, then every worthless couplet, every bad painting, every dissonant song is morally corrupting. In the same vein every indecent film is blameworthy as well, even if all the actresses remain veiled from head to toe and all the actors keep reciting Hali's *Mussaddas*.⁵ And this not in the sense of Art for Art's sake because one cannot separate the subject of the art from the craft, for a mediocre subject cannot give birth to a remarkable couplet, in the same way, one cannot lay the foundation of a good film on an absurd proposition. In the attributes of art and beauty, appearance is not the only quality – sincerity, seriousness, right-intention, and truthfulness are all included. This introduction protracted a little since the main topic for today concerns film and culture. But before taking up this discussion it is necessary to accept that film is first an art, and then an industry, a business or something else; moreover, every work of art influences the moral standards of the society and the character of a society, its virtue and sin are deeply connected with artistic merits or demerits. Thirdly, this thing which we call culture is the term for these ethical values whether they appear in the shape of aesthetics or in the shape of everyday mannerisms of life. But in addition to the general qualities of art, films have their own distinctive features as well, due to which they are profoundly associated and deeply connected with the national culture and morality of a society.

The first thing is that film, like any other art, isn't a solitary affair but an admixture of literature, music, dance, photography and performance, and that is why films influence other films and other arts as well. This means that regarding almost every art, it is predominantly due to film that societal taste is developed and is regulated.

Secondly, in contrast to poetry, music, painting, films explore abstract ideas and topics and give concrete shape to them by portraying men and women performing various vocations. That is why, other than improving the artistic taste, films also influence the manner of speaking, clothing, etiquette

⁵ Faiz is here alluding to Altaf Hussain Hali's *Musaddas Madd-o-Jazr-e Islam* (1879; The Flow and Ebb of Islam), primarily because of its religious, reverent content about the moral decadence, plight, and a call for the revival of moral values among the Muslim of India.

and behavior. In short, they affect every aspect of living.

Thirdly, these causes not only impact the outward behavior of viewers but also alter intrinsic values, feelings and thoughts, peoples' perception of good and evil.

Fourthly, art, music, painting, or for that matter any art form of this kind does not require complete and undivided attention, something that is indispensable to film watching. Whether you listen to a song, or read a book, or gaze at a painting, your environment showcases varieties of things which are equipped to readily become part of your thought and perception. But within a dark cinema hall, other than what is showing on the screen, there is nothing to distract your attention and perception – this magical process is not destined to any other art.

Lastly, amongst all the arts, the cost of watching a film is quite affordable and cost effective. Literacy, prosperity or any other such precondition required for other arts, isn't required to watch a film at all.

In short, the cultural influence of films among all other arts is most universal, most effective, most widespread and because of this reason thoughts and practice of any society, lifestyle and standard of good and bad taste are binding and relative to films. Therefore, filmmaking is, not just a business or just an art, it is a practice of immense social responsibility, the onus of which falls not only on filmmakers, but on the whole society, all connoisseurs and intellectuals.

Works Cited

- Ali, Agha Shahid. "Introduction: Translating Faiz Ahmad Faiz." *The Rebel's Silhouette*. Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1995. pp. xi-xxviii.
- Hashmi, Ali Madeeh. *Love and Revolution: Faiz Ahmad Faiz*. New Delhi: Rupa, 2019.
- Kiernan, Victor G. "Introduction." *Poems by Faiz*. London: Vanguard Books Pvt. Ltd., 1971. pp. 21-44.
- Kumar, Shiv K. "Preface." *The Best of Faiz*. New Delhi: UBSPD, 2001.
- Lazard, Naomi. "Translating Faiz." *The True Subject: Selected Poems of Faiz Ahmad Faiz*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988. pp. xi-xviii.
- Mir, Raza and Ali Husain Mir. *Anthems of Resistance: A Celebration of Progressive Urdu Poetry*. New Delhi: India Ink, 2006.