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“Dekh ākar kūcha-e chāk girebāñ kī bahār (Excerpted from *Lakhnaū kī Pāñch Rāteñ*)

Sardar Jafri

Introduced & translated by

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Translator’s note

The Progressive Writers’ Movement attracted many young poets. They received a lot of attention when, in December of 1941, a *mushaira* of novice poets was organized at the All-India Radio’s Lucknow station by its Station Director, Somnath Chib. The poetic symposium was presided by the famous revolutionary poet Josh Malihabadi, and the poets who took part included Asral-ul Haq Majaz, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Moin Ahsan Jazbi, Makhdoom Muhiuddin, and Ali Sardar Jafri. As Sardar Jafri puts it, “They are not great yet, but legends have started being written about them.” In the audience were the crème de la crème of Lucknow’s literati, such as Sajjad Zaheer, his wife Razia, Maya Sarkar, D P Mukerji, Ahmed Ali, Gauhar Sultan, Hayatullah Ansari, Anwar Jamal Kidwai, and Sibte Hassan.

This essay is an English translation of the account of this poetic symposium, and the ‘after-party’ that took place at the home of Sardar Jafri that he shared with Majaz and Sibte Hassan. The original essay is from Sardar Jafri’s collection of Urdu essays titled *Lakhnaū kī Pāñch Rāteñ*.

Sardar Jafri was born in Balrampur, a small town in the foothills of the Himalayas which was the capital of a taluqdari. The taluqdari was known as *Riyasat* and the taluqdar as *Maharaja*. The town had stables with horses, garages with motorcars and carriages, elephant shelters, ponds, guava orchards, henna plants and ‘*ishq-e pechān*’ shrubs, gardens with *dūb* grass lawns, Gulmohar trees, mansions, tennis courts, etc., i.e. all the trappings of a feudal system. As Sardar Jafri writes in his essay

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“No God Rises to Accept My Service” (also included in *Lakhnaū kī Pāñch Rāteñ*):

In all this apparatus that I have mentioned, nothing belonged to us except our small house. Everything belonged to the *riyasat*, which had been given to my father and paternal uncle to run in connection with their employment. My uncle was in a senior position and my father in a lower position, but the entire family had a commanding authority.

The family was very laid back. The world outside Balrampur meant nothing to us. The children were born here, grew up here, after schooling in Balrampur they would get educated in Aligarh, then they would get married and get employed by the *riyasat*.

This was a very honest, bound by religion, abstinent and virtuous household...They used to carry out their employment very earnestly and at every opportunity proved their fidelity to their employers.

Sardar Jafri’s interest in writing and literature started at a very young age. As he recalls from his childhood, he used to practice writing this couplet on a wooden tablet hundreds of times:

The pen says, “I am the king of the world”

By the power of the pen alone, I become the master of this kingdom

Coupled with the Shi’a faith that his family practiced, this interest drew Sardar Jafri toward the Muharram *majālis* and particularly toward *marṣiyah-khvānī*. As he recalls in “No God Rises to Accept My Service:”

There was also a lot of talk about the *marṣiyas* of Anis. It would not be an exaggeration to say that after the *kalma* and the *takbeer*, the first words I heard were that of Anis. I was perhaps five or six when I started sitting at the pulpit and reciting *salaam* and *marṣiye* of Anis. Besides *salaam* and *marṣiye*, I had memorized many couplets as well.

Perhaps it was the influence of this that I myself started writing *marṣiye* at the age of fifteen or sixteen and the influence of *marṣiye* remains on my poetry even today. The language, similes, metaphors, arrangements, everything about these *marṣiye* was Anis’, none of it was my own....

“I am a gleaner, a collector of benefaction from Anis’ garden.”

The “triumph of good over evil” theme of the Battle of Karbala appears to have led Sardar Jafri to explore the broader topic of equality and justice. From “No God Rises to Accept My Service:”

The collective influence of all this on me was the conviction that sacrificing one’s life for truth and righteousness is the greatest proof of humanity. I have always considered truth and righteousness to be earthly traits. From the fables of Nimrod and Khalil to the events related to the martyrdom of Hussain had created a fervor within me...

In those days, a few questions made me restless and a few questions created a very big rebellion in my life. The question of why this world is and where it comes from never bothered me, but the question of why this world is the way it is has always bothered me. My mind started asking this question as early as my childhood days.

In his youth, Sardar Jafri was fond of hunting and horse riding. With a gun slung on his back, he would ride around the villages, towns, and sub-divisions of the *riyasat*. In this way, he got acquainted with the rural life of Awadh. He describes it as ‘a land of beautiful songs, fields of paddy and wheat, and abject poverty.’

Beneath the scorching summer sun, stooped farmers with bricks laden on their backs are being kicked viciously. And they are pleading for mercy. Women hanging from branches of trees by their hair. Children with rickety legs and protruding stomachs. Big black eyes but they seem extinguished with a vacant stare. Once a peasant woman was stripped naked in front of me...I realized for the first time that millions of people eat only once in twenty-four hours.

Sardar Jafri’s personal observations of the brutal oppression of bonded laborers of the *harvahi* system, the painful treatment of people living in poverty, and the tyrannical retaliation of the army of the *riyasat* to a rebellion by the peasants were a close-up view of ‘the atrocity and tyranny of feudalism.’ As he puts it, “The first understanding of the societal reasons for the disgusting oppression and poverty had lit a flame in my heart.” He tried to find answers in books such as Mahatma

Gandhi's "The Story of My Experiments With Truth" and Plutarch's "Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans." But, in his words:

...Instead of answering my questions, these books lit more fires in my heart...Now I started hating everything that had the slightest odor of aristocracy...I stopped eating delicacies or fancy meals and had almost given up playing tennis or hunting...

In this state of mind, I reached Aligarh in 1933...This period is as important in the history of India as it is in the history of Urdu literature and the history of Aligarh. The Aligarh Movement had changed the course of Urdu in the nineteenth century.

When I reached Aligarh, it was the time when the first impressions of the new movement were being formed, and literature and politics were mingling into one. Akhtar Raipuri, Sibte Hassan, Hayatullah Ansari, Saadat Hasan Manto, Majaz, Jan Nisar Akhtar, and Ale Ahmad Suroor were all students there, and Dr. Ashraf and Dr. Abdul Aleem were among the teachers. Later, Ismat Chughtai also got there and Jazbi too.

This is the journey of Sardar Jafri to the Progressive Writer's Movement in general and, in particular, to the *mushaira* of novice poets, an account of which is presented below.



The Fourth Night

Come See the Spring in the Alley of the Lover with Tattered Clothes

That night was very stormy. It was the month of December in 1941 and a cold wind was blowing. The old and huge tamarind tree standing in front of our house on Kandhari Lane was swaying like a great big giant. Its branches would strike each other and with the constant sound of *saaen-saaen*, countless small leaves would rain down from it. The wind was blowing with the force of a thousand wings. Some of the street lamps, which were hung on electric wires instead of being on lampposts, were swinging wildly and the shadows were dancing in a frenzy. Our own shadows would sometimes dance in front of us and sometimes

behind our backs. The night was in its prime and there was a sense of triumph in our hearts. We were returning from the poetic symposium for novice poets at the All-India Radio.

The poetic symposium for novice poets was organized by the All-India Radio's Lucknow Station Director Somnath Chib, a lover of lovers by profession. The duties of presiding over the symposium were fulfilled by the revolutionary poet Josh Malihabadi. There was no question of him reciting his own poems that day. He had come to listen to the compositions of young progressive poets. A dignified personality with a healthy and vigorous complexion, a heartwarming and innocent smile, affection, love, and pride in his eyes, and all other mannerisms a river of distinguishment.

Josh presiding over the poets is not a question to demur
Josh is the one that wine-drinkers of the world look
toward

Among those who came to listen to the symposium were Lucknow's gentlemen of refined taste, those who were fans of new poetry as well as those whose foreheads were always wrinkled. That day they had come to hear what the novice poets had gone through. In that crowd is Sajjad Zaheer, founder of the progressive movement and its leader-in-chief. He is still a young man, just returned from England after finishing his education. He has been to prison as well. He was released on medical grounds. But he still has the innocence of a college student on his face. He is a heavyset man with the most delicate hands and a sweetness in his personality. His wife Razia, with a wheatish complexion and a slender build. She has received an MA in Urdu from Allahabad University. Maya Sarkar, who teaches English at Mahila Vidyalaya. She is a Bengali but speaks the most refined Urdu of Lucknow. Prof. D P Mukerji, a literary critic and an authoritative scholar of the Bengali language, a fan of music, appreciates poetry and poets, extremely progressive, teaches Economics and Sociology at Lucknow University. When he speaks, it is as if flowers are sprinkling from his mouth. He is in a dignified Bengali dhoti and kurta, with a Kashmiri shawl over his shoulders. He is perpetually looking for talented students. He invites them home for tea and engages them in conversations. He gives them books to read. He does not understand Urdu that well but he is extremely sharp and is able to distinguish between good and bad poets. He is happy that a student of his university is included among the novice poets at the symposium. There is Ahmed Ali, who has just returned from England. He has written a few novels in Urdu and one in English with a foreword written by

Forster. He is considered a distinguished litterateur. Gauhar Sultan, with the famous and much talked about singing voice. Hayatullah Ansari, the famous Urdu fiction writer and editor of the weekly *Hindustan*, a supporter of novice poets but taking on the style of a critic. Anwar Jamal Kidwai, with his particular nonsensical style and no interest in practical politics, does not produce any original literature, but is extremely revolutionary both ideologically and emotionally. And Sibte Hassan, love incarnate from head to toe, like a prince from the land of a romantic novel who goes around the magical palaces and verandahs waking sleeping princesses. Handsome face, elegantly dressed, delicate sculptured lips, big curious eyes, and a very polite and clear tongue. Poets are not his friends but his courtiers. Besides these people, there are other students and teachers from the university and many of the old teachers of the university in their shervanis of *jamavar*, a cloth embroidered with floral motifs, sitting on the floor with their legs folded under them. Never before in the history of Urdu literature had the elders and the seasoned poets come to listen to the poetry of young novice poets.

Everyone is waiting and the novice poets enter with Somnath Chib. These are the revolutionaries of the era, rebellious, fond of life's pleasures but willing to lay down their lives. They are not great yet but legends have started being written about them. New streams of Urdu poetry and literature will now flow in their names. They bring with them a new spirit, a new feeling, a new language. They have all the past heritage with them, they have the most advanced degrees in subjects of modern knowledge, and so the combination of the past and the contemporary has come naturally to them. They are cutting old diamonds in a new style. They know the tales of separation from and uniting with the beloved. They are familiar with the relish of the beloved's promises for tomorrow. But their greatest love is India's freedom, and even the heads of those who object to the new poetry bow down before this beloved.

Numerous glances are raised toward the novice poets, glances that have the warmth of love, glances that are cold, romantic glances, glances of opponents, but every glance has one question – which one is which?

This is Majaz. Well-dressed but always embodying the mad lover with tattered clothes. Flashes of coquetry and mischief shine in his deep sad eyes. Who in Lucknow doesn't know the soft mischievous smile from his slender lips. To quote Faiz, in his voice and in his poetry there is a profusion of the lyrical quality of a *mughanni*, a vocalist and a

musician. Josh has gathered all of his personality in one phrase, “With one glance, he wants to soak up all the beauty of the world and in one sip, he wants to drink all the liquor of the world.”

In this exhilarating gathering, in this enlightening
assembly they all sat
Goblets in their hands; I had already emptied mine,
spilled a few drops too

And this is Faiz Ahmed Faiz. A product of the lanes and alleys of Lahore. The smile on his face is sad but the eyes are soft and full of love. There is a molten nature to his voice and a slow-burning flame of the heart reflected in his poetry which melts the music of the words and turns them into colors. Every verse becomes a painting. A picture of beauty and grace that hangs over our hearts. Similes and metaphors flash like lightning in slow paced easy-going couplets. The eyes are dazzled by these sudden flashes but this is that lightning which only Faiz can generate by putting together these tiny sparks.

In the chambers of the heart with a row of burnt-out
candles
Frightened of sunlight, fed up with it, tired of it
Like the fluid imagination of the beauty of the beloved
Clasping tightly our darkness, wrapping it around us

And this is Jazbi. Wanting nothing from anyone and becoming entangled with everyone. An emotional face that reflected the bitterness of a lifetime of hardships and poverty and an immense hunger for love in the eyes. And in a beautiful melody, a transfixing state of mind that even the curated devotion of his voice cannot hide. Unwilling to accept anyone’s favor, he rails against life as well as death.

Let death not come under distressed circumstances, O
Lord
It will be known that he was unable to bear the worries of
subsistence

And this is Makhdoom Mohiuddin. The revolutionary from Hyderabad with an ebony face carved out of black stone. A high forehead, cheerful eyes, warmth of affection in the eyes, and extreme confidence and conviction in whatever he has to say, which is filled with ardor and cordiality. He is standing at the fork of revolution and romance and waiting. It is difficult to say whether he is waiting for a sultry dark-complexioned beloved from the Deccan or for the independence of India.

All night you kept fluttering in my tearful eyes
 Like the breath, you kept appearing and disappearing
 When I heard the leaves rustle, I thought perhaps you
 were here
 Prostrations of joy that after all, you had found the one
 you adored
 A sort of endurance had settled on this restless heart
 A kind of trumpet was playing in my sorrowful world

And this is Jan Nisar Akhtar. Alone in this throng of novice poets who inherited poetry from his father Muztar Khairabadi. Entangled with himself, he becomes very serious from within and then smiles at himself.

These stars, this faithfulness, these cold flowers
 The sky like the ashes of a burnt corpse
 The moon like a prophet without follower
 Friend, let me forget about all these things

And this is Sardar Jafri. Krishan Chander says he has a mark of hammer and sickle on his face. Prof. Muhammad Mujib is of the opinion that he doesn't paint in color, rather he carves idols out of stone.

The smile on the pursed lips of capital
 Is the fatigue on the worker's faces, or is it not?
 That faint whiteness of the morning beneath the horizon
 Is the shroud of the setting stars, or is it not?
 The forehead that is wrinkled with poverty
 Is the ray of the rising sun, or is it not?

Word was that N M Rashid, to whom the credit goes for introducing free verse to Urdu poetry, would also come to this symposium of novice poets. In the view of Patras, he is the greatest poet of Asia. But one thing is certain, the Urdu language will never forget Rashid.

After the symposium ended, when we reached home at midnight, the wind and rain storm had strengthened a bit and it was very cold as well. At home, in the name of furniture, there was a table, a few cane chairs, and three cots with beds made from woven ropes. The furniture had been pushed to one side and mats were laid out on the floor. Fire was burning in a hearth, above which was the cornice and above the cornice hung a large portrait of a revolutionary woman of Spain. Her hands are clenched into fists, her bosom bulging, and not even her military uniform can hide her femininity. Her face is raised toward the sky, her lips are pressed together with intense emotion, and below the picture was the caption 'TO

DEATH.’ In the light of two candles burning on top of upside-down buckets, the portrait appeared even more full of courage and heartwarming. The shadow of the cornice reached up to the raised part of the woman’s bosom and it appeared as if this passionate face was emerging from the darkness of death with a message of life. In a way, that portrait was an interpretation of our revolutionary and romantic emotions. We too wanted to fight against death. Spain appeared to us as our nation because it was fighting for freedom against fascism and for the beautiful dreams of humanity. Spain’s freedom was our freedom and that revolutionary woman was a part of our gathering that night.

Whoever was not killed is not from our tribe.

There was calm in the room. There was warmth in the fire and in the hearts. Sometimes the thousands of hands of the storm raging outside would rattle our doors and along with the sound of the doors rattling, the flames of the candles burning on top of the upside-down buckets would shiver. We sat encircling those upside-down buckets and in the soft light of the burning candles, we were watching each other’s faces which were filled with emotions and love. Josh Malihabadi could not fulfill the duties of ‘the one that wine-drinkers of the world look toward’ for long. He was always very weak when it came to all-nighters. So, when the yawns bothered him too much, he got up and left saying, “To stay up at night is the habit of *ullus* (owls).”

The warmth of the gathering kept intensifying, the exhilaration of the hearts kept increasing, the faces kept getting brighter. Now it was difficult to distinguish whether this was a poetry session or the circulation of wine goblets. All of them were contemporaries, all of them were novices, all of them were sitting in a circle, all of them had different styles. Individuality was recognized; there was no sign of any kind of envy, malice, or rivalry among contemporaries. Praise was being given to each other as if a lover and the beloved were making romantic talk. Faiz said, “Fellows, I heard a couplet in Lahore, I don’t know whose it is.”

When the boat was stable and secure, who had the desire
to return to shore
Now in such a dilapidated boat, who can hope to reach
the shore

Jazbi’s sad face blossomed like a flower. This was his couplet which had earlier reached Lahore and become famous. Faiz and Jazbi embraced each other. Faiz had not even had the chance to sit down when Jazbi,
Dekh ākar kūcha-e chāk...

without any preamble, started to recite in an immensely heart-warming melody Faiz's poem "Mauzu-e Sukhan" ("Topic of Conversation"), which I had published in Naya Adab a few months prior.

It starts to fade away, the depressed and flaming evening
 Soon the night will appear, washed by the fountain of the
 moon
 And the yearning glances will be heard from
 And these longing hands will touch those hands

The winds were howling outside and Jazbi's melodies were causing a storm to rage inside. There was an innocent and grateful smile on Faiz's face. What greater compliment could there be for a poet. Jazbi had just finished the first stanza when Majaz took up the second.

Is it her face, the hem of her veil, or her dress?
 Must be something that turns the drape so colorful
 I wonder if in the fancied dense shadows of those tresses
 Still twinkles that dangling pendant or not

Then the two of them took turns to recite the remaining stanzas of the poem. The tone of Jazbi's melody had not subsided when Makhdoom took up the harmony. He had the *Divan-e-Hafiz* (collection of Hafiz's poems) in his hands and he was humming an ode from it.

The Beloved with the upright stature, Khusro with a
 mouth so sweet
 Who with his eye-lash shatters the rank of an army
 On the world, rely not; in that goblet, wine thou hast
 The pleasure of Venus, of exquisite forehead and tender
 of body, enjoy

This ode added color to the gathering. Who would not like to have a toast to exquisite foreheads and tender bodies. And now Makhdoom's voice was not alone. The melodious and the out of tune, all the voices joined in. The chorus of Hafiz's ode continued for a long time. The revolutionary woman from Spain on the wall kept inviting death and outside the winds kept frantically knocking on the doors. But oblivious to everything, we kept drinking to the health of the beauties in Hafiz Shirazi's compositions. Who knows which beauty was peeking into whose heart.

The storm had started to abate when Jazbi stood up once again, and now he started dancing while singing the verses of "Mauzu-e Sukhan."

Today once again the heart-warming beauty adorned with

jewelry

The same dreamy eyes, the same shadowy lines of kohl
The light color on the cheeks, that dust of rouge
On sandalwood-like hands, a note in henna

There was now an impassioned crispness in his voice and had hence become very soulful. Now he was dragging each word so much that he would need to stop singing just to be able to breathe. With much difficulty we would make him sit down but he would get agitated and stand up again. Faiz's "Mauzu-e Sukhan" had once again pervaded the gathering. But a short while later Jazbi's voice left him, even though he still insisted on continuing to recite the poem. Till now, only one of Faiz's poems had been recited, and that too by Jazbi, so many times that everyone was tired of hearing it. And so, to turn the attention away to something else, someone requested Jazbi to recite his poem "Maut" (death). Jazbi's broken voice and tired melody created an unfamiliar sensation to that poem.

Let me wake up my sleeping world, then I will go
Let me have fanfare in my sorrowful world, then I'll go
Let me down another stiff drink, then I will go
I will go in a bit - let me come to my senses, then I'll go

It felt as if Jazbi was traveling on the passing night which was racing toward the morning at the speed of the raging storm. I don't know how many times he sang this melody. All I remember is that by the time the morning came, the storm had died, the candles that had been burning on the upside-down buckets had been reduced to coin sized discs, and their shivering flames were starting to gasp for breath. And when the *dastarkhwan* was laid for the meal, Jazbi was dancing in the middle of it and singing, "Let me dry the wet hem of my shirt, then I'll go." More than half the gathering was sleeping, and in the backdrop of Jazbi's drowning voice, Makhdoom's sad melody could be heard, which he seemed to be humming only to himself.

Even in solitude, the state of the world bites you like a
snake
Much like the thought of the hungry and their ilk when
drinking

Another night that would never come again had ended. Another day had begun and the portrait of the revolutionary woman from Spain hanging on the wall was inviting us to move onward in the struggles of life.

Dekh ākar kūcha-e chāk...

[Note: The rest of this chapter was added to the second edition of this book published in 1988 after Faiz Ahmed Faiz's death.]

We got up from there and went on with our lives. In that journey, a pithy and expressive couplet from Jazbi's poem Maut has stayed with us.

Where is my lost voice, bring it to me
My broken musical instrument, bring it to me

This couplet kept changing its appearance but its intended voice remained the same and manifested in Makhdoom's poetry in this way.

That lightning-fast traveling horse of mine, where is it?
Pray bring my blood-thirsty sword, where is it?

For Faiz, this voice became the sound of a bell signaling the departure of a caravan that took him into the tents of Palestinian revolutionaries late in his life. The revolutionary woman from Spain and Yasser Arafat of Palestine were two names of the same front.

On this front, Faiz's participation was different from that of other revolutionaries. In him there was a similarity with a guitar playing musician of Peekskill fame. When the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) announced that Paul Robeson would not be allowed to sing in a concert organized by the American trade unions, all the laborers gathered in Peekskill and made human walls as fences encircling Paul Robeson. Far away, at higher ground, the telescopic rifles of the KKK had been positioned. This war had not yet started when a lean youth with a guitar strolled by. Someone said to him, "Young man, what are you doing here? There's going to be fighting here, riots will break out, bullets are going to fly." He replied, "What do I have to do with the fighting and the riots? I am a peace-loving man and I have come only to hear Paul Robeson sing."

But sometime later, when the fighting began, the guitar wielding peace-loving youth was seen using his instrument as a weapon to fight the enemies of peace, freedom, and music like a lion.

The situation for Faiz in Beirut was very similar to this. He did not have a rifle in his hands, just the guitar of his poetry. He had gone there only to collect the poems of Asia and Africa. He was the editor of the magazine *Lotus*.

Arif Ansari was born in Lucknow and grew up in Aligarh, where he attended Our Lady of Fatima Secondary School and the Aligarh Muslim University. He earned his MS and PhD in electrical engineering from Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. A wireless telecommunication technologist by training and profession, he has translated several books of fiction and nonfiction from

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