Where Faiz succeeds

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The following paper about the celebrated progressive Urdu poet, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, was presented at a meeting of Faiz Academy, London, which was also addressed by the Russianorientalist, Anna Savarova. The Academy, headed by Mujahid Tirmizey, was founded with the poet’s blessings during his exile in London.

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I do not accept that capitalism has returned to Russia or ever will. This can never happen. If it ever did, the movements of workers and peasants and lovers of liberty all over the world would receive a deadly blow. If it ever did happen, all those who championed the higher values of humanism and all those who gave the good news of a bright morrow would be bereft of faith and I who regard suicide as harâm [forbidden by religion] would commit suicide.

The English translation is a bit ornate and the style is stilted, but the original is Faiz filtered through Ayub Mirza in his pioneering work Ham kih Thaehrê Ajnabi [We who are considered strangers] (1976). Capitalism has returned to Russia. Whether it will leave again is a matter of opinion or judgment. Faiz, mercifully, died before capitalism staged a comeback. Would he have committed suicide? Those who have lived by Faiz know the answer.

History is full of intellectuals’ disenchantments. In English literature, Wordsworth’s is a classic example. In Urdu literature, before Faiz, Sahir Ludhianvi was weighed down by the eruption of the great Sino-Soviet schism and betrayal of the ideals of independence in his country. Before Sahir went Makhdom Moh-yuddin, who served as a model for Faiz in both life and art. He had been called upon to respond to the debacle in Telangana. Underneath Telangan lay some serious problems of Marxist theory and practice, which eventually were to undo Soviet style communism. Faiz died before Gurbachev’s perestroika got out of hand and the gods failed and the faiths crumbled.

Sahir was frustrated but he did not lose heart. He gave a call:

Āo kih koī khâb bunēi Come, let us weave a dream, any dream.

Makhdoom increasingly retreated into himself, turning more and more to ghazal. In the process he created some of the most enchanting, haunting expressions of an anguished heart, which inspired Faiz as well. Sahir and Makhdoom were saddened,
heart broken perhaps, but they did not lose hope.

No, Faiz would not have committed suicide. It would have gone against his grain and genius.

If Faiz were alive today he would have to contend with a whole array of questions raised by the collapse of Soviet socialism, ranging from the interpretation of Marx and his followers to the meaning of history and of human destiny, leading in turn to so many questions of paradigm, language and culture.

Until the demise of Soviet communism these questions seemed to have been answered for a large number of thinking people all over the world. Marx, Marxism, Leninism, and their offshoots inspired several generations of well intentioned people who worked for freedom and social justice for themselves and their fellow beings. History seemed to have ended in so far as asking and answering questions was concerned. Suicide could therefore be contemplated when the whole life’s edifice came crumbling.

The questions have opened up like old wounds. And they cannot be wished away. In his later period Faiz had a feeling of not having done enough, a feeling of personal stagnation. To that he responded thus:

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\begin{align*}
Tum khaof o khatar se & \text{ Cast aside your fears} \\
\text{dar guzaro} & \text{Whatever will be will be} \\
Jo hona hai so honā hāe & \text{Laugh you must if you must} \\
\text{Gar hansna hāe to} & \text{Cry you must if you must} \\
hansna hāe & \text{Do what you will} \\
\text{Gar rona hāe to rona hāe} & \text{Whatever will be will be faced.} \\
Tum apni kar guzaro & \\
Jo hoga dēkha jāē ga & \\
\end{align*}
\]

Underlying these lines is the exasperation of a perfectionist, of a lover who wants to give all. In a different context and at a much earlier stage, Faiz said:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Kahā se āī nigār i sabā} & \text{From where did the} \\
\text{kidhar ko gāī} & \text{morning breeze come} \\
\text{Abhi charāgh i rāh ko} & \text{and where did it go?} \\
\text{kuchh khabar hi nahi} & \text{The earthen lamp shrugs} \\
& \text{its head in despair;} \\
\end{align*}
\]
Abhi girāni i shab mē
kami nahī āï
Nijāt i dida o dīl ki ghari
nahī āï

the night is as
oppressive as ever.
The time for the
liberation of heart and
mind has not come as
yet.
(tr. by Daud Kamal)

or

Balā sē, ham dēkha to
aur dēkhē gē
Farogh i gulshan o saot i
hazar kā mosam

So what, if we do not
live long enough to
enjoy
the garden bloom and
the nightingale’s voice --
Others will.

Here Faiz has a clear picture of the destination. But what when the destination
itself turns out to be a mirage?

This is not the occasion to discuss whether Marxism has collapsed, whether it
needs to be superseded, whether it contains within itself the method to transcend
or transform itself or whether the pursuit of Marxism itself was a wild goose chase.
As always opinions will sharply differ, and I do not know how Faiz would have
reacted to the plethora of these problems. But I do believe that he would still have
looked forward to a better future for humankind.

Marx’s belief that time had come when the utopia could be made real, when the
kingdom of God could be realised on earth, has again become problematic. Echoing
Herbert Marcuse, the moment has passed, or one might hope that it has only been
delayed.

But what about the utopia itself? My tentative submission is that dreaming is
ingrained in man. Hoping is at the core of human existence. It is a biological
necessity. All modern scientific evidence points to that. And Faiz says:

Nahī nigāh mē manzil, to
justujū hi sahī

Never mind if the
destination is not in
sight. The quest is good
enough

Nahi visāl muyas-sar to
ārzū hi sahī

Never mind if the lover’s
meeting is not in sight.
The desire is good
enough.
The key to his mind is in the contrasts he has created between manzil and justiju, and visāl and ārzū. Hoping and questing are like the libido, as immortal as a human being. Faiz is a poet of hope and quest.

It is in the nature of the utopia that it will never be realised. There will always be a distance between dream and reality, but perhaps as time passes dreams will become richer and their actualisations will be more and more fulfilling. Faiz is a compulsive utopian.

This does not however imply that Faiz would have revised his political and social philosophy or given them up entirely or switched to some other philosophy. Let me state my own prejudice here and recall Bernard Shaw’s statement -- however old fashioned it may sound nowadays -- to the effect that every civilised person today is a socialist. The need to stress the word today was never so evident as today. But being a socialist is not a matter of looking for differences but of discovering universal values of humanism in different philosophies, ideologies and faiths. Faiz would have concurred in this. Indeed, this is how most devotees of Faiz read him. It is here that philosophical or religious labels and appellations lose their significance. What is basic is hoping, questing. Systems, faiths, ideologies are attempts at capturing reality and changing it, at directing hope and harnessing quest. They may be highly efficient, but reality remains larger than them. It is no accident that Faiz was a socialist and a realist (in the widest sense), but not a socialist realist. He was also a sufì. Only we will have to be careful in defining our terms.

Faiz was a sufì not in its quietist sense, not in (the Pakistani writer) Ashfaq Ahmed’s sense, but in the tradition of Hasrat Mohani. Faiz took sides. He loved the good things of life but he kept himself in readiness for an eventuality that could deprive him of them. He avoided pain and loved pleasure, but he was beyond pain and pleasure. However, unlike Skinner, he was not prepared to give up his freedom and dignity.

Unfortunately militancy and revolutionary fervour have all too often been equated with machismo. It is time that the importance of the feminine principle in social life was asserted. Militancy and revolutionary fervour lie in one’s readiness to stand by one’s ideals and pursue them with undivided attention, and to say with Faiz:
Koi nijāt na pae nijāt sē
pehlē

Sakū milē na kabhi terē
pā figāro ko

Jamāl i Khūn i sar i khār
ko nazār na lagē

May no one ever be liberated before the liberation arrives
May those who have developed sore feet on the pilgrimage to you get no comfort
May the beauty of the blood that sits poised on the end of the thorn not be tarnished by the evil glance.

It is no wonder that the silken softness, dewy translucence and soothing allure of Faiz’s poetry have sustained revolutionaries and ordinary people when hectoring, sloganising and posturing have at best sounded irritating irrelevancies.

(Read at Faiz Academy meeting, London, 8 April 1994)