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The Life and Work of Faiz Ahmed Faiz (Review Article)

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LUDMILA VASIL'eva. *Parvarish-e Laub-o-Qalam: Faiz, Hayāt aur Takbliqāt*. Translated by USAMA FARUQI and LUDMILA VASIL'eva. Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2007. 296 pp. ISBN 0-547228-8.

DEVOTEES of Urdu literature have reason to celebrate. One of the greatest Urdu poets of the twentieth century has finally acquired a literary biography worthy of his status. Liudmila Vasil'eva (or Ludmila Vasilieva, as she usually spells her name in English) has written a rich account of the life and work of Faiz Ahmad Faiz in which both are firmly located in the times in which he lived. This is not just a fine biography, but also a nuanced presentation of his oeuvre, and it comes not in one but two versions. First published as a monograph in Russian, the Urdu translation, done in part by the author herself, incorporates enough changes to make it distinct.

Urdu literary culture does not have a strong tradition of biography. While there is no dearth of criticism, very few literary lives have been subjugated to academic rigor and written about beyond the traditions of hagiography or the *tazkira*. Our sense of the work of our literary giants is, therefore, quite innocent of the context in which it was created. If that is a problem in general, it is especially acute for the politically engaged intellectuals who figure so prominently in our literary pantheon. It is much easier to turn a Ḥālī or an Iqbāl into a font of timeless ideology if their work cannot be rooted in the contingencies of their life and times.

Faiz Ahmad Faiz was a citizen of his world and his work was very much rooted in the struggles of that world. His work took him all over the world and much was written by and about him. Yet, until now, we did

not have a single consecutive account of his life and of the context in which he wrote his poetry. The lack of a biography is hardly surprising since even his poetry has not been fully collected. Our access to it is primarily through *Nuskhabā-e Vafā* (Inventories of Fidelity, 1984), the omnibus volume that combines the seven volumes of poetry published by Faiz during his lifetime. While a section at the end of this volume brings together the verses written after the publication of *Mirē Dil, Mirē Musāfir* (My Heart, My Traveler, 1981), his last collection, there is no space given to the poems that were not included in his published volumes. While many such poems are incidental or juvenile, they are still important for any understanding of Faiz's trajectory. Also missing from it is "Ham Dēkhēngē" (We Shall See), the perennially popular anthem of protest and one of Faiz's most powerful poems. We do not know much about the textual history of Faiz's poetry and very little of his prose has been collected: his editorials for the *Pakistan Times*, his work at *Lotus* (the journal of the Afro-Asian Writers' Union that he edited from Beirut), and the many interviews that he gave around the world, all remain scattered and not easily available to Faiz scholars.

It is no surprise at all that the first serious biography of Faiz ever written should emerge from Russia. Faiz spent a fair bit of time in the Soviet Union where he was well received and very well known. Russia also has one of the largest academic establishments in the world, with a solid tradition of research and well-articulated expectations of publication, which have not been destroyed even by the trauma of the Soviet collapse. It also helps that in Russian literary culture, poetry occupies almost as central a place as it does in Urdu—no one can claim to be educated, let alone cultured, without the ability to recite poetry from memory. A love for Pushkin is, of course, de rigueur for all Russian-speakers, but other poets fare well too. Books of poetry have a ready market and poetry readings are commonplace.

Vasilieva is also heir to a substantial tradition of Urdu studies in Russia. For various reasons, both political and linguistic, this tradition is less well known in the world of Urdu letters, especially in Pakistan, than should be the case. While the study of Arabic, Persian, and various Turkic languages in Russia goes back to the beginning of the nineteenth century, and that of Sanskrit to the middle, Urdu studies began only at the very end of the century and was enmeshed in Russia's imperial competition with Britain. The first courses for Hindustani were started in Tashkent in 1897 for Russian military officers stationed in Turkestan (Lunin 1962, 151).

Since there was no one in Russia who could do the job, two military officers with backgrounds in Oriental studies were sent abroad to acquire Urdu. A. I. Vygornitskii spent a year in India and, upon his return, produced a *Grammar of Hindustani or Urdu* (1897) and a *Manual for the Study of Hindustani (Urdu)* (1898). I. D. Iagello spent two years at the École Spéciale des Langues Orientales (now INALCO) in Paris and was able to start teaching Urdu in Tashkent in 1897. He later published a *Practical Grammar of Hindustani (Urdu)* (1902) and an 8,000-word *Hindustani-Russian Dictionary* (1902) (Rossiia 1986, 194; Dubovitskii 2007, n.p.).

These initiatives did not survive the Russian revolution and it was not until the 1940s that Urdu began being taught again. It appeared at the Oriental Studies institutes in Leningrad (as St. Petersburg was called between 1924 and 1991) and Moscow, spurred in large part by the Soviet government's desire to broadcast its message around the world in as many languages as possible.¹ Urdu also appeared at the Beruni Institute of Oriental Studies in Tashkent in 1947 where local literary traditions shared a great deal with Urdu (see Khalmirza'ef 2004). Tashkent even acquired an Urdu-immersion school. In the decades that followed, Russian scholars such as N. V. Glebov, Aleksei Sukhochëv, Nataliia Prigarina, and Anna Suvorova produced a substantial corpus of scholarship on Urdu literature and made available the work of numerous Urdu writers and poets in translation. Vasilieva's readers thus had recourse to numerous translations of Urdu poetry and prose—Ghālib, Ḥālī, Iqbāl, Prēmchand, as well as Faiz—and a substantial body of literary scholarship.

Vasilieva, now a senior research associate at the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow, is one of Russia's leading specialists in Urdu. She has taught Urdu language and literature at Moscow State University and was a broadcaster with the Urdu service of Radio Moscow from 1965 to 1989. She has also published a book on Ḥālī and written extensively (in both Russian and Urdu) on Faiz and Iqbāl. She has also translated a host of works into Russian: a volume of poetry by Ghālib; poems and ghazals by Iqbāl, Firāq, Jōsh, Majrūḥ, Majāz, and 'Alī Sardār Ja'fari, in addition to Faiz; and prose by Qurratu'l-'Ain Ḥaidar, Abū'l-Kalām Āzād, and Jōgindar Pāl, among others. But most significantly, she was Faiz's interpreter during his numerous trips to the Soviet Union over the course of seventeen years, from 1967 to 1984. The book therefore draws not just on

¹From the early 1960s on, Soviet publishing houses such as Progress (Moscow) and Raduga (Tashkent) put out a number of books in Urdu, mostly translations done by native speakers. Beautifully typeset and printed on fine paper, these books had a distinct look, unlike anything published in Pakistan or India.

her superb command of Urdu poetry and literary history, but also on her personal friendship with Faiz and his family.

Completed in 2000, the Russian edition was published in Moscow in the same year. It was noticed by Usāmā Fārūqī, the noted translator from Russian, who then began to translate it chapter by chapter in the magazine *Sabras* (Hyderabad, India). He had translated only nine and a half of the book's fourteen chapters when he fell ill and passed away. The rest of the book (113 out of 292 pages of the Urdu text) was then translated by the author herself and published in Karachi. The author's own translation incorporates certain changes in the text, some occasioned by the difference in the audience for the Urdu edition, others by the extra five years of reflection. Although mostly a matter of shifting emphasis and interpretation, these changes, do, nevertheless include several new passages that make the Urdu version an updated edition of the original, rather than a simple translation. Unfortunately, the photographs included in the Russian edition have been omitted in the translation.

The account of Faiz's life presented here does not diverge markedly from what we already know about it. Faiz himself had written or spoken about his life on several occasions, and Vasilieva keeps to the main outline he provided. The strength of Vasilieva's account lies not so much in new revelations, but in providing a thorough, consecutive account of his life. She makes extensive use of his own reminiscences, as well as the memoirs of his friends and collaborators. She also uses to great effect the memoirs of Alys, Faiz's wife and lifelong friend, and the letters they exchanged while Faiz was in prison. It is clear also that what allows Vasilieva to bring Faiz to life is, above all else, her own long friendship with the poet and his family. Yet, one of the many strengths of this book is that Vasilieva does not let her personal acquaintance with him cloud her tone or her judgment. While Faiz is unquestionably the hero here, this is not a fawning account of his life and achievements, but rather a level-headed analysis of Faiz and his work in the context of his life and times.

And what a life it was. Faiz's father, Sulṭān Muḥammad Khān, was a self-made man, born, we are told, into a family of landless peasants in the village of Kālā Qādir outside Sialkot. He attended primary school on his own initiative, then ran off to Lahore in search of further education. A chance encounter with an Afghan grandee in a mosque led him into the service of the amir of Afghanistan, where he found fame and fortune, but also intrigue. He escaped from Afghanistan in disguise and headed to England where he returned to Afghan service even as he attended Cam-

bridge and the Inns of Law. He returned to India a man of substance and eventually settled in Sialkot. If this story sounds miraculous it is because it has all the features of the providential biography of the Islamicate tradition. Trawling through British archives might provide details that would bring this story back to earth. Interestingly, Faiz retailed the story himself in this form,² and Vasilieva's version is no more critical. But what is indubitable—and important—is that Sulṭān Muḥammad Khān brought back from Afghanistan several wives and their relatives who all spoke Persian (or Dari, to be more precise). Faiz thus grew up in a household where Persian was very much a living language. His fondness for the high, Persianate register of Urdu poetry later in life was rooted in a native command of the language.

Faiz first attended a *maktab* in town, but then was sent off to the Scotch Mission School for his primary and secondary education in English. This combination of traditional Indo-Muslim and colonial-missionary education had become typical for boys of his station in India. The next stop was Lahore where he attended first Government College and then Oriental College, earning master's degrees in English and Arabic. He had been a voracious reader of English novels since high school, incurring the wrath of his English teacher in class ten by correcting his mistakes! At Government College, he encountered European literature as well, which he read in English translation. Politics was all around—Faiz tells of his hostel room being used for storing illegal literature—but it was poetry that was his true passion at this time. It was only after he began teaching at the Mohammedan Anglo-Oriental (MAO) College in Amritsar in 1935 that politics and public engagement took the front seat. The friendship of Maḥmūdu'z-Zafar and his wife Rashīd Jahān, among the many London-returned Marxists in the Muslim intelligentsia of the time, had a profound effect on Faiz. In Faiz's own telling, it was a reading of *The Communist Manifesto*, proscribed in India but slipped to him by his new friends, that was the turning point in his intellectual journey.

From that point on, Faiz entered upon a socially and politically engaged public life that was to last to the end of his days. He played a role in the establishment of the All India Progressive Writers' Association (it is quite remarkable what a leading role Urdu writers played in the organization) and very quickly became a leading voice for it. This shift, from *gham-e dōst* (concerns of love) to *gham-e dunyā* (concerns of the world), from the traditional pursuits of Urdu poetry to political engage-

²For instance, in a talk he gave in English in Islamabad just months before his death. See, Faiz (2005, 3–5).

ment, defines *Naqsh-e Faryādi* (Remonstrance)—his first collection of poetry, published in 1941 but written over the previous decade—and was accomplished without abandoning the traditions of Urdu poetry or literary culture. The judgment of Faiz’s friend Sajjād Z̤ahīr in this matter might appear to be a cliché today, but it is nevertheless true:

[T]he values represented by the poet are the same as the values of all progressive humanity of today. But Faiz has adopted them so well that they neither appear distinct from the best traditions of our civilization and culture, nor is the individuality of the poet, his soft, sweet, and lyrical style divorced from them.

(1984, 198)³

Yet for all his commitments, Faiz was not an organization man. His relations with the Progressive Writers’ Association deteriorated after Independence. Similarly, his Marxism never led him to become a member of any Communist party. But when the Soviet Union was dragged into World War II in 1941, Faiz volunteered for the Indian army to do his part in the struggle against Fascism and Nazism. He was put in charge of efforts to maintain the morale of the Indian troops during the war, a task he did well enough to be awarded the title of Member of the British Empire (MBE). He took retirement from the army after the war and found himself back in Lahore at the head of the brand new (and extremely leftist) *Pakistan Times*. Thus it was that he encountered Partition and Independence.

In Lahore, Faiz threw himself into intense activity on many fronts—journalism, trade unions, the international peace movement. But conditions for such work were not salubrious in the new state as its government banked rapidly to the right and accepted American tutelage in matters of foreign policy. In 1951 Faiz met with certain high-ranking army officers, friends from his own days in the service, who were disgruntled with the state of affairs and wanted to bring about change. Faiz brought Sajjād Z̤ahīr, then the general secretary of the Communist Party of Pakistan, for a day of discussions in Rawalpindi. Although the plotters decided the time was not ripe for action, the “conspiracy” was discovered and all the plotters arrested. With half a century’s hindsight, a crackdown by a civilian government on army officers plotting a left-wing coup seems strange indeed. But Faiz was arrested and for a time the threat of death hung over him. Eventually, however, he was sentenced to four years imprisonment, which included the time already served as the trial dragged on. This spell in jail brought Faiz back to poetry, which had continually taken the back seat during the 1940s. His second collection of

³Translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

poetry, *Dast-e Šabā* (Zephyr's Hand), came out while he was in jail, and his third, *Zindān-nāma* (Prison Poems), is also largely composed of poetry written in jail.

By the time Faiz was freed, the Cold War was in full flow and Pakistan's rulers had firmly aligned with the United States. Left-wing newspapers and trade unions were persecuted, and there was little for someone like Faiz to do. But Faiz had acquired an international reputation, largely as a result of the Cold War conjuncture, and he found activity on the world stage. He attended a conference of Asian writers in Delhi in 1956 and was one of only two Pakistani delegates allowed to attend the conference of Afro-Asian writers in Tashkent in 1958. While the latter conference was in session, the Pakistani army staged its first coup and imposed martial law on the country. The new rulers had nothing in common with those who had conspired in Rawalpindi seven years earlier. Faiz returned home only to be arrested for another, though shorter, stint in jail. Upon his release, he found the avenues of journalism and labor organization, the two activities that had absorbed so much of his energy between 1947 and 1951, closed to him.

His involvement in the International Peace Committee, however, continued and his international literary reputation grew. His work was translated into many languages and in 1962 he received the Lenin Peace Prize, the highest honor the Soviet state could bestow on a foreign writer. When he was allowed to leave the country to receive the prize, he did not return and spent the next two years in Britain. This self-imposed exile ended when Faiz returned to Pakistan in 1964. He spent the following eight years teaching and administering the arts there as secretary and then vice president of the Pakistan Arts Council. He also did plays for the radio and his poetry was sung in films. (He also wrote several poems specifically for use in films.)

Things changed with the arrival at the helm of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. For once Pakistan was ruled by a government whose policies Faiz could agree with. Bhutto appointed Faiz to the post of Consultant on Cultural Affairs to the Ministry of Education. He spent the next four years in Islamabad working as a cultural bureaucrat, founding the National Institute of Folk Heritage (Lōk Virṣa), and a classical music research cell. These happy times were not to last. The 1977 coup drove Faiz not only from his posts, but, in 1978, from the country itself. Faiz spent the years from 1978 to 1982 in self-imposed exile. His old contacts with the Afro-Asian Writers Association got him the job of editing its journal *Lotus*, which had just been moved from Cairo to Beirut. Thus Faiz spent three years living and working in Beirut at a calamitous time for that city. This sojourn drew him

deep into the Palestinian struggle and gained him the personal friendship of Yasser Arafat (to whom Faiz dedicated his last collection, *Mirē Dil, Mirē Musāfir*. He was evacuated from Beirut during the Israeli siege of the city in 1982. He also managed a great deal of globetrotting during this time, traveling often to the Soviet Union and to London, and visiting countries as diverse as India, Mongolia, Angola, Vietnam, Canada and even the United States. He always said, at least in public, that there was no formal order for his exile and he returned to Lahore permanently in 1983. His health had long been fragile, and exile (self-imposed or not) had not helped. He died of a heart attack in the Mayo Hospital in Lahore on 19 November 1984.

Vasilieva tells this story with loving detail. She contextualizes Faiz's life within the main intellectual currents that shaped his life: the struggle with colonialism, the attraction of Marxism, the Progressive Writers' Movement and the struggles of the left in Pakistan in the pernicious context of the Cold War. She interweaves his biography with an appraisal of his poetry. The initial goal of the book was, of course, to present Faiz's life and works to a Russian audience. Thus she provides an introduction to Urdu poetry and its social manifestations, especially the phenomenon of the mushaira (*FAF*, 33-35; *PLQ*, 21-23).⁴ She quotes a great deal of poetry, some in translations already published, others done specially for this Russian edition. She has chosen a few poems for extended, line-by-line analysis, which is just as profitable for Urdu-speaking readers as it was for the original Russian audience.

An Urdu poet who grew up in a Persian-speaking household in the Punjab, who had both an Indo-Muslim and a missionary education, who could write highly elaborate Persianate poetry in Urdu, teach Arabic, and write powerful prose in English, an anti-imperialist who was also a Member of the British Empire, a patriot who married an English woman, a writer deeply involved in the creation of anti- and postcolonial literatures, whose friendships and activity spanned the continents—all of this crossing of boundaries, this blurring of distinctions, this hybridity makes Faiz the archetypal postcolonial intellectual. Indeed, ever since Edward Said mentioned Faiz in passing in his *Culture and Imperialism*, Faiz's name has been invoked repeatedly by devotees of postcolonial critique (1994, 18, 226, 243),⁵ but he has received little serious attention from postcolonial

⁴Henceforth, references from the books are given in parentheses, *FAF* indicating the Russian text and *PLQ* the Urdu.

⁵Said met Faiz in Beirut in 1980 through his good friend Eqbal Ahmad. For a

critics.⁶

Faiz himself would have glossed his stance as “internationalism.” Today, when we seldom hear of “internationalism”—the term “globalization” has usurped its place in our lexicon, although it means something quite different—some of Faiz’s sentiments appear naïve or dated, but, for him, to be an artist was to have commitments that were genuinely internationalist. As he wrote in the dark years of the Zia dictatorship:

[...] as a writer or artist, even though I run no state and command no power, I am entitled to feel that I am my brother’s keeper and my brother is the whole of mankind. And this is the relevance to me of Peace, of freedom, of detente and the elimination of the nuclear menace. But out of this vast brotherhood, the nearest to me and the dearest are the insulted and the humiliated, the homeless and the disinherited, the poor, the hungry and the sick at heart. And this is the relevance to me of Palestine, of South Africa, of Namibia, of Chile, of my own people and people like mine.

(1982, 2)

Of course, such commitments landed critical postcolonial intellectuals smack in the middle of the great ideological battle that was the Cold War. These commitments were to an extent shaped by this battle, but they were also hostage to it. Indeed, culture became a major arena of conflict between the two superpowers. The Americans sent jazz and other musical troupes to the Third World to win hearts and minds, but they also resorted to more crass tactics, such as paying lucrative amounts to Third World writers to publish pro-American or anti-Soviet belles lettres. This sort of attempted bribery left an important echo in Urdu letters for it was just such an attempt by the United States Information Office in Lahore to commission Sa‘ādat Ḥasan Manṭō to write pro-American essays that produced instead Manṭō’s satirical cycle of “Letters to Uncle Sam.” The Soviets did not always have fistfuls of dollars to distribute, but they could capitalize on feelings more powerful. They portrayed themselves as champions of the newly-independent countries, as well as the embodiment of an alternate model of development that could take Third World countries from “feudalism to socialism, bypassing capitalism.” Tashkent became a showcase of this model of development. It hosted hundreds of

memoir of this meeting, see Ahmad (2000, 38–39). See also Said (1984, 50).

⁶The one exception is the recent book by Aamir R. Mufti, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), where Faiz is one of the central subjects of analysis.

foreign students and it was no coincidence that the first Afro-Asian Writers Conference was held there.

Faiz first traveled to the Soviet Union in October 1958 to attend this conference. It was by no means certain that he would be allowed to go, but eventually the government of Pakistan allowed a two-member delegation to participate (Ḥafīz Jālandhārī was the other Pakistani delegate). As one of the organizers of the conference, Faiz was in part responsible for ensuring that the program included a mushaira. He appears in the record of the conference only once, making a speech devoted to purely practical matters concerning the organization of the Afro-Asian Writers Association, its permanent bureau, and its journal (see *Tashkentskaia* 1960, 403–4). He returned in 1962 to receive the Lenin Prize at a ceremony in the Kremlin, where he gave his acceptance speech in Urdu.

Faiz could not have had a better entrée into the Soviet literary world than as a laureate of the Lenin Prize, which opened all sorts of doors to him. His poetry had already appeared in Russian (a translation of *Dast-e Ṣabā* was published in 1960), and over the next two decades Russian translations of his poems were a common feature. They appeared in journals and booklets and in three major volumes of collected works (published in 1977, 1983, and 1985). The translations were done by major Russian poets and were published in enormous print runs. Recitals of Russian translations of his poetry were recorded and sold. Faiz was lionized. In 1981, while he was in self-imposed exile from the Zia regime, his seventieth birthday was celebrated with a magnificent event at the House of Writers in Moscow. Dozens of Soviet artists paid tribute to Faiz there and heard him speak (*FAF* 300; *PLQ* 253). He also received the royal treatment in Soviet hospitals and spas and forged friendships with other progressive Third World writers—Nazım Hikmet and Pablo Neruda the most prominent among them—as well as with Soviet Muslim intellectuals, such as Oljas Suleymenov, Rasul Hamza (Gamzatov), and Chingiz Aitmatov. Faiz undertook translations of their poetry into Urdu. In the process he produced poems that are masterpieces in their own right that have been translated into English from the Urdu.

Reading Faiz's own memories of the Soviet Union in a short book called *Mah-o-Sāl-e Āshnā'ī* (Months and Years of Friendship), originally published in Urdu in Moscow, brings back a world now gone.⁷ Vasilieva is perhaps too harsh in dismissing it (in a passage written only for the Urdu version) as “of a clearly propaganda type” (*PLQ*, 260). The book was

⁷(Moscow: Progress, 1979; Karachi: Dāniyāl, 1981). The Pakistani edition contains a few changes in the text.

commissioned in 1974 and completed the following year, but it was 1979 by the time it appeared in print. The book is part of a genre—accounts of the Soviet Union by sympathetic observers (or “fellow-travelers”) written for a foreign audience—but a very odd example of it. True enough, Faiz paints a rosy picture of Soviet realities and does not utter a word of criticism, but by the conventions of the genre, the praise is measured. Indeed, Faiz never seems to have got round to finishing the text. To make up the bulk of the book, the publisher supplemented the slim text with pages and pages of photographs (most of which have nothing to do with Faiz) and with poems Faiz wrote while in the Soviet Union. Yet, it is clear that Faiz’s visits to the country were always enormously fun, with the plentiful company of fellow writers and poets, extensive travels, endless banquets, visits to resorts and dachas, all as a guest of the state. The visits were also enormously productive in terms of poetry, although very little of that poetry deals with specifically Soviet topics. The only poem on a Soviet topic in *Nuskhabā-e Vafā* is the powerful “Lainigrād kā Gōristān” (The War Cemetery in Leningrad). Another of his poems, “Ashkābād kī ěk Shām” (An Evening in Ashkabad) is connected to the Soviet city only by its name. A third, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Russian revolution, is so generic that only the title gives away the fact that the revolution is being celebrated.⁸ Clearly, Faiz had a complicated relationship with the Soviet Union. One cannot therefore help but wish that Vasilieva had written more than just one chapter on this aspect of his life. The chapter “Faiz and the USSR” provides the most connected account of his time in that country, and one informed by a knowledge of the Soviet context.⁹ Nevertheless, it runs only fifteen pages in the Russian version, eighteen in the Urdu. Surely there is more to be said about such an important part of Faiz’s life.

Palestine as an issue is still with us, but who remembers détente or the passions aroused by the global struggle against apartheid in South Africa and Namibia? The “nuclear menace” has ceased to be a pressing concern, except for the purposes of Iranophobia. So what are we to make of these commitments that were so central to Faiz’s life and work? This is the

⁸The poem “Aktūbar Inqilāb-e Rūs kī Sālgira” (The Anniversary of the October Revolution of Russia) was written in 1967 but was not included in any of Faiz’s collections. The text is available today in Faiz (1981, 107).

⁹Previously, the only accounts (other than Faiz’s own words) that we had were several reminiscences (including two by Vasilieva) in the “Moscow chapter” of *Faiz kē Maghribī Havālē*. Ashfāq Husain, ed. (Lahore: Jang, 1992), 733–94.

question with which Vasilieva ends her book. For her, Faiz’s place in the pantheon of Urdu is not in doubt, but she is keenly aware of the fact that “the political and social values that were of the first importance for Faiz did not pass the test of history” (*FAF*, 330; *PLQ*, 290). How will future readers understand Faiz’s poetry? She leaves the question unanswered, of course, but in the last chapter of the book she suggests how *we* could read the poetry of Faiz’s last years—the poems written mostly in exile and collected in *Mirē Dil*, *Mirē Musāfir* and the last section of *Nuskhabā-e Vafā* called “Ghubār-e Ayyām” (Spiraling Dust of Time). This analysis is much more developed in the Urdu edition than in the original.

This poetry is usually seen as the poetry of exile—of sadness and longing and recollection. Vasilieva sees something even deeper in it. The dominant sentiment in *Mirē Dil*, *Mirē Musāfir* is grief (*gham*)—a grief accompanied by despair and hopelessness and doubt. Very indicative of this is the “heavy funereal hues ... [and] a strange inertia [and] despair” (*PLQ*, 280-81) in the 1983 poem “Āj Shab Kō’ī Nahīn hai” (Tonight There is No One, 1984, 712-13).¹⁰ “Mirē Milnē Vālē” (My Visitors), likewise, focuses solely on pain (*dard*), where even the dawn (*ṣubḥ*) comes delivering pain (*PLQ*, 284-85):

Vo ṣubḥ ā’ī damaktē nishtar sē
yād kē zakhm kō manānē

(1984, 663)

Here comes the morning with her gleaming scalpel
to play with the wounds of memory.

(1988, 93)

Vasilieva suggests that this sadness and despair emerges not just from doubts about the Soviet Union (the repressiveness under Brezhnev that led to the exile of dissident intellectuals becoming a routine phenomenon, its involvement in Afghanistan, and the rampant corruption of its everyday life), but perhaps even from doubts about his lifelong goals and ideals, or at least the way they were being brought about (*PLQ*, 282, 285). This disillusionment with what used to be called “really existing socialism,” Vasilieva suggests, left only the homeland (*vaṭan*) as the focus of hope:

Peh kaun kab āyā, kab gayā hai
nigāh-o-dil kō khabar kabān hai
Khayāl sū’ē vaṭan ravān hai.
Samandarōn kī ayāl thāmē,

¹⁰See the superb English translation by Naomi Lazard in Faiz (1988, 75).

*bazār vahm-o-gumān sañbhālē,
ka'ī tarāḥ kē savāl thāmē*

(1984, 664)

But the heart and the eye are impervious
to who comes, and when, or who leaves.
They are far away, galloping home,
hands holding tight to the ocean's mane,
shoulders crushed under their burden—
fears, questions, forebodings.

(1988, 93)

This reading of Faiz's later poetry takes his political commitments seriously and sees his life in the political context in which it was lived. It also underlines the centrality of *vaṭan*, homeland, to Faiz's thought and explains why he ended his self-imposed exile by returning to Pakistan in 1983.

Faiz died in 1984 and thus was spared the total collapse of so many things he held dear. Perhaps only historians will remember the context in which Faiz created his poetry, but we can be sure that new contexts will create new appropriations of some of the finest Urdu verse of the twentieth century. □

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