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Resistance And Romance: A Study In Activism

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Progressive writer's movement came as breath of fresh air in the literary pantheon. The All-India Progressive Writers Association, which was founded in 1930, was not limited to the literary space but was also a social and political movement which changed the whole perspective around poetry. The progressives liberated Urdu poetry from all its clichés and it became a poetry of the ordinary and mundane, with a fresh ideology, one of resistance and defiance. The romantic idioms were changed into metaphors of revolution and resistance. The progressive movement can be seen as a movement away from the doctrine of Art for Art's sake. Social emancipation was integral to progressive poetry. All the progressives were of the belief that the poet or writer has a social and moral responsibility as an artist to further the cause of humanity and become the voice of the oppressed. The story or poetry in progressive literature, needs to turn into an activist act. The journey to humanity through the medium of art is fundamental to progressive literature.

Many of the current practices in the contemporary writings about resistance originate from the Romantic period. The aesthetics of romantic poetry largely depended upon wishful destinies and creating utopias. The romantics bonded with nature and took it to the sublime, in turn personifying the sublime and making it a part of the being. The everyday mundane was made extraordinary by the romantics, which was later taken up by the progressives. The hope that romantics gave, became the warp and weft of the progressive movement. There is an inherent need for change in Romance, the need to change the order of things and create a just society. This just society is what the dreams of progressives are made of. There are two ways to impart romance in any text of resistance, one by giving it a dream like quality and two, by beautifying it. This is where the poetics and aesthetics of romance come in. Romance becomes an aesthetic principle through which reality is entered. The progressives merged this idea of romance with resistance, through realism to create a utopic society in the mind of reader by creating a revolutionary space within the same framework of romance. There is no denying of the romance but at the same time there is no denying that the harsh realities of life are very much a part of the same utopic society. Poems that acknowledge reality, also empower themselves within the same framework.

Progressive literature has seen a paradigm shift in focus from the elite to the masses. The suppressed and the subjugated found a space in progressive literature, which was a very significant change. This paper is an attempt to explore the possible terrains of how protest or resistance becomes the ideology of Romance and how the romantic idiom gets converted into a metaphor of revolution. The paper will also look at the language and texture of resistance in the poetry of Faiz Ahmed Faiz. The paper will also attempt to study the role played by art in provoking social change, in light of select poem by Faiz.

Faiz Ahmed Faiz, a poet who is read both by the literary elite as well as the masses, inverted the whole structure of traditional Urdu ghazal and used it as a space to confront the unjust human situation. Faiz writes in polished Persianized diction which is typical of the elite but it is because of his cause of the common man and sensitivity towards suffering of the downtrodden that he becomes one with the masses. The archetypal figure of the beloved in Urdu poetry is usually associated with romantic love but Faiz extended this metaphor to include the whole idea of revolution and nation in it. In his poem "Two Loves", he himself

explains this metaphor as how the beloved means both the woman as well as the nation. One love is the human form of love, which consists of sexual desires and bodily love, which is the love for the beloved and the second love is the love for the nation and its people, their deprivation and the love for humanity itself. Both of these loves require the same amount of commitment and passion. The following lines show the merging of the two loves where the nation becomes the beloved and vice versa:

In the same fashion I have loved my Darling country

In the same manner my heart has throbbed in devotion to her,

In the same way my passion has sought easement of a resting- place

In the curve of her cheek, sometimes in the curl of her ringlet;

In the same way to that sweetheart of the world my heart and eyes laughingly called, sometimes weepingly cried out. (21-26)¹

The conjoined ideas of love and revolution in his poetry give rise to a visionary idea of love. Both kinds of love whether it be love for the beloved or love for the nation require the same amount of commitment and Faiz commits to both the ideas till the very end. Any piece of art that is based on love does not perish or vanish easily from public memory and Faiz makes sure to give rise to a revolution using this very idea of love. During the course of his poems, the romance takes up the shape of an extended metaphor of the revolution that he believed in, the struggle for the grief that humanity was undergoing. This unification of politics and aesthetics in his poetry makes it difficult for the reader to make a distinction between the intermingling ideas of love and upheaval in his poetry. Since a lot of Faiz's poetry is a blend of the ideas of love and revolution and the cause of the people, he always moved beyond the ideas of the individual or even the nation, for him the focus was on a much larger canvas of the predicament of humanity. This is why Faiz being a Pakistani Urdu poet, not only talked about the pain of Pakistani people but also of the people of Africa, Iran, Palestine and various other regions of the world. Faiz is very symbolic when it comes to describing the suffering of the masses. There is an inherent need for action in his poetry. His poetry is not merely words of lamentation but are an incessant call for action and incitement.

The semantic axis of poetry changes from personal love to a wider context of the socio-political upheaval in the society. The praxis of protest is the collective but the understanding of romance lies in the individual. Faiz by and large remains a poet of love but his love is not confined to the love of the beloved or romantic love. His love functions at the level of the beloved, society and humanity. He uses poetry as literary space which has for centuries invariably intervened in the violent interstices of these ideological configurations to create, condition and critique the worldviews bearing on such spaces. His poetry is embedded in a generative context.

To create a division between Faiz's love poetry and his political poetry is to kill the true essence of Faiz's poetry and to distance the poet from his own poetry. The lived experiences of the poet are in fact political in nature. The true spirit of Faiz's poetry lies in the use of covert political metaphors in his love poetry. The art cannot be detached from the artist. To call a poem politically laden is also to assign a political position or commitment to the poet, the burden of this commitment is what determines the true course of the poetry. This burden doubles itself in any writings of resistance or protest as poetry of resistance in a way acts as a covert tool for activism. It might not lead to an immediate revolution but definitely sets the stage ideologically and paves way for a final revolution to take place in the future. As Adrienne Rich explains,

A revolutionary poem will not tell you who or when to kill, what and when to burn, or even how to theorize. It reminds you (for you have known, somehow, all along, maybe lost track) where and when and how you are living and might live—it is a wick of desire. It may do its work in the language and images of dreams, lists, love letters, prison letters, chants, filmic jump cuts, meditations, and cries of pain . . . (Rich 241)

In Faiz's Nazm "Do Not Ask Me Now Beloved", there is a very vivid shift from the first stanza to the second. The first stanza seems like a love poem where the poet is talking about the eyes of the beloved and in the second stanza, he suddenly shifts to deformed bodies, oozing out of puss, which clears Faiz's stance on his political poetry. He cannot separate a love poem from a political poem because politics is the ultimate

¹ The translation is from Victor Kiernan's "Poems by Faiz".

truth of life. The shift between the first and second stanza shows that life is not all roses and he cannot help but go back to reality which is harsh, time and again. The shift from a love poem to a poem of stark ugly realities of life can be seen in the following lines:

The sky, wherever I looked, was nothing but your eyes.

If you'd fall into my arms, Fate would be helpless.

All this I'd thought, all this I'd believed.

But there were other sorrows, comforts other than love.

The rich had cast their spell on history:

dark centuries had been embroidered on brocades and silks.

Bitter threads began to unravel before me

as I went into alleys and in open markets

saw bodies plastered with ash, bathed in blood.²

Idiom and intent are at cross purpose. He employs classical vocabulary to talk about everyday issues. Whenever he talks about love, he doesn't vulgarise it or make it mundane. He gives personal love a universal dimension. The nazm starts as a love poem and turns into a social comment, it becomes a critique for the social cause. By doing this, Faiz defamiliarizes the reader with the whole idea of love as he does in many other poems. There is an extreme contrast between the first and second stanza. This is where lies the romance of Faiz and the utopia of the poet that he lives every day, the clash between wished for romance and reality of life. The stages of the poet's mood are clearly visible in the distinction between the first and second stanza. The despair of the poet, is a reflective mood and the blurring of initial vision and reflections. The suffering of the destitute is turned into a tragic ethos to be reflected upon as a society and culture. The interwoven nature of love and the inherent internal conflict are the base of the aesthetic effect of the poem.

There are other sorrows in this world than love

There are other pleasures than lovers' meeting

Suffering is never just a personal phenomenon for Faiz, it is always collective or directed towards societal injustice or cruelty in general. In this collective suffering lies the true crux of protest literature. This is not to say that Faiz does not have poems which are exclusively political or exclusively romantic, but it is in this union of the political and the romantic that a space for covert and sometimes overt activism is created.

Faiz was completely disenchanted by the idea of freedom and how it was achieved. The partition of the two nations in the name of freedom made Faiz completely desolated with the idea of freedom. He was also disillusioned and felt alienated by the promises that were made to people of both the nations in the name of freedom. He echoes the dissatisfaction of many who felt that the freedom that was achieved and the cost at which it was achieved, made many promises to the people but failed to live up to those promises. He raises questions as to whether the freedom that we have achieved is true freedom still in "Dawn of Freedom" (Subh-e-Azadi). He also accomplishes the task of bringing in the collective angst and ethos by the use of the word *yaar*" which gets translated as comrades.

² The translation is from Agha Shahid Ali's "The Rebel's Silhouette". Agha Shahid Ali said, "I also bypassed two lines of the original, which Victor Kiernan has translated as

Flesh issuing from the cauldrons of disease

With festered sores dripping corruption (Lines 14--15)". And later he was delighted to realise that Faiz himself had deleted the same two lines in his subsequent editions.

This leprous daybreak, dawn night's fangs have mangled

This is not that long-looked-for break of the day,

Not that clear dawn in quest of which those comrades

Set out, believing that in heaven's wide void

In the desert of the sky, the final destination of the stars (1-5)³

Although the poem manages to capture the helplessness felt by people after independence was achieved but it somehow fails to provide a blueprint to as to why independence could not bring the desired results and what is the way forward. He ends the poem by saying,

The hour of the deliverance of the eye and the heart has not arrived.

Come on, come on, for that goal has still not arrived.

Faiz makes his point clear that there is a long journey ahead but he fails to acknowledge that journey and doesn't make himself clear as to what that journey is towards. He manages to keep alive that progressive tradition of always looking for a better world and a utopic society which has not yet been achieved but the poem could have reached its artistic whole if he had also provided a remedy to this problem. He leaves the last line open to interpretation which might be a conscious decision but it is somehow ineffectual in meeting the demands of progressive poetry.

He picks up the theme of the pain, anguish, the bitterness and the brutality that often accompany the process of nation building. He focuses on how it is important for governments and rulers to realise that the idea of inclusiveness needs to be a part of politics and rulers and leaders need to use methods other than coercion and censorship to create this idea of a nation. The poem "Speak" is an example of this. The poem is a potent assertion of the essence of Faiz's poetry, the utopic dream of creating a beautiful and just society can only be achieved when people speak up. His utopia is the exhortation of the arrival of a fair society but for that people need to put behind the shackles that bind them and protect them from speaking, for it is the collective voice of resistance against the order that is the best form of resistance. The poem is a call not just to people, but also other poets who have long been ignoring the cruelties and unadorned realities of life. Written in 1936, the poem also captures the angst and torment of the people who have long been suppressed by the British Regime and the poet asks these people to speak for their rights and to speak for the end of British tyranny.

Speak, for your lips are free;

Speak for your tongue is still yours,

Your upright body is yours-

Speak, your life is still yours

The poem is also an answer to those who called Faiz's poetry a propaganda, for speaking for the distressed and subjugated masses, for now is the time to speak and to show his commitment to challenge injustice and cruelties in society through what the poet does best, that is speak. The awareness of protest will only arise when man will confront the unjust human situation. The variables of the utopic dream of the just society, define the quality of the dream and the dream can never be achieved individually. He uses poetry as an activist space where you have your own agency and he also provides this agency to the voiceless, he gives them a voice and shows that their voices are integral to ending their pain and suffering. He acknowledges the reality and in turn uses it to empower people within the same context. The agency is retrieved from the tormentor and given to the tormented. There is an inversion of power that takes place in the poem when he says,

³ Victor Kiernan's translation (page 123). Kiernan describes the break of dawn as leprous, which translates as infected or diseased, the translation manages to capture the true essence of the poem through this one word, that the freedom that has been achieved is a diseased one.

Speak, for the truth is still alive-

Speak, say whatever it is to be said.

A progressive poet or a poet of resistance would not want anything more than to reach to a point where he/she is no longer necessary because the goal of a just society has been achieved. There is an effervescent will in a poet of protest to bring about social change. Faiz Ahmed Faiz, despite all his literary and political flaws, carved a social utopia for the future generations. He had a different kind of sensibility towards the oppressed, it is this sensitivity that continues to draw people towards his poetry even today.

Selected Reading List

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