

How Faiz Saved My Life

By Masood Ashraf Raja

I started reading Faiz in eighth grade at a time when Faiz was unpopular amongst those who ran our country. For me, there was a sort of tacit excitement about reading him, a sort of secret pleasure in doing what was forbidden. I was then at a military boarding school, a school that has produced so many of the military top brass of Pakistan. We were potential officer cadets being given a deep indoctrination into the hierarchical system of military order. Faiz, with his socialistic leanings and egalitarian thought, was a natural enemy to this ordered hierarchy.

When I joined the army, reading Faiz at military gathering was banned, but that made reciting Faiz even more exciting. I remember as a young officer, whenever I introduced my battalion variety show, I always opened with a full recitation of one of Faiz's greatest poems: *Sheeshon ka Masiha koyee Nahiin*.

My troops, who all came from the rural heart of Pakistan and did not have much in the way of literary training, responded amazingly to every word, every metaphor in this most beautiful of Faiz's poems. And even though neither we did not fully understand the poem, its lyrical beauty, its rhythm, and, maybe, its subtle message, moved us more than any other poetry.

There was something intriguing about Faiz's poetry: it was high diction, the most classical metaphor and language, but accessible in its emotional content in its pathos.

The poem, I can still recite it from my memory, is the most elegant rendition of eternal class struggle juxtaposed against the endless possibilities and unstoppable greed. It is a tragic poem, which its refrain highlights after every few stanzas:

*Sheeshon ka masiha koyee nahiin
kya aas lagaye baithey ho*

There is no messiah of broken mirrors
What are you hoping for!

But in its poetic resonance, Faiz clearly apportioned the blame upon an unnamed group of people, the destroyers of dreams, the sellers of all possibilities. This

eternal fight between the dreamers and their oppressors reaches its zenith in the last lines of the poem:

kab loot jhapat se hasti ki
dukaanein khaali hoti hein
yaan parbat parbat heerey hein
yaan saaghar saghar moti hein

Kuchh log hein jo iss daulat par
Pardey latkaatey phirte hein
Har parbet ko, har saghar ko
Neelam chardhaatey phirtey hein

Kuchh woh bhi hein jo ladh bhird kar
ye pardey noch giraate hein
Hasti ke utthai giron ki
har chal uljhaaye jatey hein

In donon mein ran pardta hai
Nit basti basti, nagar nagar
Har baste ghar ke seene mein
Har chalti rah ke maathe par

Ye kalak bharte phirte hein
Woh jot jagate rehte hein
Ye aag lagatey phirtey hein
Woh aag bujhate rehtey hein

Sab saaghar sheeshay laal o guhar
iss baazi mein bid jaate hein
Uttho sab khaali haathon ko
is run se bulawe aate hein

It is at the end of the poem where all those who had been nursing their broken dreams are called to enter the final battle field, the end of days of class struggle, where the people finally wrest the material means and thus symbolics of their hopes and aspirations and it is at that moment in the poem that you and the listener automatically, without a single thought, become a part of that great alliance of desire in that Deleuzian way. That my soldiers listened to it in rapture and that their hands rose in defiance and their eyes glistened with tears had

nothing to do with my recitation: it was the pathos of the poem itself, its lyrical beauty, its transportive power that moved them. In the end, I was only a vessel through which Faiz spoke and even when he had been silenced by the military-machine, we could still continue his message, feel its power, and gain those few moments of unlimited imagination, courage, and a sense of loss.

Many years later, as a young officer, I carried Faiz with me to the highest battlefield in the world: Siachin Glacier. My brother gave a copy of Faiz's collected works, which I carried in my rucksack as I trekked toward my first post for what would turn out to be the most trying year of my life.

In that harsh climate of Karakoram mountains surrounded by snow-clad peaks, so breathlessly beautiful, fighting an unnecessary war, an un-needed war, a war that took so many of Faiz's people, the common people, away, while our generals bickered over the little credit that every single victory brought them and passed around their failures to those down the chain.

Faiz was a great comfort in those dark days. We all stayed up all night long. I huddled in my high altitude tent and read Faiz in lantern light. The air is thin at nineteen thousand feet above sea level, and one had to remove the lantern glass for it to function properly. So, in those cold nights, caught in a useless war of national pride and human waste, I had Faiz to keep me going. His words gave me solace, provided me something larger than myself to think about, and, at times, revealed to me the absurdity of my personal motivations, my indoctrination.

It was at that post, a post named Red Camp, that Faiz saved my life figuratively and literally. His rich poetry gave me something more than war and its wastage to worry about. It gave me hope and a deeper understanding of the people of my country. In that one year, Faiz helped me realign my allegiance: I was forever bound to the welfare of the weak and the down-trodden and became deeply critical of the powerful. Faiz shaped my worldview, a shaping that still figures prominently in my scholarly work. I know, because of Faiz, I will never side with the powerful at the cost of the weak and no amount of dizzying success or display of power will ever convince me that the national or international economic elite are, somehow, better than the masses. Faiz did that for me: he helped me choose my side, my people, my fights. I learned to become a thorn in the heart of power instead of becoming yet another flower in that beguiling bouquet of power and riches that seduces us into becoming the objects of its logic, minions of its instrumentalizing reach. No, sir, Faiz cured me of my microfascist tendencies and gave me an unending fight: a fight for justice, love, and equality. I am thankful for that.

Literally, too, Faiz saved my life. The Red Camp was an administrative post. Every night my troops left our post laden with oil, ammunition, and food to

replenish the fighting post above us. We never got bombed and had no direct firefights with the Indians. But on the night of May 12, 1988 a few artillery salvos fell on our post. I was in my tent when I heard the first round fall. There is a peculiar music to artillery shelling and if you experience it long enough, you can tell the destination of a particular artillery shell by its sound. Thus, when I heard that long piercing screech, I knew that the shell was about to hit my post. The bomb landed, I heard the splash of shrapnel and dashed out of my tent to get my men into the shelling bunker. We had to spend a few hours in the shelling bunker. After the shelling subsided, I returned to my tent. It is then that I noticed that one side of the tent was ripped and the copy of *Nuskha Haai Wafa* that had been resting against the left side of left, as I the first artillery round fell, had a deep cut on it. When I examined it carefully, I saw a small piece of shrapnel lodged in it; It had pierced through the hardcover but had failed to go beyond that. I picked up the book and reenacted my exact position. I noticed that had the book not been leaning against my left side, the same piece of shrapnel would have entered my body and would have ripped my heart. And that is how Faiz literally saved my life.

I no longer have that book, but I still carry Faiz in my heart and I will carry his words and his wisdom with me till the end of my days. And when I am breathing my last, I would hum Faiz's poetry to myself. Yes, softly, without fear:

*Chashm-e-nam, jaan-e-shoreeda kafi nahin
Tohmat-e-ishq-posheeda kafi nahin
aaj bazaar main pa-bajolan chalo
Dast afshan chalo, mast-o-raqsan chalo
Khak bar sar chalo, khoon badaman chalo
Rah takta hai sub shehr-e-janaan chalo
Hakim-e-shehr bhi, majma-e-aam bhi
Teer-e-ilzam bhi, sang-e-dushnam bhi
Subh-e-nashaad bhi, roz-e-naakaam bhi
Unka dum-saaz apnay siwa kaun hai
Shehr-e-janaan main ab baa-sifa kaun hai
Dast-e-qatil kay shayan raha kaun hai
Rakht-e-dil bandh lo, dil figaro chalo
Phir hameen qatl ho aain yaro chalo*