

Rethinking Modernism and Progressivism in Urdu Poetry: Faiz Ahmed Faiz and N. M. Rashed

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Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911-1984) and N. M. Rashed (1910-1975) are two of the most celebrated twentieth-century Urdu poets. Born within a year of each other, both poets began their literary careers at Government College in Lahore in the 1930s, yet took seemingly opposite literary paths. Commenting on their critical reception, Asif Farrukhi recently observed, “the two of them still seem to be interlocked with each other like Siamese twins, the kind of colliding and contrasting pairs Urdu critics love to compare, right from Mir and Sauda to Zauq and Ghalib and Nasikh and Atash down to Anis and Dabeer.” Whereas Farrukhi sees Rashed as the “closest parallel to Faiz,” most Urdu critics rather see them as fundamentally different.¹

When contrasting Faiz and Rashed, critics frequently rehearse a favored dichotomy used to understand modern Urdu literature that divides writers into two camps—progressives, who favor “art for life’s sake,” and modernists, for whom “art is for art’s sake alone.” Faiz is always taken as representative of the former, while Rashed is frequently grouped with the latter. The distinction between *adab barā-e adab* (literature for literature’s sake) and *adab barā-e zindagī* (literature for life’s sake), as well as of *taraqqī pasand* (progressive) and *raj‘at pasand* (retrogressive), first developed in the 1930s and 40s by the generally secular nationalist and frequently Marxist critics associated with the Progressive Writers Association. Dividing writers into two camps, progressive criticism generated a layered system of binary oppositions that all mirrored this basic categorical distinction. Though originally grounded in specific debates in the late-colonial period, these categories have had a remarkable staying power.²

As this paper will argue, this distinction does not hold when measured against the work of either poet. However, that does not mean it should be discarded, because the distinction became central to the ways that both poets thought about their own work and, especially, the work of the other. This essay

¹ Asif Farrukhi, “Among his Contemporaries,” Dawn Centenary Special, *Dawn* (13 February 2011), 23.

² For the history of the Progressive Writers’ Association and its criticism, see K̄halīl ul-Rahman ‘Āzmī, *Urdū meñ taraqqī pasand adabī tahrīk* (Aligarh: Educational Book House, 1996 [1957]).

therefore considers the role literary interpretation plays in literary production, meaning, it will look at the way that poets shape their own work in accordance to the way it is received. In the case of Faiz and Rashed, their critical appraisals of one another are unusually revealing. Discussion of the way they understood one another, and the role played in that understanding by progressive criticism, form the first sections of this paper. Then, I will turn to their poetry itself, and consider two thematically related poems to see how these critical distinctions and the poets' assessments of each other withstand consideration of the texts themselves.

Faiz on Rashed

In a speech shortly after Rashed's death in 1975, Faiz states that while at Government College Rashed showed him the possibilities of poetry and greatly influenced his own style. Faiz describes Rashed's voice as always separate and individual, both on account of his temperament and the fact that "he would not stay at one place." While it might seem that Faiz is commenting on Rashed's peripatetic lifestyle, Faiz clarifies here that he is talking about Rashed poems—how they would change even in the course of one volume, let alone over two or three. As to their different styles, Faiz reports with humor that he would say to Rashed, "whatever the topic is you make it a thesis," to which Rashed would retort, "no matter what the topic, you make it a ghazal." In Faiz's words, Rashed continues, "no matter how complex and deep a topic ... you abbreviate or simplify it before presenting it so that people would understand it and people could praise it." To this, Faiz would respond, "whatever you present, we can't simplify."³ Through this dialogue, Faiz outlines an opposition that many of the poets' critics would recognize. Unlike Rashed's, Faiz describes his own language and poems as more simple and oriented towards the common man.

On a more somber note, Faiz continues by noting the length of time Rashed had spent outside of Pakistan, since joining the United Nations in 1952. Faiz speaks of the "distance" between the poet and his public as a loss, not only to the Urdu literary community but also to Rashed himself. "When a man is overseas," Faiz states, "then his own self (*zāt*) cannot stand in for society (*anjuman*) and, in a way, his own self becomes a separate country." Instead of focusing on his own society, such a poet becomes at once too preoccupied with

³ Faiz, Ahmed Faiz, "N. M. Rashid," *Kitab* 10.3 (December 1975): 20-21. This article is a transcript of a commemorative address given by Faiz at the Pakistan National Center, Lahore. All translations are my own.

“looking inside his self” (*darūñ bīnī*) and too prone to transcendent pronouncements. Rashed's cosmopolitanism, Faiz asserts, left him disconnected from the specific concerns of his people. He became focused on his own estranged self and on the “international problems” of man in an almost existential manner, devoid of any particularity.⁴

Faiz's argument is organized around a distinction between “outer-looking” (*jahāñ bīnī*) and “inner-looking” (*darūñ bīnī*) poetry that is a central dichotomy of progressive literary criticism. The opposition between the inside and the outside is also frequently marked as that between the “*zāhir*” (evident) and the “*bātin*” (the hidden, or internal). The progressive critics who translated the principles of Soviet socialist realism into Urdu frequently used these terms, inverting their usual Sufi connotations. When applied to the interpretation of classical Urdu or Persian poetry, the ‘*zāhir*’—the outward depictions of wine drinking, rakishness, and lust—are contrasted to the more privileged ‘*bātinī*’ meaning of such verse—the internal, spiritual meaning of otherwise disreputable statements. Progressive critics, reversing this evaluation, argued that writers should focus on the “real” entirely, and not on psychic life. “*Darūñ bīnī*” was therefore as much a sign of European bourgeois decadence as of an excessively mystical or escapist “oriental” understanding—a product of literature’s relationship to the feudal court—as earlier outlined by *ashrāf* literary reformers, such as Hali and Azad.⁵ For socialist realist critics—and certainly not all progressives were of this persuasion—a focus on the real allowed for the exposure of the dialectic—the processes of history—without a thorough theoretical understanding of the Marxist philosophy of dialectical materialism.

Faiz adopts the categories of progressive criticism when he describes Rashed’s late poetry, composed for the most part outside of South Asia. Unlike his own work, Faiz sees Rashed’s poetry in general as difficult to understand. He explains this complexity as a result of its being more inner-focused than outer-focused. Finally, he attributes this feature to Rashed’s own physical and mental distance from his people.

⁴ Ibid. 21-22.

⁵ For Hali and Azad, see Frances W. Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and Its Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

Rashed on Faiz

N. M. Rashed wrote of Faiz in 1941, 1950, and 1969, and the progression in these statements shows not only Rashed's changing opinion of the other poet but also the increasing role of the categories of progressive criticism in his analysis. In each treatment, he sets Faiz against these categories and puts forth a theory of literary creation at odds with them. In the process, the categories of progressive criticism remain the base against which Rashed articulates his own position.

In his 1941 introduction to Faiz's first collection, *Naqsh-e Faryādī*, Rashed describes Faiz as standing at the "junction of Romance and Reality" — driven by love but induced to stare at "life's nakedness and bitterness." Rashed characterizes Faiz's earliest work as especially concerned with beauty while lacking a direct connection with life. He sees this feature as common to most of the writers of their generation. In the volume's later poems, Rashed sees a noticeable change. Faiz did not "say goodbye to romanticism and take the progressive road," but instead showed maturity in his thoughts, as though he "entered a world in which the shadows are deeper and the path rockier." Rashed argues that Faiz's poetry is purposely not a revolt against tradition. The "worn-out symbols" of the executioner and the rival appear in his poetry, and there is no major break with traditional meters and rhymes. Yet Faiz's poems appear to Rashed as completely different and disconnected from those of tradition. Rashed attributes this in part to Faiz's appreciation of beauty, which he argues was absent in the traditional poets, who praised beauty but could not experience it. Faiz instead wanted to create a paradise of beauty, which he comes close to but from which he would then withdraw in order to look at life in all its ugliness. Rashed describes Faiz's early poetry as the story of retreating from this "*tilismī haqīqat*" (illusory reality). He concludes that Faiz is not a centrally ideological poet but a poet of experiences, and he joins those strong experiences with beautiful words.⁶ By emphasizing the categories of both experience and beauty, Rashed disrupts a reading of Faiz's poetry that would use the terms of progressive criticism.

In 1950, Rashed wrote an English article for Ahmed Ali's *Pakistan PEN Miscellany* in which he describes Faiz's poetry in decidedly negative terms. He writes,

Faiz Ahmed Faiz is fundamentally a poet with an introspective romantic bent of mind and a keen poetic sensibility, who has abandoned himself to

⁶ N. M. Rashid, "Muqaddimah-e Naqsh-e Faryādī," *Maqalat-e N. M. Rashid*. Ed. Shima Majid (Islamabad: al-Hamra, 2002), 375-381.

the so-called 'leftist realism.' In his early poetry, particularly in his 'Tanhai' (Loneliness) and 'Mauzu-e Sakhun' (Theme of Poetry) he stands out as an imagist who is almost sensuous, but the ideological change that came over him some eight years ago has brought about a noticeable decline in his poetic expression. Although he has all along been suffering from a cleavage within himself, yet he is one of the few poets of our age who had once successfully fused their personal experiences with a social philosophy of life. Today neither his experiences are immediately personal nor his philosophy of life varied and original. He had an undoubted capacity for writing poetry of permanent value, but since he has identified himself with the group of writers who only speak under the inspiration that comes from outside he has been lost to the cause of poetry.⁷

In this statement, we see a very clear condemnation of art written for the sake of ideology in, of course, the context of the Cold War. Rashed's charges against Faiz's artistic production, however, seem to be more ideological than based in any substantial way in an analysis of Faiz's poetry itself. Rashed's description of Faiz as "lost to the cause of poetry" for writing "under the inspiration that comes from outside" marks an absence of personal experience in Faiz's poetry. While fermenting in Rashed's 1941 introduction, this critique becomes much more explicit by the 1950s. Writing under "outside" influence, Rashed argues, limits the effectiveness of the artist's work by establishing a limitation on his freedom of personal expression.

Rashed's final major statement on Faiz is found in an interview with American Urdu scholars for the journal *Mahfil* that also formed the preface, in Urdu translation, for his 1969 *Lā=Insān* (X=Man). In it, Rashed states that he still stands by his 1941 statement that, "Faiz stands at the junction of romanticism and realism." He adds that Faiz "borrowed the whole complex of symbolism, myth and even phraseology" from the Persian and Urdu ghazal, but unlike the traditional poet, he did not seek a "personal catharsis." Rather, he worked to "awaken first within himself and then in the mind of his reader a pain and pathos which would link his experience with the experience of mankind as a whole." Rashed here adopts a universalist rhetoric found in much of his writing from the 1960s onwards. He adds that Faiz also reaches this universal level by recharging

⁷ Rashed, N M. "On Some Urdu Poets of Today," *Pakistan PEN Miscellany*. ed. Ahmed Ali (Karachi: Kitab Publishing, 1950), 92.

the “clichés of the Persian and Urdu ghazal” so that the “solitary suffering of the disappointed romantic lover is transformed into the suffering of humanity at large.” Unlike the “traditional poet,” Faiz thus writes “with a clear awareness of a multitude behind him.”⁸

While in 1950 Rashed had condemned Faiz for falling in line with “leftist realism,” in this later interview he states that while Faiz is indeed a “Progressive poet” he has not made his poetry “serve a functional purpose.” Unlike other Progressives, Faiz does not resort to “oratorical outbursts” or make himself accessible to ordinary readers through “the idiom of everyday speech, or by more direct expression, or by simple oratory.” Instead, Faiz uses the “familiar phraseology of the ghazal” and images that are “largely ornate” to approach his reader in such a way that he manages to “create a single emotional experience.”⁹

Rashed concludes that Faiz gains an approach to his readers on two levels simultaneously. The first is “the level of the ordinary lyrical poet, with a direct emotional appeal.” The second level is that of “a socially conscious poet, in terms of a political metaphor.” Rashed adds that “his reader has thus to make a slight mental adjustment to arrive at the underlying meaning of his poetry, particularly when Faiz's poetry is not a poetry of intensely subtle personal experience, which the ordinary reader would find difficult to share with him.”¹⁰ Rashed’s criticism of Faiz is that the reader just has to make a *slight* mental adjustment to understand his poetry, while in his own poetry, Rashed believes, individual, personal experience itself produces an encounter with difference that compels the readers towards critical reflection.

Whereas Faiz saw Rashed’s poetry as too internally focused, Rashed saw Faiz’s poetry as limited by its lack of personal experience. Rashed grounded his entire critical apparatus in opposition to what he understood as the overvaluation of “external” influence in progressive criticism. In his early 1941 assessment, Rashed described Faiz as able to join personal experience with a social philosophy in a way that compromised neither beauty nor individuality. By 1950, Rashed viewed Faiz as too driven to outside forces at the expense of his own personal interpretation. In his last statements from the 1960s, Rashed evaluated Faiz’s poetry as still somewhat lacking in the breadth of personal experience and

⁸ Rashed, N. M., “Interview with N. M. Rashed,” *Mahfil* 7 (1971): 8. See also Rāshid, N. M., “Ek Musāhibah,” *Lā=Insān* (Lahore: al-Misāl, 1969), 23-26.

⁹ Rashed, N. M., “Interview with N. M. Rashed,” 8-9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

limited by its sentimental ornateness but still able to form a bridge between lyrical experience and universal human suffering.

The Speaking Subject

While Faiz and Rashed are frequently held as fundamentally opposed, a comparative study of their poetry often reveals remarkable similarities in their message, if not their style. In the section that follows, I will compare two thematically similar poems that address the topic of speaking truth to power. Though a small sample, an analysis of even two poems can complicate the categories of progressive criticism as applied to these poets.

The poem by Faiz, “Bol” (Speak), from his first collection, is among his best known. The poem reads:

Bol

bol, kih lab āzād haiñ tere
bol, zabāñ ab tak terī hai
terā sutvāñ jism hai terā
bol kih jāñ ab tak terī hai
dekh kih āhangar kī dukāñ meñ
tund haiñ shu`le, surkh hai āhan
khulne lage qufloñ ke dahāne
phailā har ik zanjīr kā dāman
bol, yih thoṛā vaqt bahut hai
jism o zabāñ kī maut se pahle
bol, kih sach zindah hai ab tak
bol, jo kuchh kahnā hai kah le¹¹

Speak

Speak, for your lips are free
Speak, for your tongue is still yours
Your long-suffering body is yours
Speak, for your life is still your own
Speak, for in the blacksmith's shop

¹¹ Faiz Ahmed Faiz, “Bol” *Nuskhah-ha-e vafa* (Lahore: Maktabah-e Karavan, n.d.), 81.

The flames are fierce, the iron red
The mouths of locks have begun to open
The skirt of every chain is outspread
Speak, this little time is enough
Before the death of the body and tongue
Speak, for truth is still alive
Speak, say what must be said

Using relatively simple language, Faiz's poem is instantly accessible to a wide-range of both Hindi and Urdu speakers. The poem is a *pāband nazm* ("bound" verse), which has an accessible meter. Its message is perfectly clear: don't be afraid to express yourself, the time to speak is at hand. The images of the blacksmith's shop—of locks opening their mouths, and of chains spreading out their *dāman* (garment's skirt), as if in supplication, amidst blazing flames and hot iron—bring to mind an urban proletariat, their labor, and their tools. They point to the social collectivity of "the oppressed," whose time for freedom has come. Yet the poem does not clearly identify who is addressed; it leaves it open to the listener's social imagination. This flexibility is one of the reasons this poem remains so popular today. Although the Progressive critic 'Alī Sardār Ja'frī would at one time accuse Faiz of being an "unprogressive poet" (*ghair-taraqqī pasand shā'ir*) for "putting curtains of metaphors into his poems such that no one knows who is sitting behind them," part of the strength and appeal of Faiz's poetry is exactly this metaphorical instability, the resolution of which is left open to the listener.¹²

Rashed's poem "Ḥarf-e nāguftah" (The Unsaid Word) is on a similar theme. He composed it in the early 1960s and added it to the fourth edition of *Irān meñ ajnabī*. It reads:

Ḥarf-e nāguftah

ḥarf-e nā-guftah ke āzār se hushyār raho
kū'e o barzan ko,
dar o bām ko,
shu'loñ kī zabāñ chāttī ho,

¹² Sardār Ja'frī, "Taraqqī pasandī ke ba'z bunyādī misā'il," *Shāhrāh* 2; quoted in Khalil ul-Rahman 'Azmi, *Urdū meñ taraqqī pasand adabī tahrīk* (Aligarh: Educational Book House, 1996 [1957]), 97.

*vuh dahan-bastah o lab-doḳhtah ho—
aise gunah-gār se hushyār raho!*

*shaḥnah-e shahr ho, yā bandah-e sulṭāñ ho
agar tum se kahe: “lab nah hilā’o”
lab hilā’o, nahīñ lab hī nah hilā’o
dast o bāzū bhī hilā’o
dast o bāzū ko zabān o lab-e guftār banā’o
aisā kuhrām machā’o kih sadā yād rahe,
ahl-e darbār ke aṭyār se hushyār raho!*

*in ke lamḥāt ke āfāq nahīñ—
ḥarf-e nā-guftah se jo laḥzāh guzar jā’e
shab-e vaqt kā pāyāñ hai vuhī!
hā’e vuh zahr jo ṣadiyoñ ke rag o pai meñ samā jā’e
kih jis kā ko’ī tiryāq nahīñ!
āj is zahr ke baḥte hu’e
āsār se hushyār raho
ḥarf-e nā-guftah ke āzār se hushyār raho!¹³*

The Unsaid Word

Beware of the sickness of the unsaid word
If as the streets and lanes,
the doors and rooftops
are being licked by a tongue of flames,
someone would have a closed mouth and sealed lips,
beware of such a sinner!
Whether it's the city's sheriff, or the king's henchman,
if he says to you, “Don't move your lips”
move your lips, no, not just your lips
move your fists and arms as well,
make your fists and arms the tongue and lips of speech,
raise a cry that will be remembered forever,
beware of the ways of the people of the court!

¹³ N. M. Rāshid, “Harf-e nāguftah,” *Irān meñ ajnabī*, 4th ed. (Lahore: al-Misal, 1969), 74-75.

Their moments have no horizons—
a moment that passes with an unsaid word,
is itself the end of the night of time!
Alas, it's that poison which, if it enter the veins and fibers of centuries,
has no cure!
Today beware of
the advancing symptoms of this poison,
beware of the sickness of the unsaid word!

Rashed's poem, like that of Faiz, is a call for protest. It is an *āzād nazm* (free-verse poem), but it still has a discernible meter, with variations, and obvious rhyming elements. In the first stanza, the devastating “tongue of flames” points, through synecdoche, to any injustice perpetrated against a populace. The “sinner,” whose mouth is closed and whose lips are literally “sewn together” (*lab-dokhtah*), suggests someone who silently ignores this injustice. The message of the second stanza is clear: if you are being oppressed and an authority tells you to remain quiet, speak up and revolt. Yet the offices of the authoritarian characters referred to, the “*shahnah-e shahr*” and the “*bandah-e sultān*,” which I translate as city's sheriff and king's henchman, are not terms from the contemporary world. They refer instead to a past world of feudal monarchies, as does the stanza's final line, “*ahl-e darbār ke atyār se hushyār raho!*” (Beware of the ways of the people of the court). This stanza's final line cautions that one must be weary of monarchs and courtiers, the “*ahl-e darbār*,” referencing a stereotype of the feudal court, rife with assassinations and duplicity.

The final stanza explores the consequences of not speaking out. These consequences have something to do with time. The moments of unsaid words “have no horizons,” that is, no limits. Words that are not spoken do not rise into history and establish their eventness, their temporality. Instead, they seep, unrealized and unspoken, into the past, like a poison for which there is no antidote. While the second stanza, with its feudal nomenclature appears to be set in the medieval past, the third stanza proposes a universal, transhistorical continuity for the demand for dissent: when flames of injustice are burning the populace and yet people are silenced by authoritarian structures, people must rise up, seize the moment, and bring their protest into history. Despite its different level of abstraction and more complex vocabulary, Rashed's poems share the same message as that of Faiz's: don't be afraid to speak up right now.

The formal differences between these two poems suggest the question of the presumed audiences for these works, and—in a slightly different register—

their relationship to the categories of progressive criticism. One way in which modern Urdu poets have come to be categorized by literary critics is in terms of traditions. Through this strategy, Faiz is linked to a “*musalsal rivāyat*” (continuous tradition) that runs from “Mīr to Firāq,” in which, to quote Āftāb Aḥmad, “the language of common speech (*rozmarrah kī bol chāl*) has a fundamental position. It is familiar and idiomatic, flowing and easily accessible, and has the traits of the living language of everyday speech.” Rashed, by contrast, is linked to a tradition of difficult (*mushkil-pasand*), intellectual (‘*aql-parast*), and Persianate poetry associated with Ghālib, Iqbāl, and Bedil.¹⁴ The invention of new literary traditions and schools for Urdu poetry has been a preoccupation of Urdu literary critics since the late nineteenth century. Though taking literary traditions as an exclusive form of categorization does not necessarily make for good analysis, the underlying point made by the reference to tradition is of some use in understanding the reception of these two poets. While Faiz’s poetry, in general, is certainly not “common speech,” his poetry does settle neatly within a horizon of expectations about what Urdu poetry should be, as he in general draws heavily on the vocabulary and imagery of the Urdu ghazal. Neither bombastic nor harshly realistic, it frequently uses sensuous language to explore subjective emotional states. In his own words, “The construction of beauty is not just an ornamental action; it is also a utilitarian one,”¹⁵ and for Faiz, “The true subject of poetry is the loss of the beloved.”¹⁶ Yet, frequently in orthodox progressive readings of his poetry, every mention of the beloved is viewed only as a symbol of the revolution. This approach can certainly be supplanted by more heterodox readings, such as Aamir Mufti’s recent reading of Faiz’s poetry as focused on the meaning and legacy of partition.¹⁷ Indeed, part of the political significance of Faiz’s poetry is that, despite or perhaps because of its use of ghazal imagery, it is accessible to a variety of readers, and not bound to the fixities of the nation-state.

The poetry of Rashed, on the other hand, is marked by a continuous evolution in form and a greater rejection of the ghazal and its sensuous language. Yet despite Rashed’s later claims to be writing of the situation of “modern man,”

¹⁴ Āftāb Aḥmad, “N. M. Rāshid: shā’iroñ kā shā’ir,” *N. M. Rāshid: shā’ir o shakhs* (Lahore: Māvarā, 1989), 55.

¹⁵ Faiz Aḥmad Faiz, “Na’e chirāgh,” *Adab-e laṭīf* (September 1954), quoted in Khalil ul-Rahman ‘Azmi, *Urdu men taraqqi pasand adabi tahrik*, 138.

¹⁶ Faiz Ahmed Faiz, *The True Subject: Selected Poems of Faiz Ahmed Faiz*, trans. Naomi Lazard (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), v.

¹⁷ Aamir R. Mufti, “Towards a Lyric History of India,” *Boundary 2* 31.2 (2004): 245-274.

his poetry remained oriented towards a particular audience, who had access to his more belletristic language and whom he envisioned as largely to be found in Pakistan. However, even in his complex diasporic late poetry, Rashed is working allegorically, seizing elements from Urdu poetic tradition and, rendering them in a new context, disruptively investing them with new meanings that aim to upset traditional understandings.

While Faiz has typically been treated, following progressive criticism, as a poet concerned with the politics of “external” social life, Rashed has been frequently and unnecessarily excluded from such a reading.¹⁸ And yet, a poem such as “The Unsaid Word” has both an explicit political message—a call to expression—and a covert critique of the forms of expression available at present. Otherwise, what are we to make of his establishing continuity between pathological feudal forms of government and contemporary political conditions? This poem could as surely be read as a critique of present politics as that of Faiz.

Similarly, while in Urdu literary criticism Rashed seems to be universally accepted as a pillar of Urdu modernism, the question remains, what of Faiz? While no one would ever deny that Faiz is a modern poet, the place of his literary production within the field of literary modernism in Urdu has generally been ignored. Yet the literary production of Faiz—and, one may argue, of the Progressive movement as a whole—is by its very nature a modernist enterprise; it is no less of an attempt to seek new modes of expression than is Rashed’s poetry.

Conclusion

The categories of progressive criticism have failed to recognize the extent of Faiz and Rashed writing. Faiz is read as a poet concerned with the external world of society above all. Rashed is considered obsessed with poetic form in itself with no connection to reality. In understanding each other’s poetry, both writers make reference to the tenets of progressive criticism. However, they do make some headway in advancing an interpretation of each other’s poetry beyond these categories.

In describing Rashed’s poetry, Faiz emphasizes the differences in their style. Faiz sees Rashed’s poetry as resistant to simple explanation—a statement that is by no means universally true but that does certainly describe a considerable

¹⁸ In more recent scholarship produced in connection with Rashed’s birth centenary in 2009, this is not necessarily the case. See, for example, Fatah Muhammad Malik, *N. M Rāshid: Siyāst aur shā’irī* (Islamabad: Dost Publications, 2010).

amount of Rashed's literary output, particularly from his later years. He interprets this feature of Rashed's poetry as a product of his "inner looking" or introspection into the self, which he attributes to the author's experience living abroad. But Faiz fails to see that Rashed's poetry continues to draw on both collective experience and literary conventions, although perhaps more obliquely than his own. Despite his physical distance from Pakistan and his own universalistic rhetoric, Rashed's poetry remains embedded in Urdu literary tradition. He continues his relationship with his Urdu literary community through an allegorical disruption of literary conventions.¹⁹

In 1950, Rashed accuses Faiz of being overly ideological. But both earlier and later, he contradicts himself to insist that Faiz is not a fundamentally ideological poet but instead focused on individual experience. Rashed's description of Faiz joining lyrical individual experience with collective suffering steps beyond the most common reading of Faiz, which values most his image as a poet of the collective. In a 2011 article in *Tehelka*, for example, Javed Akhtar writes of Faiz, "The word *mein*, me, never made an appearance in his poems."²⁰ This claim is obviously not actually correct; Faiz made no real effort to avoid the personal pronoun. What Javed Akhtar seems to really value is something closer to Rashed's interpretation of Faiz's poetry, which focuses on the manner in which he represents the collectivity through his own personal experience.

An example of this individual but also collective experience is found in Faiz's short poem "Mire dard ko jo zabāñ mile" (If My Pain Would Find a Voice):

mirā dard naḡmah-e be-sadā
mirī zāt zarrah-e be-nishāñ
mire dard ko jo zabāñ mile
mujhe apnā nām o nishāñ mile
mirī zāt kā jo zabāñ mile

¹⁹ This modern form of allegory gathers images from literary tradition but deprives them of their symbolic authority through unusual juxtapositions and reinterpretations. Craig Owens has identified this form of allegory as central to postmodern art in the "West." Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism" *October* 12 (Spring, 1980): 67-86; "The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism Part 2," *October* 13 (Summer, 1980): 58-80. Iftikhar Dadi has argued for its utility in understanding "postcolonial" art. Iftikhar Dadi, "Shirin Neshat's Photographs as Postcolonial Allegories," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society* 34.1 (2008): 125-150.

²⁰ Javed Akhtar, "Do You Dar Snuff Out the Moon?" *Tehelka* 8:6 (12 February 2011). Web. 12 February 2011. <http://www.tehelka.com/story_main48.asp?filename=hub120211DO_YOU.asp>

*mujhe rāz-e nazm-e jahāñ mile
jo mujhe yih rāz-e nihāñ mile
mirī khāmoshī jo bayāñ mile
mujhe kā'ināt kī sarvarī
mujhe daulat-e do jahāñ mile*

My pain, a song without a voice
My self, a speck without a trace
If my pain would find a voice,
I would discover a trace of myself
If my self would find a voice,
I would discover the secret of the world's order
If I found this hidden secret,
If my silence would find message,
I would have sovereignty over the universe,
I would find the treasures of both the worlds.

In this short poem, Faiz celebrates individual experience, describing its necessity. For, as he writes, the individual's experience of suffering is what opens up the possibility for a transformative self-awareness. This awareness is first of the individual self, the "I," not of the collective. However, an appreciation of the individual reveals the nature of the "outer" world—the "world's order" (*nazm-e jahāñ*)—while also unveiling the other "inner" world, as well. In this poem, as well as in his oeuvre on the whole, Faiz clearly transverses the internal and the external, the individual and the collective. And so it would be a mistake to see this poet as ignoring the individual in favor of the collective; in fact, what he does is to articulate the relationship between the two.

Though the categories derived from progressive criticism do not encapsulate the work of either poet, they remain important as a historical fact. They were constitutive of the discourse through which both poets understood their own work and that of their contemporaries, and they provided terms for both poets to write against. In his poetry and commentary, Rashed insists that through an encounter with a poet's subtle, individual personal experience a reader's critical consciousness can be raised. His disruptive use of Urdu poetic tradition, however, implies a collective experience. For his part, Faiz insists on his address to and comradeship with the common man. However, he does so largely through lyrical depictions of individual experience. Faiz did not consider breaking with conventional poetic language as imperative as did Rashed, who increasingly

sought new modes of expression. But Faiz's poetry, like progressivism as a whole, still represents a degree of formal and thematic experimentation that can be more productively understood as a part of Urdu modernism, than its opposite.

While Urdu modernism remains vital to the Urdu literary community, offering extraordinary pleasures, the clarity of hindsight must now prompt a reevaluation of the terms of Urdu literary discourse. In particular, the division between progressive and modernist poets seems increasingly to be a hindrance to the interpretation of poetry—especially, it seems, the poetry of the most treasured exemplars of these positions. This essay attempts to consider again what role that division might play in a revisionist view of that crucial historical period.