

# Faiz and the Classical Ghazal

Shamsur Rahman Faruqi

*Translated from Urdu by Frances W Pritchett and the author*

WHEN Faiz's ghazal is discussed, usually the first thing said is that Faiz has given to traditional symbols (*alamat*) a new meaning and a new meaningfulness. It is also said that an important reason for Faiz's popularity is the way his feet remained firmly planted in classical soil, while the house he built on this foundation had walls inscribed with the new problems of a new sensibility. For the present, I won't raise the question of whether 'gallows', 'noose', 'murder', 'preacher', 'street of the beloved' and other such words are even 'symbols' at all. Our classical ghazal was not familiar with the concept of a symbol, and it's not likely that a thing which didn't exist even conceptually in our poetics, should not only be present, but should also be something our poets were aware of. The efforts which have been made in our country to understand and appreciate Urdu poetry in the light of half-baked notions founded on Western terms and concepts, have usually been unsuccessful. The attempt to prove the presence of symbols in Urdu ghazal has a conspicuous place in the list of these unsuccessful efforts. Well, not to prolong the discussion of this point, I only want to say that Faiz's ghazal is unquestionably adorned with the conventional words and image-clusters (*talazimat*) which are a notable feature of our classical poetry. The question is whether in reality Faiz's classicism and originality lie only in the fact

that he wasn't ashamed to try his strength against the 'rival' and the 'shaikh' in the 'beloved's street'. It is necessary to examine the question — in part, because Faiz's poetry is in any case of a markedly limited scope and compass, and because his admirers assert that Faiz's classicism is limited to giving new meanings to these same words and image-clusters. This amounts to detraction in the guise of praise. The question must also be examined because in the process light can be shed on some fundamental aspects of classical ghazal. And there is one more reason: in Pakistan, since Faiz's death certain people have been trying to prove that he was a faithful Muslim, a lover of the Prophet, and a mystically tender-hearted Sufi. Thus it wouldn't be entirely surprising if after some time, Faiz were understood to be a classical Sufi poet as well, so that his real literary achievement would be taken as limited merely to reviving the memory of scaffold and noose, Qais and Farhad.

THE first question is, if a poet uses conventional words that have come down from ancient times, while he himself is a poet of the present age, on what basis will we decide that he has given these words new meanings? For example, consider these two *she'rs*:

No pleas for union, no petitions of  
grief, no fables, no complaints —

Under *your* regime the sad heart has lost all its rights!

Murdering a lover was never far from any beloved's mind —

But before *your* regime, it wasn't the general practice!

Obviously the first *she'r* is Faiz's, and the second is Dard's (1720-1785). On what basis will you decide that the first *she'r* refers to political oppression, and the second to the tyranny of the beloved? If you say that both *she'r*'s refer to political oppression, then it can be said that using the traditional themes and words of the ghazal with a political meaning is no special characteristic of Faiz's. And if you say that Faiz's *she'r* refers to political oppression because we know that he was a progressive, a revolutionary, etc., then the implication is that these conventional words have no status of their own, their meanings keep changing according to the poet. If the poet is a Shia, then his meanings are Shiite, if the poet is a Sunni but is Ahl-e Hadith as well, then his meanings are Sunni Ahl-e Hadith etc. It's clear that in this way Faiz's individuality is again endangered. It might be said that since Faiz is a progressive, when he speaks of the sad heart losing all its rights under someone's regime, the force itself is different, the beauty itself is different. But this implies that before deciding about the strength or weakness of any *she'r*, we should ascertain the political beliefs of the poet. Obviously those meanings of a *she'r* that cannot be discovered without obtaining information about the beliefs of the poet, must in the last analysis be held invalid. For first of all we do not have information about the political beliefs of all the poets; in fact we do not always

know even the poet's name. And the second point is that if the beauty or meaning of the *she'r* is held to depend and rest on this information which is external to the *she'r*, then we'll be forced to say that the *she'r* itself has no meaning. If we accept this view, all the doors to criticism and analysis will be closed, and Faiz's poetry itself will be in danger, for the necessary consequence will be that Faiz's poetry has no excellence in itself. The real truth therefore seems to be that because Faiz was a revolutionary, a progressive, etc. there's a kind of pleasure in ascribing a political meaning to his poetry. Otherwise, if he had written these very *she'r*'s in Dard's day, or even Ghalib's day, no one would have paid any special attention to them.

IT may be said that Faiz's great achievement really lay in making the classical diction come to life again, and making it popular in the ghazal. For by Faiz's day, it may be said, all those beautiful words had either already been abandoned, or had lost their meanings. But these words are in fact part of a whole conventional system; and all the assumptions of the ghazal world depend upon them. As long as that conventional system and those assumptions exist, these words cannot lose their meanings. It is impossible that some conventional term — for example, 'tyranny and oppression' — should have meaning in Mir's *she'r* and have no meaning in modern *she'r*'s. It can indeed be said that conventional words like 'tyranny' and 'oppression' can lose their interest and freshness. Thus what we are really claiming is that these words had lost their interest and freshness, and Faiz endowed them with renewed interest and freshness. Then the

question comes up, how did Faiz perform this feat? You will reply that he gave them a political meaning. But this is clearly circular. For again that same problem arises: the quest for political meaning in Faiz's poetry rests on our knowledge that Faiz was a political and revolutionary individual. That is, if we encounter the *she'r* with the line, 'But before *your* regime, it wasn't the general practice:' in Faiz's collected poetry we would discover political and revolutionary meanings in it, and if we found it among Dard's poems we would consider it merely love poetry. Thus the interest and freshness we find in the classical ghazal imagery used by Faiz, is due to our awareness that Faiz had certain political views. That is to say, Faiz did not endow such imagery with any special poetic excellence — it was only the magic of his politics.

Of course I don't accept this conclusion; in fact, I consider it incorrect. I know that in our time many poets besides Faiz have used the classical ghazal imagery, and they have even agreed with Faiz's views and shared his convictions, but in their poetry the classical images do not have the same beauty as they do in Faiz's poetry. Thus Faiz's greatness cannot be founded on the claim that he gave a political meaning to the classical, romantic, conventional imagery of the ghazal. Many modern poets — Makhdum, Majruh, Sahir, Ghulam Rabbani Taban, and others — have done as much, and not one among them is the equal of Faiz. If it be said that Faiz was the first to achieve the feat of arriving at new meanings, not even that is true. Among the Progressives, Makhdum was the first to make systematic use of the ghazal, while Hasrat Mohani,

Muhammad Ali Jauhr, and Iqbal had re-established the use of classical imagery in the ghazal. In the preface to *Daste-e tah-e sang* Faiz mentioned Hasrat Mohani. In this preface he wrote that he himself began to write poetry around 1928. At that time Muhammad Ali Jauhar was alive, and his political ghazals were echoing in the halls of literature. Hasrat's prestige as a ghazal poet had already been thoroughly established, and Iqbal had become a kind of ideal for all the new poets (including Josh). Faiz himself wrote an elegy for Iqbal that can be counted among the best poems of the Progressive poets. Thus when Faiz began to write, there were abundant examples before him in which political themes had been used.

In the light of this analysis we are obliged to say that the classical beauty and excellence of Faiz's ghazals cannot be ascribed to his habitually using certain conventional words, and endowing them with political meanings. In the world of criticism we often find ourselves in the difficult situation of being able to perceive beauty, but unable to explain it. Murray Krieger, in his *Theory of Criticism* (Baltimore, 1976), has elucidated this point. He says,

If we have an experience that we describe as aesthetic, we are likely to seek to find its cause in the stimulating object, to which we then attribute aesthetic value. But the issue for us as critics is whether the cause is in us or in the object. In a literal sense of course, the source of the response must be in us, since there are other people who do not feel it when confronted by the same object and since without us there is no such response, however powerful the object and its stimulating

propensities.... But I have raised the normative issue that transcends such literalistic reductions: does the object have an aesthetic character that we apprehend or do some of us read such aesthetic character into it, projecting it out of ourselves? If we have discovered that character, so that our experience — to the extent that it is aesthetic — is an appropriate response to that character, then we ought to be able to describe it and expect it to sponsor a similar experience with other readers (p. 13).

Later, Krieger says that the critic must be able to distinguish between the 'object in experience' and the 'experience of an object'. That is, the critic must be able to say that the beauty he finds in a verse is not the invention of his own mind, and by describing this beauty he must be able to claim that from verses which possess this beauty such-and-such a type of experience can be obtained. If the experience of a poem is described in such a way that its separate parts retain their own individuality, then the claim of those parts to offer a 'unified' and 'self-enclosing' experience becomes doubtful.

Krieger uses the terms 'unified' and 'self-enclosing' to remind the reader that poems are organic wholes, that no element of a poem can be singled out as greater than the rest, and that poems contain their meanings within themselves. These formulations, which are regarded in the West as faintly Neo-Aristotelian, have parallels in Perso-Arabic poetics too. One might cite the work of classical Arab critics like Qudama ibn Ja'far, who denied that the meaning of a poem existed outside its words. In any case, the critics' dilemma

that Krieger describes is common enough, and most critics of Faiz do not escape it. By stressing the so-called political content of Faiz's poetry, they unwittingly run the risk of devaluing Faiz's real achievement. The admirers of Faiz's classicism say that in Faiz's ghazals the words are one thing, and the political meaning which Faiz's beliefs have given them is another. But since those very words have been given political meaning by Majruh and others as well, but have not been given the beauty that they have in Faiz's poetry, Faiz's admirers have not succeeded in explaining how the same words work so effectively for Faiz, and remain ineffective for others.

IN order to resolve this question, let us examine certain points illustrated in the following two *she'rs*. The first is Hafiz's, the second is obviously Faiz's:

The eagle of tyranny has spread his wings over the whole city —  
Is there no bow of a recluse, is there no arrow of a sigh? (Hafiz)

This is the city of the unjust ones — where is there any justice or compassion?  
You fools, Supplication wanders from door to door, beating her head in vain. (Faiz)

Leaving aside the fact that Hafiz's *she'r* is of a very high order and Faiz's *she'r* is not among his good ones, the question to be asked is: in what way can we decide that Hafiz's *she'r* is not political and Faiz's *she'r* is political? Or again, can we say that although much inferior to Hafiz's *she'r* Faiz's *she'r* deserves praise because it has a political dimension, or a political dimen-

sion too? (That is, a political dimension in addition to some other dimension). Can we establish criteria for political poetry, in the light of which we can distinguish it from non-political poetry? Is it possible for us to show that non-political poetry, while remaining within the bounds of conventions, can become political poetry, since the conventions are context-neutral? Is it possible for us to stay entirely within some conventional framework, while the meanings that emerge are non-conventional?

To answer all these questions would take whole chapters. For the present I only want to say that Hafiz's *she'r* can sustain a political meaning, but we cannot call it political in itself, because the political meaning that we pull out of it will be related to its signification (*ma'naviyat*), not to its real meaning. And the power of metaphor is that it opens doors for signification. We have no criterion by which we can declare this *she'r* non-political, but neither do we have any criterion by which we can declare it purely political. The signification of a *she'r* is part of its meaning, but the circle of its meaning can be narrower than its signification. Faiz's *she'r* in comparison to Hafiz's *she'r* is less effective, although it too has a political signification. It is less effective because the meaning on which its signification is based is a lesser meaning than that of Hafiz's *she'r*. When I speak of a lesser meaning my point is that in Hafiz's *she'r* there are four metaphors and four images — that the metaphors are also images: the eagle of tyranny, the wings spread over the whole city, the bow of a recluse, the arrow of a sigh. Then, the presence of two things (which are mentioned in the first line) proves the absence of two things (which are mention-

ed in the second line). Faiz's *she'r* is devoid of these merits.

Where Faiz has used classical imagery successfully, he has always achieved *Kaifiyat* or *Mazmun-afarini*. *Kaifiyat* can be loosely translated as 'feelingfulness': that is, a direct appeal to emotions without any special depth of meaning or obvious recourse to metaphor or imagery. *Mazmun-afarini* can best be understood as finding a new aspect of a traditional theme, approaching a traditional theme from a new angle, or giving a new direction to a traditional theme. By 'traditional theme' I mean, of course, the set of stock topoi of the ghazal, each of which can subsume a large number of subsidiary and related images.

In any case, neither a political dimension, nor a philosophical dimension, nor a romantic dimension, nor any other dimension, contains any merit in its own right that could make it a bearer of poetic excellence. The discussion has focused on Faiz's ghazals, but he used ghazal images in many of his nazms as well. Thus I present the first two lines of 'We who were Killed on Dark Roads', then a Persian *she'r* by Hakim Kashi, a sixteenth-century Indo-Persian poet:

Loving the flowers of your lips, we  
were sacrificed on the dry branch of  
the scaffold.

(Faiz)

In the course of loving you I too was  
sacrificed.

What a pity that from the tribe of  
Majnun no one now remains!

(Hakim Kashi)

The dignity of its *mazmun-afarini* and

suggestive implications (*kinaya*) make the Persian *she'r* something monumental. Faiz's *she'r* contains a little wordplay, but the well-worn, threadbare feel of its imagery creates self-pity instead of dignity. Where there is *mazmun-afarini*, there is no self-pity. Faiz was among those of our modern poets who had a sense of the importance of these classical terms and concepts. He even wrote an essay on some of them. We, under the influence of Western education, have chosen to become strangers to those terms. When our literary intuition causes us to sense a classical tone in Faiz's ghazals, we are not able to make use of traditional terms and concepts in our efforts to ascertain the true nature of this tone. Thus we have been content merely to say that Faiz has used 'Shaikh', 'Brahman', 'holy man', 'street of the beloved', 'rival', 'destination', 'gallows', 'noose', and other classical, conventional terms, with a new meaning. In many of Faiz's best *she'rs*, there are no conventional terms — what can then be the secret of their success? Here are some of Faiz's most famous *she'rs*, taken from different ghazals:

1

The thing that was not mentioned in  
the whole story  
That was the thing that displeased her  
very much.

2

When we were apart how many near-  
nesses we achieved —  
When we were together, what separa-  
tions came upon us.

3

If we are still strangers after so much  
friendliness,  
How many meetings will it take for us  
to become friends?

4

What they took for a mirage turned  
out to be the fountain of eternal life,  
The dream, which didn't reach even to  
the mind, was the only true one.

Note the *mazmun-afarini* of the first and fourth *she'rs*, and the *kaifiyat* of the second and third. The way Faiz brought a classical tone to life in the ghazal is a notable chapter in the history of our poetry. In his ghazals the classical intellectual world of the Urdu ghazal comes alive, a world in which *mazmun-afarini* and *kaifiyat* played an important part. In Faiz, the magic of *kaifiyat* echoes even in the nazms. It is thus necessary for Faiz's poetry to be examined afresh, in the traditional context of the ghazal.

