

ALI SHEHZAD ZAIDI

A selection of Poems by Faiz Ahmed Faiz

(Translated from the Urdu by Daud Kamal)

The Grove 13 (2006)

Dedication

Abacus of suffering —
frost-edged fields
of withered flowers —
a wilderness of yellow leaves.
This is my land —
offal in narrow lanes.
I write
for the miserable —
clerks, postmen, coolies,
labourers with bent knees,
peasants in the blistering sun.
It is for the widows
I write —
for the orphans
and the unwed —
for the condemned
in their separate cells
and the stars
that will not last
through the night.

A Prison Evening

Night — enchanting princess — descends
 the sky's jewelled staircase
 one step at a time.
 A cool breeze whispers words of love.
 Gnarled and hunchbacked
 trees in the prison compound
 are embroidering exquisite designs
 on the sky's blue silk shawl.
 Moonlight penetrates my soul.
 Green undulating shadows —
 star-moisture — the poignancy of desire.
 How precious is life!
 But the tyrants
 have injected their venom
 into the veins of humanity.
 They have slaughtered our joy.
 Centuries of oppression, brutality, plunder.
 And, yet, the moon shines
 in all her splendour.
 The lotus blooms.
 Life is eternal.

Captivity

What does it matter
 if pen and paper have been snatched
 from my hands?
 I have dipped
 my fingers
 in the blood of my heart.
 What does it matter
 if my lips
 have been sealed?
 I have put
 a tongue
 in every mouth of my chain.

Disillusionment

Endeavour
has now been squeezed bone-dry
of possibility —
even the most intrepid eagle
cannot pierce
the sky's ultimate barrier.
All the stars have been lassoed
one by one
and the moon-goddess
strangled to death
by an unrepentant Othello.
No dewdrop of grace
trembles on the eye's periphery —
no diaphanous dream
soothes the heart.
Those ravishing lips are gone —
free hearts and illumined minds
have atrophied.
Love
you will moulder in your grave
and I in mine.
There is no antidote
to death's scorpion-sting.

A Selection of Poems by Daud Kamal**The Rebel**

They
stood him up
against an orchard wall
and shot him
at dawn.

Pandemonium of crows
and then
the empty horizon.

Hundreds of miles away
his mother
kneels in prayer –
in ignorance –
the ignorance of prayer.

Wheat ear on the stubble –
the blind earth
must be fed.

Anniversary

Cascading back
to the source
over a difficult terrain
but the heart remembers.
Wet stones
conscious of their lineage –
the chopped-up moon
in paddy-fields.
A fierce love has blurred my sight
and burnt the lines off
the palms of my hands.
I have drunk acrid milk.
I have heard the sound of clogs
in an ancient ruin.
How can the mind contend
with all this chaos –
this endless repetition
of thwarted lives?
Shelley asserts
that the deep truth
is imageless.
An invisible bird
perches on my shoulder
and speaks to me
in a language
I do not understand.
Ashes and dust.
I am only a word-smith.

Kingfisher

April
is the kingfisher's beak
which pierces
the river's glad torment.
Is this an image
of our love?
Carnage
in the rose-valleys
under the first light
of our wounds.

Clouds
detach themselves
from disconsolate trees.
The future
curves on another shore.
Tongues of water
cradle our startled dreams.
Moss-grown stepping-stones.
The stars burn fiercely.
They tell us what we are.

Winter Rain

Mist
 suspended over a deep void:
 translucent bridge
 sculpted in fire –
 in rock-crystal.
 Memory,
 someone says,
 is a forest of mirrors.
 Is this true?
 Stone parapets
 eroded by time.

Is death
 the only exit?
 The moon thaws
 before your loveliness:
 you are the breath of violets –
 the vivacity
 of a snow-fed stream.
 Nightbound travelers –
 you and me –
 and this winter rain.

A Selection of Poems by Daud Kamal

The Grove 17 (2010)

Floods

How does one forgive
the treachery
of blind rivers
and water-buffaloes
dissolving in the mind?

Their hut was
forty years old.
They had
three wooden boxes of dowry
and a sackful of expensive rice.

At the army relief-camp,
the bride-to-be
covers her head
while her parents
look the other way.

A Narrow Valley

Flash-flood
in a narrow valley.
A bowl of milk
Falls
From the hands
Of a trembling child.
Mud houses collapse.
Prayers
Do not work
At time
Such as these.

Widow

Every evening
she would go down to the river
wet pebbles and hird-shadows
but the boat
never came.

Mist like a shroud
and the smoke of cowdung
over which
she cooks for her children –
the river, the river.

The youngest asks:
how much bigger than a scorpion
is death? You should be out
with the others – she scolds –
catching fish.

Mouth stained
by an old dream – glass bangles
and the sounds of a village festival
in her eyes, in her blood –
the river, the river.

Exile, Prisoner, Poet: A Brief History of Faiz Ahmed Faiz

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The artistic sensibility of Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911-1984), Pakistan's most acclaimed and translated Urdu poet, was a rare synthesis of modernity and tradition. After completing master's degrees in Arabic and English in the early nineteen thirties, Faiz taught English as a lecturer at colleges in Amritsar and Lahore. He served as the editor of an Urdu literary journal for two years and joined the Progressive Writers Association of India at its inception in 1936. As he recalls in an autobiographical essay, the Great Depression ushered in a period of intellectual ferment in the Indian subcontinent:

It was a time of great creativity and the opening of new perspectives. I think the first lesson I learnt was that it was impossible to detach oneself from what was happening externally. An individual, no matter how rich and fulfilled emotionally and in intellectual terms, is, after all, only an individual, a small, humble entity of little consequence. What matters is the world outside and the people in it and what happens to them. What is important is the larger human equation of pain and pleasure. As such, internal and external experiences are two sides of the same coin. ("Faiz on Faiz" 4-5)

Faiz became a literary celebrity in 1941 when *Naqsh-i-Faryadi*, his first volume of Urdu poetry, was published. However, World War Two intervened, and in 1942, Faiz joined the British Army War Publicity Department in Delhi. Upon leaving military service in 1947, the year of Pakistan's independence, Faiz became the editor of *The Pakistan Times*. Amidst a government crackdown on leftists, Faiz was imprisoned in solitary confinement from 1951 until 1955.

In the coming years, many other worthy endeavors of Faiz would be interrupted by imprisonment, exile, or calamity. Faiz's poems express the anguish of separation – be it of India from Pakistan, East Pakistan from West Pakistan, husband from wife, poet from country – as in "Legend of a Tall Tree":

It seems there is nothing now –
 Neither sun nor moon –
 Neither darkness nor dawn.
 There's no Aphrodite in the sea-foam –
 No ship in the harbour of pain.
 Perhaps this was all an illusion –
 Legend of a tall tree –
 The last swirl of desolation
 In the butchered lane.
 No one will come now to this oasis –
 No one will drink from this stream.
 All attachments are snapped –
 All friendships buried.
 This is the worst that could have been.
 But courage – my heart –
 This too will pass.
 Do not despair.
 There's a life to live.
 (*Four Contemporary Poets* 11)

Faiz co-founded the Afro-Asian Writers Movement at a time when Third World writers were de-colonizing the imagination as can be seen in Faiz's "Come Back Africa":

Come back Africa.
 I've heard the thunder
 of your drums.
 Your maddening rhythms
 have entered my blood.
 Come back Africa.
 I've raised my forehead
 from the dust.
 I've peeled off
 the scales of suffering
 from my eyes.
 Come back Africa.
 I've smashed
 the shackles of pain.
 I've torn
 the web of helplessness.
 (*Four Contemporary Poets* 27)

Upon his return to Pakistan from its first conference, held in Tashkent in 1958, Faiz was imprisoned for six months by the newly-installed military regime of General Ayub Khan. In 1978, in the wake of the military coup that overthrew the democratically elected government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, Faiz moved to Beirut to serve as the editor of *Lotus*, the flagship literary journal of the Afro-Asian

Writers Movement. He had to leave Beirut because of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. Faiz died shortly after his return to Pakistan in 1984.

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Daud Kamal's Legacy of Mercy

“A poet’s autobiography,” according to Yevgeny Yevtushenko, “is his poetry. Anything else is just a footnote” (1). Even so, a brief introduction to the Pakistani English-language poet Daud Kamal is in order. Born in Abbottabad in 1935 to a Hindko-speaking family, Kamal was educated at the Burn Hall School in Srinagar and completed a bachelor’s degree in English at Islamia College in Peshawar. In 1956, he left for Cambridge University, where he completed a tripos (three-part examination) in English literature for his master’s degree. Two years later, Kamal returned to Pakistan. He began teaching in the Department of English and Modern European Languages at the University of Peshawar which would soon thrive under its Vice Chancellor, Chaudhry Mohammad Ali (Kamal’s father) who promoted women’s education at the university, establishing the Jinnah College for Women in 1964. Kamal taught for nearly three decades in the English Department, serving as department chair during the nineteen eighties. The department chairs who preceded him, such as Herbert Michael Close, Mazhar Ali Khan, and Margaret Harbottle, were all gifted teachers and revered by their students. Near the end of his life, Kamal recalled, only half in jest, having gone into teaching out of “an exaggerated sense of idealism coupled with a total lack of a world-sense.”¹

Kamal’s first volume of original poetry was a self-published chapbook titled *The Compass of Love* (1973). During Kamal’s lifetime, Peter Dent, the head of the Interim Press, a small poetry press in the United Kingdom, published Kamal’s *Recognitions* (1979) and *A remote beginning* (1985), and also included several of Kamal’s poems in an anthology of Pakistani English-language poetry titled *The Blue Wind* (1984). Kamal was an accomplished translator of classical and modern Urdu poetry. He died of a heart attack in December 1987 while on a visit to the United States that was sponsored by the United States Information Agency. His posthumous volumes include *Rivermist* (1992), *Before the Carnations Wither* (1995) and *A Selection of Verse* (1997).

Kamal’s “Old Woman” resurrects the merciful ethos of the Sufi mystical tradition. While I was his student at the University of Peshawar in the early eighties, Kamal would, on his way to photocopy his poems at a shop, pause to converse with an old woman and give alms to her. In this poem, she lives on, together with the poet persona who is an oasis in a desert of indifference. “The need to lend a voice to suffering,” according to Theodore W. Adorno, “is the

¹ Unpublished July 25, 1985 letter to the journalist Khalid Hasan.

condition of all truth” (17-18); and in “Old Woman,” Kamal indicts a social system that creates suffering:

Two
old jute sacks
(generosity of
a God-fearing grocer) –
one for her
skin-and-bone legs
and the other
(suitably perforated
for breathing)
to hide and keep warm
the ruin above.
Winter can be
deadly
if you have
no home.

Partially
sheltered by the awning
of a jeweller’s shop
she has become
a part
of the scene
on the pavement.
The late-night
cinema crowds
pay no heed to her.
I am no better
but how I wish
I could bend down
and whisper:
"I am writing this
for you."
(*Rivermist* 110-111)

The poem’s opening word has a line to itself. “Two” modifies more than the two jute sacks, connoting at once the unity and the separation between the poet and the old woman. They meet under the awning of the shop of a jeweler, perhaps the one who created the jewels of caring and love. The poem’s final word rhymes with the first one. At first glance the “you” appears to be the old woman, but on further consideration “you” might well address the reader, the indifferent cinema crowds, or the divinity that erases distinctions.

Kamal condenses Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* in the two lines about the cinema crowds who ignore the old woman. Debord shows how society diverts our gaze away from human need and suffering and towards a spectacle that is "a visible negation of life" [whose] "function in society is the concrete manufacture of alienation" (14, 23). The lachrymose spectacles in our cinema and public life are, in the words of Debord, "a specious form of the sacred" and the "the locus of illusion and false consciousness" (12).

As a messenger of mercy, Kamal bore witness to barbarism that recurs throughout the ages. In his poems, an object or artifact opens a wondrous portal that leads us to a wistful sense of what might have been. In "A Rotting Pomegranate," pomegranate seeds that resemble fragments of shattered pottery evoke the sackings of Baghdad, then a great center of learning:

Baghdad
is again on fire
and the leather bags
of merchant-princes
trampled and torn
under the hooves
of Mongol horses.

Look
at these fragments
of sun-baked pottery –
each piece dripping
with jewels –
miniature suns
of untasted sweetness.
(*Recognitions* 16)

The ruby-red pomegranate color denotes the bloodshed during the massacres by the Mongol hordes of Helagu in 1258 and of Tamerlane in 1401, those avatars of "shock and awe." However, the image of the pomegranate also promises regeneration, fecundity, and immortality (Cooper 134).

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Ali Shehzad Zaidi teaches Spanish language at the State University of New York at Canton. He co-founded the Transformative Studies Institute in 2007 and is the editor of its quarterly journal, *Theory in Action*.