

**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**

The Grove 25 (2018-2020)

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.

### **Works Cited**

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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.”<sup>1</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup> 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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