

Socio-Political Concerns in the Poems of Faiz Ahmad Faiz: A Select Study

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Abstract

Faiz Ahmad Faiz is one of the most prolific writers in Pakistan, well-known for his poetry collections. He lived during the most crucial period in the history of India and Pakistan. His poems are notable for their aesthetic and artistic values. In the latter part of his literary career, he started incorporating revolutionary ideas in his poems. He is among the most prominent progressive writers who lived during that period. Literature can always be used to influence the common people's mind. Literature and politics are always interwound with each other. This paper studies the writings of Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and brings out how his poems are loaded with political metaphors and foresees how the poet has used radical ideas throughout his writings to kindle the minds of men of the working class and bring about a political change in their society.

Keywords: Politics, Poetry, Capitalism, Communism, Labourers, Liberation.

Faiz Ahmad was born in 1911 in British-governed India and died in November 1984, in Pakistan. Most of his poems, which are in Urdu, speak volumes about love and loneliness. During the later period of his life, after the formation of the separate state of Pakistan, he witnessed all the chaos that happened there. The people of Pakistan faced many political and social crises during that period. In 1951, the first conspiracy against the Pakistan government was orchestrated. This was against the first Prime Minister of Pakistan, Liaquat Ali Khan. Faiz Ahmad was also a part of that conspiracy. He was then convicted and imprisoned.

Faiz Ahmad, in all his poems, wrote against the totalitarian government of Liaquat Ali Khan. He stirred the minds of people to revolt against suppression. He also wrote about the sufferings of Pakistani working-class men in his poems. He used his poetry as a tool to bring out their agony in the limelight. He was also a member of the Communist party of Pakistan.

The main idea of the communists is to bring salvation to the lives of the proletariat. They fought for the upliftment of the working class. Faiz, being a communist, wrote about the hardships faced by the labourers. He brought out their miserable lives through his poetry. Faiz talked about the exploitation of working-class men by the capitalist class. He wanted to make some changes in the life of middle-class men, through his writings. Amina Yaqin in her article describes Faiz as "a people's poet and a nationalist". He wrote for the people of his society and for their welfare. Their well-being was his primary concern.

Faiz, in an interview while talking about his literary influences, mentions "In the early days romantic themes were dominant in poetry and then a breakthrough came. New forms, patterns, themes – mainly political – began to appear". Faiz Ahmed Faiz, who was interested in romantic poetry earlier, shifted towards political themes after his thirties "Political themes became more important than romantic ones" (Faiz)

Faiz had even once said that “The war between the capitalist and the proletariat is not the exclusive war of the proletariat; it is a battle challenging all of us. Are not we part of our society?” (Qtd. by Malik 653). Faiz Ahmed also had the idea that Literature and politics are interlaced with each other and one facet cannot be separated from the other, “There is an inevitable relationship between literature and politics” (Faiz 142). The founder of Marxism, Karl Marx also shares this same view about the relationship between literature and society. “For Marx, literature is not a separate, self-enclosed region, and literary works are not isolated from social and political conditions” (Hamadi 156-157).

Both Faiz Ahmad and Karl Marx share the view that literature has a major role to play in the socio-political system of the society. Literature cannot be completely isolated from the society. The unique feature of his writing is his use of metaphors and symbols to bring out the intended argument. This makes his writing more complex and riveting, offering many hidden layers.

Poet Faiz Ahmad portrays the pathetic lives of the blue-collar workers in his literary works. In his poem “When Autumn Came”, Ahmed compares the working-class men with trees and the power of the capitalists is portrayed as the autumn season, which causes all trees to shed their leaves. Through this poem, he reports that the owners exploit the lives of the working men to the core. They aim only at extracting wealth by abusing the working men’s labour. He expresses this idea in his poem as “it stripped them down to the skin/ left their ebony bodies naked” (2-3).

Just as the autumn season affects all the trees leaving them without a single green leaf, the owners exploit the lives of the workers. The capitalists make use of the working men and once their work is done, they are left without proper recognition or wages. The capitalists sought to benefit the most by oppressing these workers and their labour. He also complains that the labourers are given minimum wages.

In his poem “Dogs”, he uses dogs as a symbol to portray the untold sufferings of working-class men. Through this poem, he strongly expresses that labourers are treated similar to dogs by their masters. As many stray dogs are abused by people in the society, workers are abused and exploited by their

masters. The life of labourers is like that of a dog, “Neither rest at night, nor joy in the day” (5). The labourers work day and night for their owners, but still they are deprived of happiness.

Faiz in his poem “Look at the Town from here” writes about the submissive lives of people living in towns as slaves, “Like a jail - There are walls all around” (4-5). He compares cities and towns with jails, built in concentric circles and also complains that all pathways are filled with prisoner’s footprints. According to Faiz Ahmed, people living in towns are living the lives of prisoners. “No person with dignity. No being with reason” (20-21). People in cities have their hands manacled as slaves, and no one dares to get rid of those. People who try to come out of this slavery are also subdued by the oppressive authorities.

Faiz Ahmad not only talks about the agony of the people, he also provokes the thought of revolutionary action through his poems. In the poem “Speak” (Bol), Faiz Ahmed stirs the people to speak up against the oppression of the upper-class people. Poet asks people to open their mouths and speak for their rights. Freedom of speech is a fundamental right and no one can stop people from talking about their rights.

Speak, your lips are free.

Speak, it is your own tongue.

Speak, it is your own body.

Speak, your life is still yours. (1-4)

In this poem, he uses the imagery of a blacksmith shop, where he compares his country with the blacksmith shop. He brings out the significance and necessity of revolt for the upliftment of the suppressed through the words— “Flames leap high and steel glows red; / .../ Every chain’s embrace outspread!” (6-8). He tries to convince his readers that only revolution can bring betterment in their life. In this poem, he symbolises revolution as flames. Only when the flames of revolt are wild inside the heart of the people, one could fight for his freedom. Faiz Ahmad calls all working men to revolt against the mighty capitalist owners. Only when the labourers fight for their justice, they could attain liberation. He encourages the emancipation of working men through revolt against the capitalists.

In a poem titled “Stanza”, Faiz states the idea that even if his pen and ink are taken away from him, he would dip his fingers into his blood and use it as ink instead to condemn tyranny. He exhorts people

to speak and write about all the crimes committed against them. It is their only weapon of hope and liberation.

Awakening the working men to embrace their freedom, Faiz Ahmed wrote to the citizens of Pakistan to revolt against the oppressive rule of the government. He has written many poems about the tyrannical government in power at Pakistan. He states that, under the rule of this government, the lives of Pakistani citizens are like "a beggar's tattered clothes/ patched constantly with pain." (9-10). He opines that the people of Pakistan live a life similar to that of beggars, without any happiness and face different kinds of sufferings each and everyday.

Faiz Ahmad pictures a positive future for the oppressed people through his poem "We Shall See". In this poem, he contemplates his desire to see an idealistic future where there will be no difference in classes and all men will be treated equally. He desires an egalitarian society without any discrimination. He expresses his contempt against the ruling capitalist class with his words "And heads of rulers will be struck/ With crackling lightening/ and thunder roars." (10-12).

In this poem, he also talks about his desire that the power to govern the country must come into the hands of ordinary people. This poem "We Shall See" is similar to the speech "I Have Dream", delivered by Martin Luther King Jr., where he talks about the emancipation of Blacks. Faiz strongly scorns the governing body for its exploitation of ordinary men's life.

In the poem "When Autumn Came", he talks about the liberation of the proletariat from the suppression of the ruling class. At the end of the poem, he prays to God to "Give some tree the gift of green again" (17). As the working men are compared with trees in this poem, he hopes their lives are resurrected by some luxuriant greenery. The poet adopts this line to bring out his wish that the proletariat must come up in their life.

Poet Faiz Ahmad, in most of his poems, has tried to bring out the sufferings and hardships of working lower-class men to the core. He has used his writings as a powerful medium to point out the cruelties faced by workers. He is definitely "a spokesperson for the world's voiceless and suffering peoples" (Coppola 126). He has used numerous metaphors to picture

the kind of life they live.

Faiz Ahmad, as a communist political poet, has succeeded in portraying the agony of workers' life and has also sown the seeds of a revolutionary change inside their hearts. "His poetry has a virile voice and message that deserved to hear in the complex socio-political scenario of the modern world" (Magray 15).

Conclusion

Faiz, being a complete Marxist, depicts sheer universality throughout his poetry. He is a master of coalescing politics with aestheticism in poetry. His aesthetic poems talk about the agony of voiceless people in this society. Faiz Ahmed has been an indispensable poetic voice that remains crucial at any political scenario. His poetry never fails to fit into any contemporary socio-political situation.

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