

BIOREGIONAL STUDY OF THE POETRY OF FAIZ AHMED FAIZ

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Is it possible to conceptualise a universal culture which overrides and yet does not obliterate the specificities of the diverse cultures of different countries and their peoples?
(Faiz Ahmed Faiz, 1949)

ABSTRACT

This paper invokes bioregional study of the poetry of Faiz in the wake of neo-liberalistic agenda of trade liberalisation which is trying to obliterate diverse cultural patterns of different societies in order to develop the same system of exchange all over the world. Being a bard of masses, peace, progress and harmony, Faiz envisions a planetary culture which overrides but does not obliterate the specificities of the subaltern cultures of the world. Keeping in line with the bardic tradition, Faiz glorifies his native land, its farmer and its pre-imperial culture of collectivity and harmony and relates it with other oppressed cultures of the world. Moreover, the poet calls forth the legends of the native folklores to reintegrate and reconnect his people with their past cultural heritage—the heritage which is distorted in standard texts. This bioregional vision of Faiz invokes the literary accounts of planetarity in the works of Gayatri Spivak (2003) and Paul Gilroy (2000) who advocate displacement of global agents by the planetary subjects based on post-anthropological and non-racial politics.

KEY WORDS: Bioregionalism, Subaltern cultures, Planetarity, Homogenisation, Neo-liberalism

1. INTRODUCTION

Bioregionalism is a set of political, cultural and ecological views which enjoins that cultural and political identities of the societies should be based on bioregions. Bioregions are defined through natural boundaries such as watershed boundaries and terrains. These natural boundaries are further strengthened by the bonds of shared history and common spiritual experiences of the people of the natural regions. Bioregional writers cultivate harmonious relationship between natural and human worlds. They oppose ethnocentric homogenisation of cultural and economic worldview. Bioregionalism has gained more prominence in the aftermath of neo-liberalistic drive for unbounded consumption of environment which is challenging the autonomy of native cultures, the sovereignty of Nation-States and the workers' rights.

Faiz does not agree with colonial representation of indigenous history and culture in which the Orient is depicted as a pre-civilised limbo and a historical void, and that progress, culture and history began with European arrival. Faiz defines culture as the entire ways of social existence of a given society representing mass participation in all walks of life. He glorifies pre-imperial, pre-feudal cultural heritage of the sub-continent which in the words of Faiz, "has naturally been better preserved in our villages and the countryside of various regions than in big towns where dominative foreign influences have introduced a cosmopolitanism composed of many elements and characteristics which are not exclusively national" (in Majeed, 2011, p. 45). Faiz shares postcolonial perspective that the growth of regional cultures was arrested with the process of imperial cultural invasion. He discards the notion that call for return to roots and bioregionalism is antithetical to the goals of national integration and that love for past predicates love for the whole. Faiz argues that as a country is a geographical union of its constituent units, so is the national culture—an aggregate of regional cultures along with the bonds of common historical and psychological experiences.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The poetry of Faiz has been mainly received by the critics and researchers in terms of its social and political content. It has been envisioned as a poetry of 'romance and revolution' and of 'pain and cure' in the critical accounts of Fateh Muhammad Malik (2008), Dr Muhammad Arif Hussain (2010), Nosheen Tauqeer (2011) and Dr Muhammad Ali Siddiqui (2011). Faiz has also been eulogised for his major contribution in keeping alive the Urdu romantic poetic tradition which would have extinguished if Faiz had not moulded it according to the contemporary realities. Gopi Chand Narang (n.d.) is conspicuous for his

critical discussion on various stages of the growth of classical Urdu tradition from an erotic diction to a political discourse with particular focus on Faiz's contribution in it. Moreover, there is no dearth of the dissidents of Faiz who criticise him for his ambivalence. Most conspicuous among the dissidents of Faiz is Shams ur Rahman Faruqi (2005) who has dubbed the blend of political and lyrical in Faiz as an eccentricity.

While much has been said about the socio-political content and form of the poetry of Faiz, less ink has been spent upon its anti-globalisation appeal and call for bioregionalism despite the fact that the poet opposes a homogenised economy and consumer culture with its lack of stewardship towards nature. However, it seems befitting to briefly review the sporadic efforts which are made in this direction. Dr. Zia-ul-Hassan (n.d.) in "Faiz ki Shairi aur Hamara Ehed" (The Poetry of Faiz and our Age) has claimed that after the death of Faiz, the popularity of his poetry has increased manifold on account of its humanistic value in the wake of this unipolar world of universal capitalism. The critic has also made a passing reference to the dialectical significance of the poetry of Faiz in current politico-economic culture.

Dr. Asghar Ali Baloch (2011) in "Faiz Ki Shairi Mein Punjab Rang" (the colour of Punjab in the poetry of Faiz) has drawn the attention of the critics and the readers of Faiz towards the poet's admiration for the landscape, crops and the peasant of his native region. Dr. Anwaar Ahmad in his review of the aforesaid work has also acknowledged the presence of the odour of the native earth in the poetry of Faiz. However, the poetry of Faiz has not been received so far as a literature of bioregional quality in the wake of bourgeois drive for unbounded consumption of the environment. In order to fill up this gap, the present research invokes bioregional reading of the poetry of Faiz.

3. ANALYSIS

Throughout his poetry, Faiz glorifies native environment, its culture of collectivity and its hardworking farmers who work from dawn to dusk to attain self-sufficiency and livelihood with dignity. He laments the distortion and suppression of pre-imperial cultural heritage under bourgeois dominance and calls for regeneration of native values through collective action.

3.1 Glorification of Land

Both the pre-partition and post-partition poetry of Faiz is at once a glorification and a dirge of the captive motherland, its flora and fauna and its seasons. Glorification calls forth the natural beauty of the landscape, its trees, birds and its climate whereas dirge reminds the reader of the loss of freedom of the motherland and its culture under foreign and local oppression. The prototype of

environment in the poetry of Faiz is his native land Punjab and its countryside. In the words of Dr. Baloch, “the external environment, the subjective mood and the portrayal of nature in the poems of Faiz spring from the dawn and dusk, the forests, the birds and the beasts of the Punjab” (2011, p. 50). The poet not only narrates the tangible beauty of the native landscape but also looks at intangible exhausted murmur of midnight moon and listens to the incredible lores of love through the breathing of the Milky Way nowhere else but in the dense woods and the crystal clear skies of the Punjab. The poet gives vent to these strings of heart in “Sarod-e-Shabana” (Nocturnal Rhapsody):

Look, the tired voice of moonlight
Is curling up to sleep
In the thick foliage of trees.

(tr. Daud Kamal, 2006, p. 114)

Moreover, Faiz borrows erotic imagery from the Persian-Urdu romantic diction to express his love for the native soil as well as to cultivate harmony between the human world and the environment. In his nationalistic poems, the poet uses the analogy of ‘Laila’, ‘Jan-e-Jahan’ (Beloved) for the land which is a captive in the hands of ‘Raqebs’ (Rivals). In the words of Gopi Chand Narang:

The underlying pattern of such poems is the age-old love triangle. The first person of the poems is again the Ashiq (Lover), that is, the revolutionary, the nationalist or the socialist. The ma’shuq (beloved) is the country, the society or the people. The third element of the triangle, the raqib (rival), is now the imperialism, foreign tyranny, or the capitalist and the bourgeois. (n.d., p. 67)

Faiz’s evocation of romantic imagery to establish the bond between the land and the masses invokes the literary accounts of the bardic poetry of Walt Whitman (*Leaves of Grass*) and Pablo Neruda (*Canto General*) who use the imagery of female body and the woman-earth equation to recuperate pre-Columbian culture of harmony between man and the natural world.

The recurrent pattern of love triangle in Faiz which generates the tension between the lover and the rival does not end on a pessimistic note. Resolution comes through return to the cycle of nature and call back to the ways of Qais and Mansoor who symbolise commitment, perpetual struggle and sacrifice instead of compromise. The poet anticipates reunion between the lover and the beloved and regeneration of past harmony between man and nature in “Nisar mein teri galiyon kay” (To the streets of my land):

It is true we too now are parted,
But it matters little: tomorrow we’ll be together

Our separation is no longer than the night
It will pass and so we bear it.
(tr Khalid Hasan, 2006, p. 204)

3.2 Solidarity with the Sons of the Soil

Faiz defines liberation from British Raj in terms of cultural and economic freedom of the toiling masses of the land from foreign bondage. In the words of Faiz,

The people wanted freedom from the British and the Bania, not because these two were personally undesirable but because they were committed to support everything that was retrograde and undesirable in our social and economic existence and to stifle everything that was progressive and radically beneficent. (2008, p. 24)

Faiz believes that the greatest wealth of our motherland is its people and they are the real heirs of its material and natural resources. The prototypes of the humanity of Faiz are the farmers of the Punjab, the factory and railway workers and the destitute mothers who work from dawn to dusk to earn their livelihood and to contribute to the progress of their country. In “Intisaab” (Dedication), Faiz pays tribute to these prototypes of real humanity. Exalting the struggles of destitute mothers, the poet says:

Let me write of the Mothers
Whose children sob in the night
And cradled in tired, toiling arms
Will not tell their woes.
(trShoaib Hashmi, 2011, p. 21)

The poet eulogises the peasant of Punjab as ‘the vice-regent of God on earth’, ‘provider and sustainer’ in “Rabba Sachaya” (Supplication) and “Aik Tarana Punjabi Kisan kay Liay” (An Anthem in Praise of the Punjabi Farmers). He produces wheat, rice, cotton and milk. This peasant of the Punjab does not aspire for the worldly riches and luxury. He only yearns for bread and butter with dignity as he produces goods to satisfy human and social needs, not for the sake of their capital value. In “Rabba Sachaya”, the poet glorifies this pre-imperial culture of self-sufficiency:

Who cares for Wealth or power. All we want
Is honourable bread And something
To cover our nakedness.
(trDaud Kamal, 2006, p. 180)

However, the poet is extremely dismayed over the dichotomy of existence under bourgeois hegemony. On the one hand, there is hustle and

bustle of life in cities along with luxury and comforts and on the other hand, there is the issue of daily livelihood and the wish for death. In rural areas, the fields are full of crops but the farmers are starving. The poet gives vent to his agony over this dichotomy in “Mauzoo-e-Sukhan” (poetry’s theme) in the following words:

The multitudinous creatures of these glittering cities
Why do they keep living only in desire of death?
These lovely fields, whose bloom is bursting out,
Why does only hunger keep growing in them?
(tr. Kiernan, 1971, p. 93)

The poet also castigates the exploitative role of aristocracy and the repressive state apparatuses who deprive the farmers of the fruits of their labour. In the preface to *Sarvat Rahman’s 100 Poems by Faiz Ahmed Faiz*, Dehra Dun (1979) says, “Faiz was soon disillusioned by the lack of progress in democracy and social justice in Pakistan, and he used both poems and ghazals for covert and overt criticism of the oppressors of the people” (p. 15). The poet takes exception to the economic plunder of the land and the peasants at the hands of political and administrative hierarchy in “Intisaab”. He questions why the peasant does not enjoy the right of the ownership of the land he and his forefathers have been cultivating since generations. The legal rights of the land are reserved for the absentee feudals. As feudal class is the author of cultural values, so it is obligatory upon the peasant to obey and submit to the authority of his master. The life, honour and belonging of the peasant are at the will of his tribal chief. In the aforesaid poem, the poet says:

Let me write of the farmer
This lord whose fief was a few animal – stolen
Who knows when
This heir who once had a daughter – carried off
Who knows where
This chief whose turban is a tattered rag
Beneath the feet of the mighty.
(tr. Shoaib Hashmi, 2011, p. 21)

The poet is equally critical of the non-existence of state patronage for the farmers who work with singleness of intention to bring fertility to the salinity-hit regions of the native land. An excerpt from “Ye Fasl Umeedon ki, Hamdam” (This Crop of Hope) testifies to the miseries of farmers without patronising role of the state:

This crop of our hope

Will once again be laid to waste;
All our work through night and day,
Will once again have turn out to be vain
(tr. Khalid Hassan, 2006, p. 266)

In the words of Dr Balooch, “This Crop of Hope” “tells the whole story of decaying plants and crops, the futility of labour and hope of livelihood of the farmer in salinity-hit field and deserts of Punjab” (2011, p. 51).

However, this narrative of plight of the farmer is not without future hope. In “Aik Tarana Punjabi Kisan kay Liay” (An Anthem in Praise of Punjabi Kisan), the poet calls for unity among the agriculturist tribes of Punjab – the Rajputs and the Jats to secure their rights.

3.3 Indictment of Homogenisation of Native Culture under Bourgeois Hegemony

Faiz is extremely critical of materialistic nature of bourgeois culture in which pre-imperial values of collectivity and harmony are displaced by the same system of exchange. The poet is equally critical of much publicised façade of growth, prosperity and enlightenment under capitalism. He castigates bourgeois historians and writers who have established history as a march towards social emancipation, economic prosperity and intellectual freedom. The poet says that the path of history is highly enigmatic because the dominant class has interspersed the centuries-held oppressions with ‘silk’ and ‘gold cloth’ to conceal its materialistic designs. In his famous poem, “Mujh Se Pehli Si Mohabbat Mere Mehboob na Maang” (Do not Ask), the poet gives vent to his feelings of pain and agony over the misery, disease and hunger in the world under the bourgeois myth of glory and progress:

On the dark loom of century
Woven into silk, damask, and gold cloth
Is the oppressive enigma of our lives
Everywhere – in the alleys and bazars –
Human flesh is being sold –
Throbbing between layers of duct – bathed in blood.
(tr. Daud Kamal, 2006, p. 164)

The poet’s diatribe at bourgeois hegemony is contextualised in his native land under bourgeois oppression. Faiz clearly locates oppressive and manipulative role of state apparatuses peculiar to Pakistani political culture and the postcolonial societies at large. In our culture, Civil administration, Police and Revenue department whose constitutional role is to serve the people, act as instruments of oppression in the hands of the regimes to seek complicity of the

people for the hegemonic class. Sub-divisional Revenue Officer, Police Station House Officer and Village Revenue Collector act as metaphors of State repression. “Rabba Sachaya” (Supplication) depicts the wretchedness of the common man in front of the State officials who use force and coercion to gain submission to the will of the ruling elites. The poet says:

Writhing

In our bones
Like trapped animals –
Hunger and humiliation Our daily lot.

(tr. Kamal & Hasan, 2006, p. 180)

One of the central concerns of Faiz in his critique of Capitalism is the hypocritical behaviour of the ruling elites and religious clerics. The hegemonic class uses all means to manipulate power to serve their profit grabbing instincts. To perpetuate their supremacy, the social elites adopt revisionist version of Islam which, in the words of Dr. Hussain, “neither Allama Iqbal nor the Quaid-e-Azam (much less the Holy Prophet) would have approved” (1989, p. 37).

Faiz argues that in the history of class struggle for monopoly over means of production, dogma has supported the forces of oppression and status quo. The religious clerics preached resignation instead of resistance to the will of hegemonic class which is in contravention to the true spirit of faith. In his famous poem “Zalim” (Tyrant), the oppressor rejoices over the death of hope, humanistic values and the voice of resistance. He is sure to have manipulated ideology in his favour in connivance with the obscurantist mullah. He claims that there is no ‘Ibrahim’ to challenge the hegemony of ‘Nimrod’:

I have strangled every aspiration
No more will the rose bend with blossoms.
The spring will wreath in the fire of Nimrod

.....

I owe allegiance to a new creed
(tr. Kamal & Hasan, 2006, p. 154)

The oppressors’ claim of non-existence of ‘Nimrod’ points to the endorsement of religious clerics for his interpretation of dogma. However, this enchantment with the ruling and religious elites is not without hope. In “Mazloom” (Victim), the victim questions the validity of this fate of the suffering humanity. He disagrees with the assumptions of the dominant ideology which endorses uneven distribution of wealth. The victim ridicules bourgeois sponsored interpretation of religious injunctions in which cruelty and injustice perpetrated

by the ruling elites and the tyrants are projected as part of the Divine design. An excerpt from the poem testifies to the contradictions in the dominant morality:

They say that cruelty pleases you
And injustice is not possible without your consent.
If this is true, should I deny you justice?
Should I listen to them or should I believe in you?
(tr. Kamal & Hasan, 2006, p. 156)

These lines evoke similar disenchantment expressed by Allama Iqbal in his “Baal-e-Jibreel” (The Wings of Gabriel) regarding the hypocrisy of the retrogressive clerics:

Why these curtains draped between the creator and his
Creatures Drive out of my church these elders of the church!
I am really displeased with these slabs of precious marble.
Build me another sanctuary of humble clay.
(In Majeed, 2011, p. 166)

Allama Iqbal rejects the priesthood, the worldly and the luxurious ways of life of the ‘obscurantist Mullah’.

3.4 Reassurance of Cultural Resurgence

Poetry of Faiz is not only conspicuous for the romanticisation of native environment and its people but also for the reassurance of its cultural and political resurgence. This mood of reassurance of cultural resurgence in Faiz invokes the literary accounts of Whitman, Neruda, Walcott and Minstrel Gabriel who in the words of D. Handley believe in “the power of poetry to hold back the destruction of the world” (2007, p. 6). Faiz glorifies pre-imperial plural cultural heritage of the subcontinent and equates it with primitive communist society. Elucidating the adverse cultural effects of colonial experience on indigenous values, Faiz argues that between 16th and 19th century, there flourished two distinct cultural patterns of socio-political behaviour: imperial culture and the popular mass culture. The imperial culture promoted social elitism, ethnocentrism, religio-political dogmatism and total alienation from the native land and its culture. Whereas the mass culture promoted social equality, humanistic mysticism, cultural and national integration and total identification with the native soil. Faiz idealises the latter ‘integrationist’ culture which

produced great folk classics, heroic or mystical, in the Pushto of Khushhaal Khattak (1613-1691) and Rahman Baba (?-706), the Sindhi of Shah Latif (1690-1757) and Sachal Sar Mast (1739-1826), the Punjabi of Waris Shah (1722-?) and Bulleh Shah (1688-1728), the wealth of

folklore in song and legend and a great variety of purely localised architecture, and folk crafts.

(in Majeed, 2011, p. 28)

Dialectical in vision, Faiz affirms that subaltern culture will recuperate as a result of struggle and sacrifices of the native people who have always been waging struggle against oppression and exploitation. Faiz's belief in cultural and political resurgence of the captive land and its culture is also inscribed in the Holy Quran in the promise of the Day of Judgment where the innocent (oppressed) will be rewarded and the evil doers will be penalized. Faiz's unflinching faith in the day of reckoning is best expressed in his poem "Hum Dekhain Gay" (We shall See). The poet says:

We shall live to see,
So it is writ
We shall live to see
.....
When the earth will dance
Beneath the feet of the once enslaved;
And heavens'll shake with thunder
Over the heads of tyrants.

(tr. Khalid Hasan, 2006, p. 230)

In his oracular voice, the poet glorifies the affinity between his ideological commitments and the pluralistic spirit of Islam—the religion of his land.

Faiz also acknowledges socially committed writers' struggles and sacrifices for social emancipation. He pays glowing tributes to the socially committed writers who protect and preserve the heroic struggles and sacrifices of the legendary figures in the annals of history and speak truth even to the distaste of the power corridors. It is the genuine writers and artists who keep on resisting the official manipulations and the distortions of historical truths. The poet boasts of this revolutionary role of the writers in his poem "Qita" (Whilst We Breathe). He claims:

While we breathe, still in the street of Rapture robed
Grandee, gowned preacher, crowned king, stand abashed;
Through us God crazed Mansoor, love crazed Majnoo
And tilted cap and gay flowered coat, live on.

(tr. Kiernan, 1971, p. 159)

Faiz's glorification of socially-committed poets reminds me of Pablo Neruda's poem "The Rivers of Song" from *Canto General* in which he eulogises the bardic poetic tradition of his native continent (Latin America).

3.5 Planetaryity in Faiz

Bioregionalism of Faiz is not antithetical to the vision of a planetary culture based on friendship and solidarity with native cultural heritages. He is a poet of peace and progress and is opposed to aggression and exploitation whether it is cultural, political or economic. Faiz believes that peace, progress and planetaryity cannot be materialised in the existence of oppression whether it exists in the form of Palestinians under Israeli occupation, Lebanese under siege or Algerians under France. He glorifies indigenous cultural and political resistance movements against cultural and political imperialism of foreign oppressors. The poet's glorification of resistance movements in marginalised and oppressed lands against oppressors is best reflected in the poem "Falasteeni Shohda Jo Pardais Me Kam Ai" (For the Palestinian Martyrs) in which the poet admires the sacrifices of the Palestinian freedom-fighters who have received martyrdom during resistance against the occupying Israeli forces. In another poem "Aik Naghma Karbala-e-Beirut Kay Liay" (The Massacre of Beirut), Faiz commemorates the beauty of Beirut and the valiant courage of Lebanese against Israeli occupation. He says:

Every single destroyed house, every single ruin
Is more magnificent than the legendary palace of Dara.
Every single fighter is more valiant than Alexander.
Every single girl is more alluring than Lyla.
(tr. Daud Kamal, 2006, p. 160)

Similarly, in "Ajao Mere Africa" (Africa Come Back), Faiz anticipates the rising African resistance movement against French imperialism. He affirms that the Africans have started to shake the shackles of foreign bondage. African drum-beats and the dances symbolize emergence of armed resistance against foreign occupation. The poet says:

Come back for I have lifted my forehead from the dust;
Come back for I have stripped away the bark of sorrow from
My eyes; Come back for I have shaken away my pain.
(tr. Khalid Hassan, 2006, p. 254)

"Come back" is a clarion call to the pre-imperial Africa of drum beats and marshall dances. This clarion call of the poet to the pre-imperial Africa invokes Frantz Fanon's literary account of national culture in *The Wretched of the Earth* in which he advocates the reclamation of past to seek political and cultural liberation from foreign cultural and political invasion.

4. CONCLUSION

The discussion and analysis of the poetry of Faiz establishes that Faiz is a bioregionalist, a cultural bard who sings cultural song in praise of his native environment, its farmer, its folklorists and its culture of collectivity and harmony between man and nature. He rejects imperial discourse in which the Oriental world has been depicted as a historical and cultural void before the arrival of the colonial powers. Faiz dismisses colonialism as a purely materialistic enterprise which distorted and suppressed pre-imperial cultural heritage and promoted social elitism and racial exclusiveness. The poet also rejects homogenization of native cultures under bourgeois dominance and reassures bioregional cultural resurgence across the globe to hold back the destruction of the world in the wake of growing ecological imbalance. In this way, Faiz envisages the possibility of a planetary culture based on respect for subaltern societies; hence, pioneering Spivak and Gilroy's vision of planetary humanism.

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