

TAIMOOR SHAHID

The Politics of Enchantment: Remapping the Precapital in Faiz Ahmad Faiz's Postcolonial Poetry*

I

IN THIS PAPER I examine the work of Faiz Ahmad Faiz (1911–1984)—arguably the most famous Urdu poet of the second half of the twentieth century—and contend that unlike the common interpretation of his poetry as an ultimate work of a postcolonial nature, his work offers several other layers of meaning and is far more complex than a parochial sociopolitical interpretative lens allows us to see. His poetry is deeply rooted in its antecedents of the Persio-Arabic, Indo-Persian, and Urdu literary traditions and emerges out of these varying genealogies which are *precapital/precapitalist* in nature. The stark presence of these traditions in his oeuvre makes him much more than a mere “revolutionary poet,” an archetypal postcolonial mold in which he is often cast. This is common practice in much of the critical discourse on modern (postcapital and postcolonial) South Asian literature which employs methods that reduce the so-called “third-world” literature to a political program, namely, the unfolding of a universal modernity in the world. However, in order to understand Faiz’s work, it is important to break away from these parochial sociological and political labels that have become synonymous with his multivalent poetry, which defies such classifications.

In undertaking a project of this kind one has to be cautious of the methodological pitfalls that await hermeneutical analysis of a highly contested text which exists in the popular and critical imagination by virtue of not merely its wide popularity and high aesthetic value, but also because of its author’s political subjectivity. How then is a person to understand

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the poems of an avowed political activist who had clear ideological inclinations? Can we assume that the author is dead, as Roland Barthes would have us do, and look at the text as an autonomous entity? Or should we try to capture authorial intention by constructing the context of the text and its author?

I believe that in the case of Faiz—who, in addition to being a colonial and postcolonial subject was also a member of the Communist Party associated with Soviet Russia (1930s–1960s), as well as a member of the Progressive Writers' Movement (1930s–1950s) committed to the cause of social change—it is difficult to kill the author, particularly if we are to interpellate his work as postcolonial discourse and posit questions to it about its place in this debate. However, while we need to capture the authorial as well as the textual intention of his work by focusing on its idiomatity and interpreting its tropes, we also need to historicize it in the Gadamerian sense—that is, to understand its unsuspendable historicity, as well as the hermeneutic cycle that generates interpretative discourse around it.

But how exactly are we to historicize Faiz's work? Is it sufficient to restrict his text to its postcolonial subjectivity, as almost all the previous interpretations have done? It is in answer to this question that I will try to go against the grain of mainstream interpretation. In a *truly* Gadamerian gesture of interpretation, I will try to excavate various precapital/precolonial genealogies of his work to liberate him from the provincial historicism of critical discourse based on an uncritical adaptation of European models of postcapital thought and coloniality to the South Asian context. Taking my lead from Foucault and Nietzsche's indispensable philosophical lessons about the importance of examining different historical genealogies, in light of Dipesh Chakrabarty's and others' theoretical intervention in postcolonial theory, and through lessons about new ways of examining non-European modernity (see Foucault 1980; Chakrabarty 2007; and Kaviraj 2005), I will argue that restricting Faiz's work to strictly Western models of postcolonial literary analysis—assertions such as, Faiz is a communist poet¹—generate an inadequate, fragmented, and distorted *truth* about his poetry. It is an act of epistemic violence that not only overlooks a distinct precapital/precolonial way of being that persists in Faiz's work, but also distorts Faiz's unique postcolonial subjectivity that is kneaded in the dough of a particular way

¹There are numerous such works and instances where that label is attached to Faiz. I look at a few later in the paper. Moreover, it should hardly be a surprise that he is called a "communist poet" amongst communist activists; for instance, in a post celebrating Faiz's centennial on the website of the Communist Party of the U.K. See Celebration (n.d.).

of being in South Asia, different from the postcapitality/coloniality, or modernity, of the European world, as I will show. However, by using the parameters of pre- and postcapital I do not imply a developmental teleology, that is, the inevitability of capitalist modernity and our need to read history, time, and texts from its vantage point. In fact, I argue against such a narrative. Therefore, I stick with the term precapital instead of precapitalist (in its adjectival form) to suggest a temporality that is alternate and parallel to the timeline and teleology of capitalism (as suggested by the term precapitalist). “This is another time that, theoretically, could be entirely immeasurable in terms of the units of the godless, spiritless time of what we call ‘history’...” (Chakrabarty 2007, 93). Yet it is not beyond the timeline of capital and maintains with it a two-way relationship of change marked by a tension of difference.² As will become clearer in the paper, I use these parameters mainly in two different but interrelated ways. Firstly, I use them inevitably as markers of a temporal break between the colonial and its eventual surpassing. But more importantly, I employ them to show their inadequacy as universal markers of intellectual and literary inquiry by pointing to conceptual continuities between the pre- and postcapital and colonial, and the presence of alternative and antecedent systems of signs and meaning in a non-European context. There is a pre- and post- with the modern in the way it is understood in the mainstream academy dominated by European epistemology; however, I argue that it is inadequate in non-European contexts.

II

But why is Faiz interpreted in such a way? Or why are the readings of his work restricted to such interpretations only? There are several reasons. The most obvious of them lies in Faiz’s active involvement in politics and consequently the overemphasis on his biography in the interpretative method. Faiz was born in 1911 in a middle-class, literary Muslim family

²As Chakrabarty (2007) argues, “The prefix *pre* in ‘precapital,’ [...] is not a reference to what is simply chronologically prior on an ordinal, homogeneous scale of time. ‘Precapitalist’ speaks of a particular relationship to capital marked by the tension of difference in the horizons of time. The ‘precapitalist,’ on the basis of this argument, can only be imagined as something that exists within the temporal horizon of capital and that at the same time disrupts the continuity of this time by suggesting another time that is not on the same, secular, homogeneous calendar (which is why what is precapital is not chronologically prior to capital, that is to say, one cannot assign it to a point on the same continuous time line)” (93).

near Sialkot, now in Pakistan. He received an education that was typical for his social background—basic instruction in the Qurʾān; Persian, Arabic and Urdu languages; modern, colonial-style schooling, and degrees in Arabic and English literature. It is important to note here that Faiz's Persian and Arabic teacher was Shamsu'l-'Ulamā' Maulvī Syed Mīr Ḥasan, who was also the teacher of Muḥammad Iqbāl (1877–1938), the poet-philosopher of India who wrote in Urdu, Persian, and English and is regarded as the national poet of Pakistan. It is difficult to doubt then that this formative instruction must have cultivated a certain sensibility akin to the classical Persio-Arabic, Indo-Persian, and Urdu poetry in Faiz's literary farmland.

Faiz lived during a time of political strife. He saw both the conditions that led to and the aftermath of India's independence from British rule in 1947, which resulted in the formation of the nation-states of India and Pakistan when Faiz was thirty-six years old. This had a profound effect on his personal and social life, and also on his poetry which was subsequently colored with subjects dealing with the perceptual world of phenomenology and its oppression, rather than merely the putatively imaginative/emotional world of the ghazal, the classical lyric poem in Urdu, dealing primarily with the unrequited love of a cruel beloved, who could either be a fellow human or divine or both.³

For his first vocation Faiz joined the Muslim Anglo-Oriental College at Amritsar as a lecturer in 1935. Here he became acquainted with Communism and was affiliated with a literary circle that emerged as the All-India Progressive Writers' Association (AIPWA) in 1936. He also became a leading voice of the "Progressives" and continued his social and political activism after 1947 as a journalist, labor unionist, and member of the Communist Party of Pakistan. The year 1951 marked a key event in his life, but more importantly a key event in the memory of his readers and inheritors, when he was arrested, along with other political activists, writers, and some military officers, for allegedly planning a Communist coup against the government. Shortly after his four-year prison term he was again in the line of fire with the 1958 imposition of martial law in Pakistan, but this time only for a few months. By the late 1950s he had acquired an international reputation and was particularly famous in socialist circles around the world. He received the Lenin Peace Prize in 1962, and during the last years of his life served as the editor of *Lotus* (1979–1982), the journal of the Afro-Asian

³I am not claiming that the ghazal world, a historico-cultural phenomenon, is somehow beyond the experiential world. I am making this distinction to differentiate between the culturally and historically cultivated aesthetic conventions that formulate the idiom of the ghazal world and the subjective experience of the self in a contemporary world.

Writers Association, from Beirut, where he was in a self-imposed exile from Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq's Pakistan.⁴

It is these political episodes of Faiz's life that become the locus of interpreting his poetry. Faiz the revolutionary takes center stage and his text becomes secondary to his political being. The most recent illustration of this interpretative mode that I have come across is a collection of essays entitled *Maujūda 'Ālamī Iste'mārī Ṣūrat-e Hāl aur Faiz kī Shā'irī* (The Current State of Colonialism in the World and Faiz's Poetry). These essays were presented at a conference organized by the University of Gujarat, Pakistan, in celebration of the 2011 Faiz Centennial in Pakistan. While the title of the book/conference is telling of the framework of analysis, what is astonishing in these essays is a complete lack of any textual analysis of Faiz's poetry. We are told that "it was Faiz's poetry alone that strengthened the connection between Urdu poetry to the Third World" (Rashid 2011, 13),⁵ and that "Faiz's optimism, his positive revolution is the only cure for our helplessness" (*ibid.*, 18). We learn about Faiz's position on the Kashmir issue (its unlikely articulation does not matter for our purposes), and his relationship to colonial agendas and global colonial expansionism, but most of the time these relationships are either unsubstantiated, or are founded in his political activity but never in his texts. His poetry, or rather excerpts from it, is merely reduced to citation as a polemical device in discussions of problems ranging from the recent Iraq War to the unjustified drone attacks in Pakistan. However, there is no analysis of the poetry—its language, its literary tropes and references, its position in the Urdu literary tradition, nor even a justification of its use as a polemical device in these particular contexts—except as an appeal to the afflicted subjectivities of a "third-world" audience eager to change its conditions.

Inqilābī Shā'ir (Revolutionary Poet), a similar but much older work, published in fact within Faiz's lifetime, sets out to trace the reasons that turned him into a "revolutionary and communist poet" (Sandēlvī 1977, 7). It is no surprise that the query leads the author to a biographical study of Faiz, with his life as the center stage of analysis. In *Faiz—Muḥabbat-o-Inqilāb kī Shā'ir* (Faiz—the Poet of Love and Revolution), Razmī (1986) calls Faiz's poetry the protest of the Third World. He suggests that "Faiz kept himself above the ghazal's conflict of rejection and acceptance because, for him, the main and important element of poetry is revolutionary mate-

⁴This biographical sketch is based on Nāṣir (2008); Dryland (1993); Kiernan (1971); and the following two essays from Faiz (1984): "Ahd-e Ṭiflī sē 'Unfuvān-e Shabāb Tak" (From Childhood to Youth) (489–97) and "Faiz az Faiz" (Faiz on Faiz) (307–14).

⁵All translations from the Urdu are by the present writer unless otherwise indicated.

rial that can be molded into every form” (175). In a short collection of English translations of Faiz’s poems, Zakir introduces him as a voice of the subjugated, exploited, and suffering people that “comes to reflect and culture the voice of the emerging nations comprising the Third World” (1995, III). Carlo Coppola also hails him as the “spokesperson for the world’s voiceless and suffering peoples” (1990, 126). In her dissertation on Faiz, Estelle Dryland reads Faiz as a poet of social realism and wishes to “demonstrate the role that poetry can assume [...] as a powerful weapon against the political and economic vicissitudes of daily life, with particular emphasis on authorial concern for the people of the Indian sub-continent, and latterly Pakistan” (1993, XII) and concludes that Faiz “gave a means of expression to those who had hitherto lacked a social voice” (173).

These are works that examine the phenomenon of Faiz in and of itself. However, there are numerous works on the Progressive Writers’ Movement that also talk about Faiz in similar if not more politicizing terms. Perhaps they can be said to do literary sociology more so than literary criticism. Summarizing the Progressive Movement’s position on Faiz in 1947, Mohammed Sadiq writes that the “Progressive Movement rescued him [Faiz] from the luxury of personal emotions, and ranged him on the side of the masses” (73). This generic position has not really changed since. While critics have acknowledged Faiz’s strong affinity to the classical tradition of the Urdu ghazal, most have felt the need to identify the traditional “romance” of his ghazals as either “social romance” (Ḥaq 1997, 192), or “revolutionary romance” (Riyāz 1996, 185). These and other similar critics have argued that Faiz infused new meanings and concepts into the “traditional vocabulary,” “old diction,” and “ancient tropes” of the Urdu ghazal through which he has explained the “problems of his times” (Ajmalī 1996, 92). “His romance rests on the foundation of social realism” (Ḥaq 1997, 192) and by using customary tropes such as *qafas*, *ṣaiyād*, *bulbul*, *gulshan*, *saqī*, *muḥtasib*, etc., “in a particular social and political background, Faiz has changed the nature of these words” (Riyāz 1996, 187).

The primary concern of all the commentaries discussed above is with the authorial intention of the poet and with his use of poetry as a means of political activism—that is, for giving voice to the subjugated and oppressed masses of the “Third World.” This consequently leads to an inquiry of a poem’s “reasons and circumstance of composition” (Nāṣir 2008, 7). While this exercise of looking at the immediate sociopolitical context is useful in reconstructing a part of the whole, it remains a part after all. It is a limiting exercise which dampens the multivalence of poetry and restricts the possibilities of its potential meaning by confining poetry to its immediate political context. Certainly, reading anything into

a poem is not possible, but instead of a restricting historicism we need a rather liberating one that situates the text not just in its immediately temporal sociopolitical context but also in its broader literary, linguistic, aesthetic, and cultural context which exists, in a way, beyond linear time. Such a contextualization allows one to see several moments of time at once in the text, such as in *Alexanderschlacht*, the famous 1529 painting by Albrecht Altdorfer in which more than one historical moment—that is, the Battle of Issus (333 BCE) and the Battle of Pavia (1529 CE)—exist at once, allowing for linear time to collapse and the text to become timeless, to function beyond time in its own autonomous transhistorical cosmos.⁶

Moreover, the exercise of constructing the immediate sociopolitical context for discovering the original “cause” and “context” of writing a poem assumes that there is one single “cause,” “reason,” and, by implication, an *intended* “meaning” of a poem that we can capture. Notwithstanding the theoretical and practical impossibility of completely constructing the immediate context of a text and our own contextual prejudice as an obstruction to capturing that intention, we cannot assume a singular historical, subjective reason behind the composition of a text and need a thorough inquiry into its genealogy. For example, even when Faiz writes poetry about Independence, or writes while he is in jail or in exile, or about another particular historical event, the vocabulary that he employs has meanings predetermined through their particular use in the long literary tradition of Urdu, in particular, and the Islamic East in general. That traditional vocabulary exists in the cultural memory of his audience and, consequently, particular historical meanings and meaning-associations exist and persist in his poetry through the weight of tradition and its memory, even if he *intends* to impregnate them with different meanings, as some have contended.

Also, what the kind of analysis discussed above ignores is that the immediate circumstances of a poem’s composition never remain part of the poem unless concrete historical references to place or time are consciously invoked in the poem, or through some external means in the audience’s memory. Concrete references to space and time are seldom part of Faiz’s poems, except sometimes through inclusion in the title (such as the poem “Dhāk sē Vāpsī Par” (On Returning from Dhaka) or through paratext—date and place of composition—at the end of poems). But how often are those invocations part of an aesthetic consumption? Most often not, and, as such, the poems are historically abstract, or timeless. While immediate context may be one possible lens for looking at Faiz’s poetry,

⁶For more discussion on this see Koselleck (2004).

the parochial nature of such interpretation becomes apparent with a close “contentual” reading of his poems—even when he titles the poem with a space-time reference or includes a paratext, a reading of the poem beyond that paratext, which is what makes the poem timeless and aesthetically universal and valuable, reveals the difficulty with this restrictive interpretation. This is particularly true of a poet like Faiz because his poetry is more often sung, heard, and recited rather than being read silently. The purported *raison d’être* of his poetry is almost never recollected when a poem is given life in an aesthetic environment like singing or public recitation. The poem takes on a life of its own and the so-called “cause” and “context” of its composition dissolves into oblivion. Only its poeticity survives. It is this poeticity of Faiz’s poetry, its autonomy as a literary text and not his social commentary, if any, that makes him a master poet of Urdu. While a contextual analysis might help in studying how politics and social life shape literature and vice-versa, putting sociological labels on poetry is limiting and crippling for literary analysis. As long as the poem remains tied to the poet, it has no literary autonomy, no life of its own. In fact, in order for all its potential meanings to be realized, the author needs to disappear.

The multivocality of Faiz’s poetry should be no surprise given what we know about Urdu poetry’s tradition of *ma‘nī āfirīnī* (meaning-creation), which Shamsur Rahman Faruqi defines as “that manner of speech in which a single utterance contains several kinds of apparent or hidden meanings” (2006, 45) and calls it one of the two foundations of our poetics along with *mazmūn āfirīnī*—theme-creation (*ibid.*). This can perhaps be attributed to the Indianness of Urdu poetry—the imbibing of *dhvani* in *sabk-e hindī* (Indian-style) Persian poetry and through it in Urdu poetry. *Dhvani* (literally “echo”) is the Sanskrit aesthetic device through which “the poet is able to attach new or unexpected meanings to the literal meaning and can construct meaning on two levels, between which there may not be any direct discernible relationship, and what is ‘literal’ may not be so literal after all” (Faruqi 2005, 22), and this aesthetic device is “not to be found in mainline Arabic or Persian literary theory” (*ibid.*). It is manifested in Urdu poetics in *ihām* (ambiguity, inconclusiveness), which Amīr Khusrau claimed to have invented (Alam 2003, 180), and in *kaiḥiyat* (state). Defined as “wordplay generated by the intent to deceive, [*ihām*] characterized the earliest major effort to make poems yield more meaning than they at first glance seemed to possess” (Faruqi 2003, 855) and *kaiḥiyat* (state) is “a state of subtle and delicious enjoyment such as one derives from tragedy or a sad piece of music” (*ibid.*, 856). The fact that Faiz’s apparently lyrical poetry can be used for purposes ranging from socialist movements to protest

against contemporary imperialism is illustrative of the *ihām* and *kaifiyat* of his poems, the polyinterpretability of his work, the range of potential meanings embodied in it. However, by the same virtue, it points to the danger of restricting his poetry to political programs. Politics might be one possible layer, but casting him into the mold of a “third-world” poet constrains his poetry to only one dimension, blinding us from studying and appreciating his aesthetic technique, which creates layers of meanings and possibilities that make him a poet unbound except by his language and technique.

Finally, using popularity among the masses or an articulation of the suppressed voice of the people as a yardstick for studying poetry is perhaps more suited to a sociological study and would require completely different instruments of inquiry than literary criticism permits. In fact, even here we tread on delicate ground for it seems that such a case can perhaps be more convincingly made about poets, both earlier than Faiz, such as Iqbāl, as well as about his contemporaries, such as Ḥabīb Jālib (1928–1993). Nonetheless, that is not, and cannot be, a concern of literary inquiry, for it does not in any way aid the study of Faiz’s poetry on literary terms.

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The interpretative modes summarized above can perhaps be best explained by the subjectivity and ideological “prejudice” of Faiz’s interpreters. A modern historian’s “work is entirely dependent on his subjectivity, creativity, and capacity to re-create,” writes Pierre Nora. “He performs a metabolic function, taking something lifeless and meaningless and investing it with life and meaning” (1996, 13). The reason for this “subjectivity” can be explained by the unsuspendable historicity of the historian’s time and consequentially his understanding since “all understanding inevitably involves some *prejudice*,” (Gadamer 1989, 270, emphasis added) which is the fore-meaning that colors the interpreter’s understanding of his sources, his text. Since this understanding is a precondition for constructing an interpretative narrative, prejudice arising out of the interpreter’s context becomes a condition of his narrative. Moreover, the thrust of the interpretative discourse begets similar discourse and thus the prejudice. However, constructing a genealogy of this particular prejudice would lead us to a theoretical and sociological inquiry which is not our concern here. We shall limit ourselves to examining the nature of that prejudice.

For political activists, their prejudice as revolutionaries often prevents them from seeing anything else in Faiz. When asked about the astounding presence of a lyric poem in Faiz, they are forced to give it an intentionalist

spin by claiming that Faiz's beloved was the revolution, and that he infused the "traditional" tropes of the Urdu ghazal with new political meanings. Similarly, the modern historian and critic is also blinded by the prevalent discourse of postcolonial theory whose epistemological limitations have been highlighted by critics such as Dipesh Chakrabarty among others, which I will elaborate on in the next section.

Another important reason why Faiz's interpretation is restricted to merely a postcolonial consciousness is perhaps this:

Things that change force themselves on our attention far more than those that remain the same. That is a general law of our intellectual life. Hence the perspectives that result from the experience of historical change are always in danger of being exaggerated because they forget what persists unseen.

(Gadamer 1989, xxiv)

Thus by virtue of being the fundamental element of historical change, the postcolonial consciousness in Faiz arrests our attention and the precolonial elements that persist unseen are forgotten. However, it is not just historical amnesia but also a totalizing fog of a certain kind of postcolonial theory rooted in a European episteme that dampens our interpretative lens. It is to this matter that I now turn.

III

Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued in his *Provincializing Europe* that the use of the universal abstracts of Marxism to analyze non-European worlds and texts is insufficient, for these so-called universals have profoundly/parochially European origins that render them inadequate for grasping the complex and different reality of non-European modernity. Though capitalism has caused massive structural transformations all over the world, these transformations are not homogenous, as assumed by the totalizing categories of much of the analysis. Historical reality throughout the planet is constituted of more than the precapital historical conditions that led to the development of capitalism. That historical reality, the diverse life-worlds of the worker "that do not belong to capitals 'life process'" (2007, 50), or the different ways of being-in-the-world, is heterogeneous and causes the historical formation of the non-European parts of the world to emerge in a manner distinct from Europe.

The aforementioned universal abstracts emerged as a direct result of the colonization that placed Europe, or the colonizing world, at the center of an episteme that was imposed as a universal on the colonized world.

Modern social science discourse on political modernity, since it also emerged in the same colonial framework, is caught up in these categories, which in a normative narrative of secular, linear progress, posits all the heterogeneity, the *difference* and *différance* of the non-European world as still arrested in, and hampered by the “premodern” (irrational, superstitious/archaic, bad), and sees a disenchanting, secular⁷ linear time as the only *right* way of being modern (rational/good) in the world. The internalization of a Eurocentric discourse is perhaps most starkly apparent in a recent statement made by Syed Shabbir Husain Shāh, a professor at the University of Gujarat, Pakistan. In his paper “Iste‘māri Jabariyat aur Faiz kā Falsafa-e Rajā’iyat” (Colonial Oppression and Faiz’s Philosophy of Optimism), he laments the effects of “colonial oppression,” which suppressed society’s “potential for civilization” and prevented it from “civilized institution building.”

We passed through the moments of history like a herd. No nation was formed, no country, no economy of our own; neither our own parliament, nor ideologies of our own, nor our own future. *Even our ruling classes do not fit the classical definition of the social sciences.*

(2011, 72, emphasis added)

This postcolonial anxiety of *evolving* in the way prescribed by “classical” (read: Western) social sciences is uncannily naked here. Even for an anti-colonial gesture the author has to rely on a framework that is an unnoticed product of the selfsame “colonial oppression” the professor is lamenting. Another instance of this postcolonial anxiety is found in a translation and interpretation of Iqbāl’s poem “Farmān-e Khudā (Farishtōñ sē)” (God’s Command—to the Angels). In the anthology *Tablet and Pen*, the editor quotes a *sh‘er* from this poem as Iqbāl’s voice of “struggle for freedom against British Imperialism” (Aslan 2011, 120) in a telling misappropriation of a translation by Zeenut Ziad: “The rule of the people is close at hand / Erase all traces of the ancient Raj” (*ibid.*, 157). This poem deals with the timeless affliction of the poor and the subjugated on earth, with no historical references to imperialism of any sort. God commands his angels to remove the discussed plight of his people. However, the unlikely translation makes a completely unwarranted interpretative leap. While *sultānī-e jambūr* (literally, sultanate of the common people/populace) may be idiomatically translated as “rule of the people,” the rendition of *naqsh-e kuban* (literally, vestige/trace of antiquity/ancient, old times) as “traces of

⁷How “secular” that world is, is a matter of contention that has been debated by critics such as Talal Asad (2003).

the ancient Raj” throws light on the misleading temptation to use a post-colonial interpretative framework.⁸

Chakrabarty and others, such as Kaviraj (2005), call for a break away from this episteme that is centered on Europe and its particular history, and advocate for a pluralizing historicism based on a hermeneutics that pays close attention to the diversity of particular life-worlds and different ways of being in the non-European world. It is in the same vein that I wish to demonstrate how the predominant readings of Faiz’s poetry are caught in the same Eurocentric categories and how such readings blind themselves to a *difference* that is present in Faiz as a remnant of a non-European precapital past, and as a new heterotopic⁹ way of postcolonial being. For this purpose I will closely examine a few of Faiz’s famous poems: “Va Yabqā Vajhu Rabbika” (The Face of Your Lord Will Abide Forever), “Bilaik Ā’ōṭ” (Black Out), and “Dḥakā sē Vapsī par” (On Returning from Dhaka), as well as a few others.

Though the title of the first poem is “Va Yabqā Vajhu Rabbika” the effective title in historiography and the popular imagination has become the first line of the poem, “Ham Dēkhēngē” (We Shall Witness), which is also the refrain of the version that is sung. This has happened perhaps merely because of practical reasons, since the original title is in Arabic¹⁰ and hence difficult for Urdu speakers to relate to. However, this amnesia is also telling of the interpretational scheme in which this poem is usually seen. Since our task is to elucidate this lacuna of interpretation, we shall refer to the poem as it is generally called: “We Shall Witness.”

I choose these poems because they are distinctly postcolonial: “We Shall Witness” is an iconic revolution poem dealing with apocalyptic change and is arguably Faiz’s most famous piece—sung numerous times as an anthem at social and political gatherings, and damned to a crudely functionalist Marxist interpretation; “Black Out” was written during the 1965 India-Pakistan War and has been interpreted as purely a meditation on Partition; and “On Returning from Dhaka” was written three years after the horrifying events of Bangladesh’s liberation war. While there are numerous ghazals and other lyric poems in Faiz’s corpus, such as “Pās Rahō” (Be With Me), “Tujhē Pukārā hai Bē-Irāda” (I’ve Called You Unwittingly),

⁸I am thankful to Professor Muhammad Umar Memon for pointing me to this translation.

⁹Akin to Foucault’s idea of heterotopias, I use this term broadly to connote a space with a possibility of duality, contradiction, and a multiplicity of meanings and relationships.

¹⁰It is the first half-clause of the Qur’ānic verse 55:27. I use Abdullah Yusuf Ali’s (1992 ed.) translation for this and subsequent Qur’ānic verses.

“Tanhā’ī” (Solitude), “Raṅg hai Dil kā Mirē” (This is the Color of My Heart), “Kō’ī ‘Āshiq Kisī Maḥbūb sē” (Some Lover to Some Beloved), “Merī Jān Ab Bḥī Apnā Ḥusn Vāpas Phēr Dō Mujḥ kō” (My Love, Give Me Back Your Love/Beauty Still), “Yād” (Remembrance) and “Marg-e Sōz-e Maḥabbat” (The Death of Love’s Pain), among others, which can be placed beside classical Persian and Urdu poetry, and perhaps poetry from the larger Islamic East. I want to show that even Faiz’s iconic “revolutionary” and postcolonial poems have genealogies in the following sources: the Qur’ān; Islamic tradition/Sufi texts; and the classical Indo-Persian literary tradition, all of which also overlap, but none of which can be confined to a secular, disencharmed postcolonial modernity.

IV

AND THE FACE OF YOUR LORD WILL ABIDE / WE SHALL SEE¹¹

1. We shall see
2. Surely, we too shall see
3. The day that has been promised
4. That has been written on the eternal tablet
5. When the heavy mountains of injustice and oppression
6. Will blow away like (fluffed) cotton wool
7. Under the feet of we, the subdued/oppressed
8. This land will thump with a severe shake/rattle
9. And above the heads of those who rule
10. The lighting will strike with a clatter
11. When from the *Ka’ba* of God’s world
12. All the idols will be taken away
13. When we—the pure ones/those who believe, and those who have been barred from the sacred sanctuary/Mecca (*ḥaram*)
14. Will be placed on the high cushion (throne)
15. When all the crowns will be tossed
16. When all the thrones will be brought down
17. Only the name of Allah will remain
18. Who is hidden as well as apparent/present
19. Who is the spectacle as well as the spectator
20. The cry of *ana’l-Ḥaqq* (I am the Truth) will be raised
21. Which is I as well as you
22. And God’s creation will rule
23. Which is I as well as you.

(1982, 431–33)¹²

¹¹I have kept the translation as literal as possible to aid close textual analysis.

Surely, if put in a political context and looked at superficially, this poem seems to do nothing else except incite the dream of a political revolution in a true sense: an overthrow of the rulers leading to the rule of the currently oppressed populace. But given that Faiz was an avowed Marxist, and this poem has been seen as his ultimate Marxist expression, the question we need to ask is: how truly “Marxist” is this poem? Unlike the dream of a disenchanted, godless revolution which the limiting Marxism of some political activists from Pakistan and India perpetrates, the change /revolution that Faiz is painting in this poem is clearly apocalyptic in a religious sense, and is articulated in deeply Qur’ānic, and Islamic (interpretively cultural, like Sufism, as opposed to being canonical) terms. Put in the language of modern social-science discourse, Faiz’s idea of change is acutely enchanted¹³ and religious, not only in that it is apocalyptic, but also in its textual references. He is dwelling in a profoundly enchanted world which does not know about the disenchanted, secular world of modern Europe that serves as the foundational battleground for a strictly worldly Communist revolution. He is vernacularizing Marxism to a non-European religious episteme. He is appropriating it into the literary world such that the religious and the revolutionary become coeval.

Faiz is creating a world where destiny is not in human control. Unlike the European modern world where gods and spirits no longer have agency, the future in Faiz’s world is already written in the “eternal tablet,” of which God himself spoke in the Book (Qur’ān 85:22). This future has also been described to us—we need not worry about how it will be laid out. We just need to keep *faith* that we shall see that promised day. It will be the day when the “earth shall be shaken with a (severe) shake” (*ibid.*,

¹²Though publicly available on the Internet in Faiz’s own recitation, this poem is missing in most editions of *Nuskhahā-e Vafā*, his complete works. Moreover, lines 20–21 are omitted in the editions that do carry this poem. According to Ali Hashmi, Faiz’s grandson, the publisher censored these lines without the consent of Faiz or his family. The complete poem can be found in *Sārē Sukhan Hamārē*, a collection of Faiz’s work published from London in 1982 under Faiz’s supervision. However, this was a special edition with a limited number of published copies and is thus very hard to procure. I am thankful to Ali Hashmi and Faiz Ghar of the Faiz Foundation Trust, Lahore for the exact reference.

¹³I use enchantment in a broad general sense, namely, a sense of belief in the supernatural constitution of the material world of perceptual experience; in the inevitable relation and dependence of this and other worlds (that is, the realms of the real and the unreal, the true and the untrue) on the transcendental as the source of their origin and return; and in the Divine as the Omnipotent and an active agent of change.

56:4) and “the mountains will be like wool, fluffed up” (*ibid.*, 101:5). History will repeat itself, in a *cyclical* fashion, and the past and the future will come together: God will strike the wicked, the unjust with “thunder clap and lightning” as he did to the people of Moses (*ibid.*, 4:153). The false idols will be thrown out of the *Ka’ba*, and the pure People who fled the persecution in Mecca, “the sacred sanctuary” (the *ḥaram*), in the Prophet’s time will be made to “recline on raised couches” (*ibid.*, 18:31; 36:56; 56:34) as promised for them in the heaven. It will be a time of *purity* wherein “abide (forever) the Face of thy Lord, full of Majesty, Bounty and Honor” (*ibid.*, 55:27), and “*only* the name of Allah will remain” whose presence, as the Sufis have articulated in the metaphysical doctrine of *vaḥdat al-vujūd* (Unity of Being) is indubitable despite His apparent absence. Whose truth, as in the words uttered by the Sufi martyr of love Ḥusain Ibn Maṣṣūr al-Ḥallāj, is also our truth—and this establishes our mutual relationship with each other as well as with God. We are tied to each other (and to Him) not as mere humans, but through our inextricable common lineage from Him—we operate, not as independent agents, but as a common force and truth by virtue of being “His creation.”

Surely, all of this may be metaphor for political change—but is it only that? What does the choice (deliberate or subconscious) of these metaphors and images tell us about the discursive world in which Faiz was operating? Limiting the reading of this text to its political specificity, as Fredric Jameson suggests in his notorious essay “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” (1986), and not paying attention to its “language and idiom and respect for their grafting [...] [blinds us to] the inevitable themes of tradition and modernity, collectivity and individualism [...]” (Spivak 2003, 66) that are at play here. In this poem, Faiz resurrects the collective tradition to develop a modern political consciousness that is individual yet collective. Deliberately, or subconsciously, he makes use of the cultural memory of his largely Islamic context. This is the only cultural memory he can use, this is the milieu he was brought up in and it is the literary tradition he is writing in. It is, so to speak, the thrust of his discourse. That is why he can articulate his truth in the words of Ḥallāj, who is an iconic figure in the classical Indo-Persian literary tradition where poets find the “*anā’l-Ḥaqq* manifest in the heart of every atom and every drop of water” (Schimmel 1996, 75). This is perhaps also why, though in this poem there is no prescriptive political system for the kind of modernity this interpellation wants to engender, there is a prescriptive principle, and that principle is certainly premodern/precapital in its nature—namely, the place of man in the world of God. The defining relationship of humanity to the world is not articulated on some secular Marxist principle; it is articu-

lated on the fact that all of us are related to each other by virtue of a common faith, a common begetter—a very Islamic articulation. In this formulation there is no place for the sovereign Cartesian individual who is the bedrock of the Liberal-Western logos and tradition—and which Marxism, as Foucault famously charges (1994), was inevitably complicit in reproducing. Here, there are divine forces that complicate futurity and intent, in fact even authorship in its broadest ontological sense, as partly implied by the collective personal pronoun of the voice. In this way the poem creates for the postcolonial imagination a heterotopic *lieu de mémoire*,¹⁴ an aural, textual, and revisitable site of memory formed with the dough of the postcolonial nation's premodern enchanted past combined with the dream of a Marxist humanist revolution.

It is the archive of precapital/premodern existence that is truly at stake in all parochially postcolonial readings of literary texts. When looked at through a lens of European categories, Faiz is reduced to a “Marxist,” a “Leftist,” a “Progressive,” and so on. All of this is done at the cost of ignoring the textuality of his poetry, the aesthetics of his work, the archival value it carries due to its cosmopolitanism. What is the consequence? Since Faiz is seen as a representative of the postcolonial literary imagination in Urdu, his work is reduced *merely* to a postcolonial imagination struggling with the problems of nationhood and class, trying to mediate the premodern in the modern world. His work is denied not only its historicity, but also its history wholesale. The historical-cultural discourse in which it operates is ignored, and the integrated cultural zone of the Islamic East in which it exists is forgotten. This alternate—not that there is a normative—archive, a horizontally parallel but distinct way of being on the planet, is silenced, and the heterogeneity of the colonized space is rendered a universal homogenous.

BLACK OUT

1. [*Ever*] since the lamps have been without light,
2. [*I keep seeking*]/I am seeking, moving about, in the dust: I do not know where
3. Both my eyes have been lost;
4. You who are familiar with me/[*who know*], give me/[*tell me*] some sign/[*identity*] of myself.
5. It is as if into every vein has descended,

¹⁴I adopt Pierre Nora's category here. He defines *lieux de mémoire* as sites “in which a residual sense of continuity remains” (1996, 1). He describes memory as “a phenomenon of the present” which can be understood as notions that are part of the cultural consciousness of a people.

6. Wave on wave, the murderous river of some poison,
7. Carrying longing for you, memory of you, O my love [lit., life];
8. How to know where, in what wave, my heart is swallowed/ [*rolls, my heart*].
9. Wait one moment, till/[*that*] from some world beyond
10. Lightning comes towards me with [*a*] bright hand
11. And the lost pearls of my eyes,
12. As luminous pearls of new eyes drunk with the cup of darkness,
13. Restores.
14. Wait one moment till somewhere the breadth of the river is found,
15. And, renewed, my heart,
16. Having been washed in poison and annihilated, finds some landing-place
17. Then let me come bringing, by way of offering, new sight and heart,
18. Let me make the praise of beauty, let me write of the theme of love.¹⁵

This poem was written during the first war between the postcolonial nation states of India and Pakistan. It is dated September 1965 and its implication of the war is evident from its title “Black Out.” In a detailed analysis of this poem, Amir Mufti (2004, 263–68) interprets the *vāqif* (the knowing)—which he translates as “the familiar”—to which the narrating self is pleading for “a sign/an identity” for his self, as the postcolonial, semi-other created by the formation of the nation-states of India and Pakistan now pitted against each other. The self in the poem, he argues, is longing for the “familiar” other because it is a part of the divided self, brought into perspective by the war between the two nations—two halves of one self. This separation has caused the tormented self to lose its sight (eyes) which can only be restored with some union through annihilation (*fanā*) of the self into the “familiar” other, the half-self of the “world beyond” which is the pitted-against other nation-state.

Mufti’s reading of the poem in its strict temporal context, which is the context of the war, is one plausible reading. However, I would like to offer a radically different reading of this poem, one which views it not in the strictly temporal context of war, but rather in the larger, broader context of the Islamic poetical tradition, which allows us to see that Faiz’s poetry says more than the paratext allows us to see. Mufti’s reading is facilitated by the translation of *vāqif* as “familiar” in the fourth line. The dictionary *Farḥānḡ-e Aṣafīya* defines *vāqif* as an adjective which means “*ḡharā bone-*

¹⁵This is a literal translation by Amir Mufti (2004, 264) with my suggestions of alternate translation in italics within brackets. I have used his translation as I want to argue for a different reading than Mufti’s, drawing on a slightly different translation, as I will show.

vālā, jannē-vālā, mābir, āgāb, čaukas, hōshiyār, khabardār, muṭalla,” all synonyms for someone who *knows*. Even though *vāqifiyat* and *vāqifkārī* can mean *jān-pehčān* and *shānāsā’ī* (that is, familiarity with a sense of kinship), *vāqif* is defined as one who knows, one who stays at a place (to become acquainted with it), which is its most literal meaning, derived from its Arabic root *vaqafa*: to stand or pause. Similarly, *vāqif* is defined as “informed, acquainted (with); aware (of), privy (to)” in John T. Platts’ *A Dictionary of Urdu, Classical Hindi, and English*, considered the standard Urdu to English dictionary amongst most scholars of Urdu literature. This indicates that “familiar” is not an incorrect translation if understood to connote “knowledge of” something. However, in Mufti’s reading familiarity connotes a sense of kinship and association with another person, rather than of *knowledge* of something or someone. While this sense of the word is sometimes employed, the way in which Faiz has used the term here does not grant its translation as “familiar” in the sense of kinship, for it can only carry that sense of “familiar” or “acquainted” with certainty if it acts as a transitive verb, as is apparent from the “with” appended to “apparent (with)” in Platts’ dictionary. Without a direct object, *vāqif* tends to mean “the knower, the one who is aware.” In Faiz’s sentence “*tum jō vāqif hō*” (you who are informed) there is no object. Moreover, the verb employed in the sentence *batānā*, “to tell” (which Mufti translates idiomatically as “give”) also indicates that the narrator is invoking the *knowledge* of his addressee, rather than the addressee’s *familiarity* with the narrator himself. That is perhaps why Agha Shahid Ali has also translated this as “You who know” (Faiz 1991, 67). If we accept this position, it becomes difficult to uphold Mufti’s interpretation because his argument is based on the “familiarity” of the other. In any case, we can always hold that it is equally, if not more, plausible to read *vāqif* as the knower.

Moreover, if seen in the context of the enchanted and religious cosmos of the previous poem, we can argue quite strongly that the longing here is not merely—if it is at all—for the “familiar” self that has been created as a result of Partition, but is deeper and more fundamental than that. When the narrator longs for the “bright hand” of lightning from “some world beyond,” his beyond is clearly not the horizontal “beyond” of the geographical border—there is a clear allusion to the Qur’ānic story of Moses on Mount Sinai. In addition to receiving commandments from God on Mount Sinai, Moses had brought there his people, who had desired to “see” God. However, they “were dazed with thunder and lightning” (Qur’ān 2:55) as they looked on, as a result of which their “sight,” with which they could see the Truth—of Moses’ Prophethood in this case—was returned, and they repented and submitted to God. Mufti indeed picks up this connection, but reads Faiz in

the modern, postcolonial framework of a disenchanted secular world and argues that “this image is secularized here” with the “beyond” referring not to the heavens but to a neighboring world. While the ambiguity of poetry, its polyinterpretability, the *ma‘nī āfirīnī* of the Urdu poetic tradition that is at the core of its beauty, might allow for this reading, it seems implausible to restrict the poem to this interpretation only. Again, I refer to the poet Agha Shahid Ali’s translation for a counter reading, since he, as one poet translating another, has a different “prejudice” than that of postcolonial literary critics or members of a revolutionary group, despite the fact that he believes that the traditional beloved could figure as revolution in Faiz (1991, [11]). In his figurative and beautiful translation of the lines under discussion (9–13), Agha Shahid Ali emphasizes the religious weight of these lines: “Wait a little: perhaps from some other world / *the hand of a prophet*, carved in lightning, / is bringing me pearls for my lost eyes” (*ibid.*, 67, emphasis added). In this wait for “a prophet” from “some world beyond” one can sense the wait for the Mahdi, who, it is believed in Islamic eschatology, will rid the world of injustice for a certain period before the Day of Judgment—a prominent theme in the Urdu literary tradition. It is a Utopian wait, one could argue, as was the apocalyptic change articulated in “We Shall See,” the first poem we examined. Yet, it is full of hope; while the Mahdi takes until the end of time to arrive, here it happens in “a moment.”

This is clearly a longing for the enchanted, the religious, which is pitted against this world’s darkness produced by the bared, disenchanted reality of postcolonial nation-states. The “praising of beauty and the theme of love” are only possible in an enchanted universe, only with a heart that has been annihilated like a Sufi’s into a universal spirit/consciousness and has been washed of the sins of a “poisoned” world. The darkened night of “Black Out,” a reality (and perhaps a result) of this disenchanted world, forces the poet to question the position of the self in this world. In this murderous world that has colonized and poisoned every vein, the self seeks a new but old sight, a new pair of eyes from which to look at the self in an old way—a new way of being which is rooted in a longing and the “memory of [a previously recognized] life.”

This way of being is based on the way of being that is lost in the totalizing discourse of the normative narrative of linear progress produced by colonization. However, what is really important, and is brought into perspective more starkly in the previous poem, is the fact that it is not a way of being that romanticizes or fetishizes either the past as authentic/native, or the present as inauthentic/foreign. It is in a truly cosmopolitan gesture that the poet accepts the unavoidable reality and the violence of the present world, but finds a way to resist it by combining elements from a

geographically and epistemically unbound human universe. In this way he creates a planetarity “imagined from the precapitalist cultures of the planet” (Spivak 2003, 101), a re-formation of collectivity that is not based on the nation-state, but on a commonality based on Marxian humanism, something that Spivak has urged academics to create (*ibid.*, 71–102).

Such a longing for the enchanted is not unique to this poem either. Faiz’s corpus is strewn with cries that reach out to the world beyond. In a poignant articulation of disillusionment in a late ghazal, “Voh Butōñ nē Dālē haiñ Vasvasē,” he writes:

Such doubts the idols have sown that fear of God has left the hearts
Such dooms have befallen daily that the thought of the Judgment Day is
gone
The breath became a thorn in the throat, the hands that were raised were
bloodied
That pleasure of the enchanted sigh is gone, that grace of the hand that
prays is gone

(1984, 671)

This lament is so generic that it could be about any personal, social, or political situation. However, what is important to note is the enchanted idiom in which this lament is articulated: through the reference to idols as symbols of false piety/belief/thoughts versus a fear of God, through a bemoaning of the loss of active remembrance of Judgment Day as the day of reckoning, and through a lamenting of the loss of hands raised in prayers, a reminder of the Islamic gesture of praying and pleading to God.

In the same volume, from the collection *Mērē Dil Mērē Musāfir* (My Heart, My Traveller), there is a *qavvālī*, “Jala Phir Şabr kā Khirman” (Harvest of Patience Burnt Again), which the paratext notes was written in Beirut 1979. The poet addresses God and, after describing the coming of destruction (again in very generic terms as we will see shortly), pleads to Him in these words:

Where do these guileless slaves of yours go, O God
Every plaintiff masquerades as your messenger
Each idol in the idol-house claims Divinity ...
God protect us from the gods of (different)
doctrines/ideologies/religions
(Such) a caravan of nights’ cries went towards the heaven ...

(*ibid.*, 651)

When “the harvest of patience is burnt again, the smoke of sighs is rising,” when “it is the morning of mourning again, the rivers are filled with tears,” when “the guardians of pen are beheaded” and when “the minds

are being auctioned, and the tongues being put on sale” because of a rise of false claimants of piety and religious/traditional authority, what does the helpless poet do? Unlike a secular modern progressive or communist reaction rejecting the tradition of enchantment, the poet adopts the traditional strategy of the classical poetic tradition he is part of—and that is a rejection of false piety and the embracement of a true one, with recourse to an enchanted universe and, in it, a plea to God.

In the same vein, another ghazal by Faiz opens:

Tyranny will teach one the wont of faithfulness; it doesn't work like that
Idols will show the way of God; it doesn't work like that

(*ibid.*, 673)

Using the long established strategy of the ghazal tradition, Faiz too attributes tyranny, injustice, and oppression to idols—which often stands for the cruel beloved of the ghazal—and faith and faithfulness to God. Perhaps the most iconic illustration of this vertical longing is in his poem titled “D‘uā” (Prayer):

1. Come, let us also lift our hands,
2. We who do not remember the custom of prayer,
3. We who, except for the burning fire of love,
4. Do not remember any idol, any God.
5. Come, let us present a petition that Life, our beloved [*the Creator/Embellisher/Writer/Designer of Life*],
6. Will pour tomorrow's sweetness into today's poison;
7. That for those who have not strength for the burden of the days,
8. May it [*be*] make night and day (weigh) light on their eyelashes;
9. For those whose eyes have not strength for (seeing) the face of dawn,
10. May it [*be*] light some candle in their nights;
11. For those for whose steps there is no assistance of any road,
12. May it [*be*] make some road luminous to their sight;
13. To those whose religion is pursuit of lying and hypocrisy,
14. May there come courage for denial, resolution for truth;
15. To those whose heads are awaiting the sword of oppression,
16. May there come capacity to shake off the murderer's hand.
17. The hidden secret of love is the fevered soul, with which
18. Let us today make a covenant, and let its fever be slaked;
19. The word of Truth, which throbs in the heart like a thorn,
20. Let us today accept, and the anguish be wiped out.

(1971, 277–79)

I have chosen to use Kiernan's literal translation for two reasons. Firstly, despite being literal, it works quite well to capture the sense and meaning

of the poem. Secondly, it is at the same time illustrative of Kiernan's interpretative bias which ironically results in what I think is a mistranslation of the fundamental trope of this poem in an otherwise admirable translation. Kiernan translates *nigār-e hastī* (line 5) as "Life, our beloved." While *nigār* can mean a beautiful woman, a beloved, a beauty and, if taken to mean this here it would mean "the beloved of Life" because of the *izāfat*. However, if we look at the context of the poem and other parallel constructions using *nigār*, it becomes quite clear that here this Persianate construction means "Creator/Embellisher/Writer/Designer of Life."

Nigār is the agentive noun of the Persian verb *nigāridan/nigāshtan* which means to design, map, record, register. *Nigar* is often used as a suffix to make agentive verbs such as *afsāna-nigār* (short-story writer), *nāvil-nigār* (novelist), *savānih-nigār* (biographer), *mazmun-nigār* (essayist) as used in Urdu, and *ṣūrat-nigār* (painter), and *but-nigār* (sculptor), as used in Persian, among other constructions. Though not used as a suffix, the context of the prayer indicates clearly that here *nigār* is serving as an agentive noun of *nigāridan*. This is a collective prayer for the poisonous times of *now* (line 6), for the condition of humankind, and an earnest cry for action in which the poet interpellates everyone, by particularly addressing those who have forgotten to pray (line 1–2). Those who remember are already partaking in the corrective action that involves praying to the *nigār-e hastī*. By lamenting the absence of the Divine (idol and God, line 4) posited against a strong presence of the worldly (suggested by "the burning pain of love" (*maḥabbat*, line 3)) in the collective lives of the times, the poet implicates worldly attachment and the forgetfulness of the Divine as the cause of the human plight. He urges the reader to participate in the collective petition to the *nigār-e hastī* to ease (sweeten) today's pain, and asks them to pray for all—from the burdened to the hopeless, from the directionless to the cheat, and from the dejected one to the oppressed (lines 7–16).

The petition ends here and the poem turns inward. The poet now addresses himself and the people, and urges everyone to make a covenant with the fevered soul and to accept the Truth (lines 17–20). These lines apparently suggest a turning away from the Divine toward the self in the world, but the idiom of this shift is rooted in Islamic mysticism and philosophy. The *love* here has clearly divine overtones; it is the Sufistic *ishq* as opposed to the worldly love invoked as *maḥabbat* in line 3. Its hidden secret is the *soul*, and a covenant is the only way of slaking its fever, while acceptance of *ḥarf-e Haq*—the "word of Truth" which pricks the heart—is the only way of extinguishing its anguish. What is this *ḥarf-e Haq*? *Haq*, meaning the Truth, is one of the ninety-nine Qur'ānic names of God, and

the most fundamental one in Sufi imaginary and Islamic philosophy. *Ḥaq* is the Truth that God has planted in the heart, which is the receptacle of the divine spirit and the natural seat of the Truth, “the seat of learning or religious apprehension and of divine visitations” (*Encyclopaedia* 1978, 486), and thus it is a central conceptual category of Sufi epistemology and psychology. A search for this Truth and its recognition, acceptance and embracement are the most central objectives of Sufi practice, fulfilled through *tazkiya-e nafs*, or purification of the soul. The soul is regarded as “the spiritual reality of all living creatures,” and the human soul specifically is often described as “the potential to actualize the fullness of self-awareness” (*Oxford Dictionary* 2003, 226). Thus, the soul defined here as the “hidden secret” of *‘ishq*, and an entreaty for a covenant with it has a strong resonance of the religious covenant to purify the soul. The burning of the soul in love is reminiscent of a famous line from Book 2 of the *Mašnavī* of Rūmī: “Ignite a fire of/from love (*‘ishq*) in your soul (*ātishī az ‘ishq dar jān bar-farōz*)” (1958, 343, line 1763. And this covenant with the soul, along with the plea to accept the Truth already present in the heart, echoes the Islamic philosophical and mystical understanding of the soul, the heart, and the Truth.

This sense of enchantment produced by reaching out to the Divine through a prayer and by the spiritual purification of the self is compromised in the Marxist historian’s translation of *nigār-e bastī* as “Life, our beloved,” and the worldliness of this trope. This can be seen as another subtle, but telling instance of the anxiety produced by modern interpretative schemes, and the *prejudice* of scholars affiliated with certain ideological groups.

Enchantment, however, is not the only way the tradition persists in Faiz. Let’s look at the ghazal “On Returning from Dhaka”:

1. We have become strangers after so many intimate encounters
 2. After how many meetings will we be close again?
 3. When will we see the spring of unstained green?
 4. After how many monsoons will the bloodstains be washed?
 5. The moments of the end of this pain (called) love were too cruel
 6. Too unkind were the mornings after (such) tender nights
 7. The heart wished, but its dejectedness did not give us a chance
 8. For us to quarrel a little after those intimate chats
 9. Faiz, what we had gone to say to them, ready to offer our life
 10. It remained unsaid, *that (those words)*, after all else had been said
- (1984, 538)

I have kept my translation literal but have attempted to invoke an emotive sense in English similar to that invoked in Urdu. Agha Shahid Ali

has a beautiful idiomatic translation (Faiz 1991, 87), but I use this literal translation to underscore the lyricism of this poem.

There is an important paratext to this poem, but if we forget that for a moment, what dominant *mazmūn* (theme) emerges from this closely connected ghazal? Certainly, it is the classical theme of separation from the beloved, and a longing for reunion. It is highly reminiscent of the famous long ghazal of Mōmin Khān Mōmin (1800–1851) commonly known by its half-line *radīf*: “*tumbaiñ yād hō ke na yād hō*” (you might remember you might not). Let’s look at a few of its *sh‘ers*, which again, I have tried to keep as literal as possible without compromising meaning:

That pact between you and me—you might remember you might not
That same vow of fidelity—you might remember you might not

Once there was passion between us, once you were affectionate to me
Once we were both close (to each other)—you might remember you
might not

The one you counted as close (to you), the one you regarded as loyal (to
you),

I am the same stricken one called Mōmin—you might remember you
might not

(1964, 178–79, ghazal no. 152)

The tone of Mōmin’s ghazal is more varied than Faiz’s, with hints of wistfulness, sarcasm, anger, and regret invoked in the different *sh‘ers*. On the other hand, the emotions invoked in Faiz’s ghazal are largely melancholy, wistfulness, and dejection. Nevertheless, the overarching theme of longing for *āshnā’ī*—familiarity and closeness—with the beloved after a loss of shared intimacy is the same in both. Faiz and Mōmin use the same trope of *āshnā’ī* as the centerpiece around which they weave their theme. While Mōmin reminds the beloved that “Once we were both *āshnā*” and that once “you regarded [me] as an *āshnā*,” Faiz asks, “When will we be *āshnā* again” (line 2)? Moreover, both construct this theme of longing by invoking past moments of intimacy: affectionate encounters, tender nights, secret chats and mutual passion, affection, and closeness. Faiz’s ghazal is also composed in the same classical idiom of Indo-Persian poetry in which Mōmin was writing. It is using the same traditional vocabulary and creating the same traditional theme in a different way.

Mōmin’s ghazal can be considered a prime example of an Urdu love lyric. It has been sung by at least nine master ghazal singers including Begum Akhter, Ghulam Ali, Nayyar Noor, Farida Khanum, and Abida Parveen, and is perhaps one of the most popular Urdu ghazals of all time. Faiz’s ghazal, on the other hand, is primarily read and understood as a

“political” poem because of its paratext: it is titled “On Returning From Dhaka” and is dated 1974, suggesting that it was written about and in the aftermath of the Indo-Pakistani War of 1971. But does the paratext justify our confining the poem to only one domain? As I have tried to illustrate with a brief comparison to Mōmin’s ghazal—read or heard (it has also been sung numerous times) without the paratext, this ghazal can be interpreted completely apolitically. Except for the paratext, the ghazal is historically abstract—there are no space-time references—and Faiz constructs his poem purely by using the traditional language and devices of the ghazal where the stricken lover pines for union with the beloved, for which he is ready to sacrifice his life. Moreover, given the idiom of this poem, even the paratext does not justify confining its reading to a specific space and time. It might sound preposterous to some readers, but it is instructive to consider the possibility of reading this as a pure love poem which the poet composed about an actual encounter in 1974 with a personal beloved in Dhaka. I suggest this only to emphasize that we should not be bogged down by the confining historicism of reading Faiz’s poetry in a strict sociopolitical context, but, rather, we should read his, and in fact all Urdu poetry, on its own terms. We need to be conscious of the poem’s textuality so we can allow its semiotic multiplicity to flower, which produces blossoms—albeit of a particular Urdu-esque nature—in the garden of Bacchus, Eros, and Ares, among others, at the same time.

“On Returning from Dhaka” is not an exception either; there are several poems in Faiz’s oeuvre whose paratext, or other context of composition, ties them to particular historical events, and yet they speak beyond that authorial context. Two such famous poems are (1) “Ham Jō Tārik Rāhōñ Mēñ Mārē Ga’ē” (We Who Were Executed in Dark Alleys) which Faiz wrote in 1954 after reading the letters of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, the American couple who were executed in 1953 on charges of espionage for the Soviet Union; and (2) “Lā’ō Tō Qatlnāma Mērā” (So Bring Me the Order for My Execution), a ghazal in the classical idiom written on Zulfiqat Ali Bhutto’s execution and composed in the meter and rhyme of, titled after, and inclusive of, as *maqtaʿ*, a *shʿer* attributed by different people to either Vājid ‘Alī Shāh Akhtar (d. 1887), Mirzā Dāgh (d. 1905), or Amīr Mīnā’ī (d. 1900) (Nāṣir 2008, 114). Both of these poems are devoid of space-time references in their text and their classical idiom—the use of the traditional images of *dār* (gallows), *lab* and *zulf* (lips and tresses), *qindīl* (cresset), *hijr* (separation), *shauq* (passion), *ishq* (love/passion), *rind* (profligate/drunkard), *mai* (wine), *maikada* (tavern/winehouse), *tēgh-e sitamgar* (the oppressor’s sword), *labū* (blood), and *qātil* (murderer), among others—produces a semiotic multiplicity which allows for interpretations much

beyond their immediate context of composition.

Commenting on this semiotic multiplicity, most of the scholarship briefly reviewed above has emphasized strongly that Faiz merged the lyrical and the political, implying that he was the first one to do so. However, a very brief look at the tradition of classical Persian and Urdu poetry suggests that the lyrical and the political were hardly ever separated in the tradition, and that this is a false binary to employ here. This binary collapses perhaps most prominently in the writings of Rūmī who has historically been quoted in varying social and political contexts. And Rūmī is just one such classical master. The sociopolitical upheavals of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries found their expression in the works of Ḥāfiẓ Shīrāzī (d. 1389). And poets such as ‘Urfī (1554–1590/2) and Naẓīrī (ca. 1560–1612/14), among others, composed ghazal verses that went beyond the concerns of unrequited love for a coquettish beloved.¹⁶

Therefore, when Faiz urges his audience to speak the truth and break the shackles (1984, 81), he is also not unprecedented. The Mughal Persian poet Fayzī (1547–1595) similarly urged his audience in the following words:

Come, destroy the glitter of the bazaar, push the thorn into the gardener's
eye.
The arrogance of those who wear their cap askew [i.e., the beloveds] has
exceeded all limits;
be bold and twist the ends of their turban,
go past the Ka‘ba, sipping the goblet,
pull down walls and door in drunkenness

(Qtd. in Alam 2003, 172)

He was perhaps urging his fellow poets to break away from the past, to stop imitating their predecessors and create new themes in poetry, as Alam explains it. But the idiom of the poem, which is very similar to that of Faiz, does not give us any clues—just like Faiz’s poetry—about its intended or “real” meaning, which, as I have argued, is difficult and almost useless to

¹⁶For a detailed discussion see Alam (2011) where he examines *Mir‘at al-Asrār* of Shaikh ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Čishtī (d. 1683) of Awadh, a major Shaikh of the Šābirī branch of the Čishtī Order. Shaikh ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Čishtī uses classical Persian poetry as an articulation of a competing formulation of religiosity implicated in the social and political formation of Mughal India, from which the social and political nature of classical lyrics from Rūmī, Ḥāfiẓ, and others becomes evident. See Alam (2003) for a brief discussion of Mughal Persian poets’ regular narration of the sufferings of others and their expression of the susceptibilities of the vanquished. Also see Dabashi (2012) for a broad general discussion of “Persian literary humanism.”

gauge. When Faiz famously shifts his attention to “sorrows other than love in this world” (1984, 149) in his famous poem “Mujh sē Pehli sī Maḥabbat Mērē Maḥbūb na Māṅg” (Don’t Ask Me for That Love Again, My Beloved), his voice echoes the humanly concerns of the Indo-Persian literary tradition.

Another Persian poet, albeit an earlier one, whose name comes to mind here is ‘Ubaid Zākānī (d. 1371), best known for his narrative poem *Mush-o-Gorbeh* (Mouse and Cat) which is a classical, early example of political satire. Of course, this confluence of the so-called lyrical and the political was not limited to Persian poetry alone and its examples are also to be found in Urdu, the heir of this tradition in India. One such early figure is Ja‘far Zaṭallī of the seventeenth century. Comparing him to John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester (1647–1680), Faruqi terms him a serious commentator on the life and politics of his time who had “an astonishing grasp of a variety of poetic techniques” (2001, 124). Such a poet closest to Faiz in terms of time would, of course, be none other than Muḥammad Iqbal.

*

Faiz’s poetic technique, particularly the traditional idiom and devices embodied in his poetry, should be seen as a conscious aesthetic choice. This becomes starkly clear by looking briefly at some of the poetry of his fellow members of the Progressive Writers’ Association, several of whom, if not all, try to reject this tradition in search of an alternate idiom that will aid a total revolution. Look at this early poem by ‘Alī Sardār Ja‘farī (1913–2000) for example:

Revolt is my religion, revolt is my deity
 Revolt is my Prophet, revolt is my God
 Revolt from Chingizi custom, from Tartar civilization
 Revolt from oppression and tyranny, from capitalism
 Revolt from Saraswati, from Lakshmi, from Bhim and Arjun
 Revolt from the culture of gods and goddesses
 Revolt from bonds of superstition, from the imprisonment of nation
 Revolt from Providence that mills Man
 Revolt is the abode of the God of liberty
 Revolt is the song of the sons of today

(Qtd. in Yāvar 1997, 204)

Again, I have stuck to a literal translation of this poem for, surprisingly, there is almost no loss of meaning, aesthetic texture, or emotion as conveyed in the original. This is quite telling of the poem’s (un)Urdu-ness. Its idiom is almost entirely independent of the aesthetic sensibility of the language and it relies only on its rhyming scheme without achieving

much from it besides versification—so much so that perhaps we can even say that it is just a versification of slogans; there’s no poetry in it. In any case, this poem stands in stark contrast to any of Faiz’s poems that are termed “political.” Such a call for revolt is never heard in Faiz, nor is such a vehement rejection of tradition ever seen. Despite his Communist and Progressive associations, Faiz never uses such vocabulary—the term *sarmāya-dārī* (capitalism), for example, never sneaks into Faiz’s poetry. Similar to its antecedents in classical Indo-Persian poetry, there’s a criticism of false piety in his poetry, but there is never a rejection of the religious tradition. Revolution never takes the place of God, and the poet always maintains a constructive relationship with the Divine.

Ja‘farī was not the only one composing such poetry while Faiz was writing. We see glimpses of this exasperation with the religious tradition in other poets as well. Kaifi ‘Azmi is a prominent example. In an elegy for a writer, entitled “Dūsra Tūfān” (Second Storm), he describes the dead as: “A warrior writer / who for Life / always fought Providence / who for Man / always seized God by the neck” (1974, 51). Another iconic rejection of tradition is his poem “Pīr-e Tasma-pā.” The Old Man of the Sea, known literally as the old man with stringed feet in Urdu, is the fantastical character from the tales of Sinbad the Sailor and was said to trick travelers into transporting him on their shoulders. However, once on their shoulders, the Old Man would tie his legs around the traveler’s neck and beat them into carrying him wherever he wanted until they died. Because of this quality, he has become a symbol of someone who clings on and is hard to get rid of. This is how ‘Azmi reappropriates his image in the poem: “Someone sitting on my shoulder / Recites the Bible, the Qur’ān, and the Vedas / Bees buzz in my ears / My ears are wounded / How do I hear my voice?” (*ibid.*, 68). Then he invokes a myth from the Mahabharata (Sanjay’s ability to tele-watch the Battle of Kurukshetra), and one from the Qur’ān (the Prophet’s ascension into the heavens), and laments their respective positing as antecedents to the modern invention of television and modern Man’s journey to the moon as ignorance and stupidity (*jabālat*). He ends the poem: “This and other such words of ignorance / Are said on my shoulders / My shoulders are drooping / My stature is shortening day and night / Lest my head become one with my feet” (*ibid.*, 69). Positing men’s seizing of God’s neck as heroism, comparing the (meaningless) recitation of Holy Scriptures to the droning of bees, and calling their myths—or their popular reception—“ignorance,” reveals a hostile attitude toward the tradition of enchantment and the adoption of a new idiom that is absent in Faiz’s work.

These examples show that a new idiom for writing about the tradition,

or an alternative to the convention, was not unavailable to Faiz. Rather, he seems to have made a conscious choice about his conservatism. His adoption of a traditional idiom and a conventional attitude toward his inherited tradition has a sense of purpose in it. Why Faiz chose to stick to the conventions is a complex and large theoretical question. The answer could lie in Faiz's formative intellectual training, in his desire for innovative execution within the confines of the tradition, in the temptation to exploit the tradition for its deep cultural associations and memory, and/or in the thrust of the poetic discourse, among other things. Such an inquiry is beyond the scope of this present exercise; however, the important place of tradition in Faiz's poetry, his conventional treatment of it, and consequently its significance in any interpretative exercise should now be evident.

V

In any text of an aesthetic nature there is an inevitability of the ethical that conflicts with the inevitability of the aesthetic. How does the artist mediate between the two? It is perhaps the artist's prerogative, and hence a difficult question to answer in general. However, we can be sure that the artist is always mediating between the two compulsions to find his preferred balance between them. But what is important for us here is to understand the genealogies and antecedents of his aesthetic and the ethical, both of which are elements of the artist's critical thought. And all critical thought carries prejudice, for it remains tied to the place, in however tenuous a way. Faiz's poetry, in the same way, is tied to the "locale" through what may be called its medieval/premodern/precapital¹⁷ enchanted genealogies that we examined above.

However, this raises the question whether the premodern way of being continues in the modern world? I contend that it does. The medieval, the ancient, and the precapital, as we saw in Faiz's poems, is never completely lost, but lingers in the modern as the *prejudice* of the place. This relationship to place is constructed and maintained through the presence of traditional signs and references which acquire meanings through the cultural memory of the tradition's place in local history. These layered, accumulated meanings of the text truly binds it to the past and the place and shows its rootedness in the *locale*. Nevertheless, the local premodern does

¹⁷Though the use of the categories of medieval and modern is itself mired in problems and confusion, for the purpose of distinction I use medieval as precapital and precolonial, and modern as postcapital and postcolonial. See Kaviraj (2005) and Ali (2012).

not remain what it was in the past. It is modernized. It interacts with the modern in such a way that “the universal concepts of political modernity encounter pre-existing concepts, categories, institutions, and practices through which they get translated and configured differently” (Chakrabarty 2007, xii). That is why the local genealogies of Faiz’s aesthetic and the ethical, the historical thrust of his discourse, produce a modernity that is medieval and enchanted at the same time. Faiz localizes Marxism, and incorporates it into a rich local library. His Marxism, postcoloniality and modernity take a different idiom and shape than Eurocentric Marxist and postcolonial historicism allows us to see. He fuses two horizons to produce a polyphonicity that allows the medieval and modern to coexist.

This polyphonicity, though, is lost when such texts are translated into the Eurocentric academic discipline of history which invokes as a code “a natural, homogeneous, secular, calendrical time without which the story of human evolution/civilization—a single human history, that is—cannot be told” (*ibid.*, 74). However, the presence of the religious, the prophetic, and the divine produces a reality that cannot be reduced to the universal abstracts of homogeneous, secular time. Disenchantment is not the only way of being modern, just, and “progressive,” contrary to what the dominant discourse of postcolonial modernity would like us to believe. And even if one insists on calling this premodern, it should not matter, for we should not expect the Western experience of modernity to have unfolded the same way in South Asia.

[...] modernity across Asia may have shown simultaneity [with the West] without symmetry [with it]. But should this asymmetry turn out to reveal continuity and not rupture [with the past], no need to lament the fact. There is no shame in premodernity.

(Pollock 2007, 383)

Indeed this shame-less-ness is palpable throughout *Nuskhahā-e Vafā*, Faiz’s collected works. Nevertheless, it is no site of social archeology. Its close examination vis-à-vis Faiz’s life evidently shows that there is no direct relationship between the experiential sphere of the poet’s life and the imaginative world of poetry that he inhabits. The latter works as a self-sufficient autonomous sphere, albeit not unconnected to the phenomenological world. However, the relationship is not that of a direct parallelism, and affects the imaginative world of the poet in complex ways that are rendered flat in parochially historicist readings of his poetry. The historical abstractness of his poetry calls for a sensitivity to its semiotic multiplicity and begets a reading that does not seek to reconstruct and understand a relationship between his poetry, its immediate political context, and the

poet's historical experience in terms of semiotic conformity.

The task, however, is not to depoliticize the text. It is twofold. Firstly, it is to emphasize that the politics cannot be understood through some sociological marker/category that forces a direct representational reference—to war, revolution, etc.—but is precisely in the multiplicity of meaning, the layered texture of the text and form itself. As I try to show in my counter readings, any politics itself necessarily has to come out of the use of literary device as poetic effect. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly for literary criticism, the task is to recover the meaning-engendering autonomy of the poetic world, which gets lost in the haze of a sociological excavation of aesthetic texts. One way of doing this is to do what I have done: that is, an against-the-grain, almost corrective contentual analysis of the text, placing it in the larger historical tradition of Indo-Persian, Persio-Arabic, and Urdu poetry with little use of literary analytic categories such as *ma'ni āfirīnī* for analysis. Yet another essential way of asserting the autonomy of the literary sphere is a method of inquiry employing these local literary analytic categories. A close examination of the literary devices Faiz uses to construct his poetry, an employment of the analytic categories of *dhvani*, *kaiḥiyat*, *ravānī*, *mazmūn āfirīnī*, etc., to study his rhyme, meter, words, vocabulary, and meaning is essential for understanding his poetry and evaluating his poetic abilities on literary terms. We are fortunate that we need to look no further for a precedent than Faruqi's analysis of Iqbāl, where he reads Iqbāl's poems as fiction, and "the poet as the maker of fiction" (2005, 12) without any concern for the "truth" of his poetry (*ibid.* 15). □

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