

## Pakistani literature: Faiz on Iqbal

Thursday 22 April 2010, by [SULEHRIA Farooq](#) (Date first published: 21 April 2010).

Few students of Pakistani literature know that Faiz Ahmed Faiz translated Allama Iqbal's *Payam-e-Mashriq* into Urdu. An equally little-known fact is Iqbal's presence at the founding conference of the Progressive Writers Association. While Iqbal, being the national poet of a confessional state, has been "Islamised" beyond recognition, a section of the left has written Iqbal off as reactionary. However, many progressives, notably Ali Sardar Jafri, glorified Iqbal as a neo-progressive.

But Faiz finds these evaluations "far from satisfactory." He criticises writers who put a "great deal of stress on the religious element in Iqbal's work without clarifying that Iqbal's concept of religion was in many ways opposed to the concept of the orthodox Muslim theologian."

On the other hand, Faiz disagrees with progressive commentators who make much of Iqbal's admiration for Marx and Lenin. These progressives, Faiz thinks, "ignore that Iqbal's approach to social and economic problems was idealistic and abstract, and the scientific basis of Marxist materialism did not enter into his concept of socialism." For Faiz, Iqbal was neither a reactionary ("The mullah or the orthodox religious preacher is the subject of some of the bitterest satirical verse written by Iqbal"), nor a socialist ("He frequently confused the materialist and capitalist points of view").

Instead of colouring Iqbal red or green, Faiz has tried to contextualise Iqbal's message. Placing Iqbal among "poets of affirmation" like Dante, Milton and Goethe, Faiz described Iqbal as a product of his period whose "work reflected all the inner intellectual contradictions, all the conflicting impulses, all the confused dreams and aspirations of the middle strata of Indo-Pakistani Muslims." "It is precisely because of this," says Faiz, "that his work is popular among progressives and reactionaries alike."

Despite the fact that Iqbal benefited from Western philosophies, according to Faiz, he devoutly believed that it was only the authority of Islam that could truly validate the message he carried. However, to drive home his message, Iqbal, as a first step, "sought to cleanse the House of God of all false idols, of scribes and Pharisees, the obscurantist mullah, the withdrawn mystic, the charlatan and the demagogue." Faiz finds in Iqbal a believer in the process of never-ending cosmic creation signified by constant change. To quote a line by Iqbal:

*"Sabaat aik taghayyur ko hai zamanay main."*

*("Only change has permanence in this world.")*

Iqbal applies this change, Faiz claims, "as much to the subjective and the ideological as to social and material factors" and "the principal agent in this creative process is the human Ego, or Personality or Self—Khudi, as Iqbal calls it." To meet the challenge of creation, Khudi has to be fortified by "perceptual knowledge of the physical world and intuitive passion (or love, 'Ishq' in Iqbal's terminology)."

Only Iqbal's Perfect Man (*Mard-e-Kamil*) is capable of meeting this challenge. However, Faiz finds the Perfect Man different from Nietzsche's Superman, as this Perfect Man does not develop in isolation but "in the context of the totality of social relationships." Hence, unlike the Superman, the

Perfect Man negates "all forms of nationalist chauvinism, imperialist domination, racial discrimination, social exploitation and personal aggrandisement, since all of them make for the debasement and perversion of human personality." For Faiz, "Iqbal is a humanist not only in the formal but in the literal sense of the word."

Unlike many critics, Faiz attaches great importance to Iqbal's style too. After all, it is Iqbal's "vibrant and impassioned verse and the persuasive appeal it carried which accounts for much of his influence." But before analysing Iqbal's style, Faiz warns: "First of all I might clarify that Iqbal himself was deadly opposed to art for art's sake and, therefore, we cannot study his art or his style or his technique or his other poetic qualities in isolation from his theme."

Faiz believes that Iqbal's thought, and hence his style, went through a four-phase evolution influenced by the political milieu in the Indian Subcontinent. In his younger days, Iqbal's themes are either descriptive and colourful delineations of natural phenomena or "subjective experiences typical of adolescent years, experiences of nostalgia and romantic melancholy." Iqbal is "obviously under the influence of Bedil, Naziri and Ghalib." The style is "a bit florid, a bit diffuse, a bit undefined."

In the early twentieth century, "as the first wave of nationalist anti-imperialist sentiment, after the great uprising of 1857, arose in undivided India and saw the birth of various political organisations," Iqbal's verse enters the second phase as Iqbal "transferred his attention from personal subjective observations and experiences to the collective sentiments and experiences of his country - his nationalist, patriotic phase." Now his style becomes monolithic. "It becomes almost uniform, having no ups and downs, practically keeping the same pace and same level." This is second progression.

In the period before and immediately after the First World War, when the subcontinent was convulsed by a series of widespread anti-imperialist movement, the "Indian Muslim, while fully participating in these movements shoulder-to-shoulder with non-Muslims, had some additional emotional and political motivations which were distinctly their own, and which found expression in what came to be known as the Khilafat Movement." This struggle took a Pan-Islamic character. Hence, notes Faiz, "Iqbal's poetry, correctly reflecting the emotional and political impulses of his people, also turned from Indian patriotic to Pan-Islamic anti-imperialist themes, which is the third important phase of his poetic evolution."

The same period also witnessed the abolition of the Khilafat and the birth of Soviet Russia as first socialist state. "For Iqbal these were the years of deep study and meditation, resulting in the fourth and last phase of his work, the most mature and most valuable, the phase of his philosophical humanism." This final theme is Man and Universe. As Iqbal goes Pan-Islamic, one witnesses the third progression in his work and style, "the progression which integrates disjointed phenomena, disjointed experiences into a single whole, through a process which is both intellectual and emotional." And the fourth progression, as Iqbal goes universal, is "transition in emotional climate" when *Ishq* (passion) replaces *Mohabbat* (love as a sentiment).

This is no coincidence. After all, the entire universe is man's domain and "each stage of evolution is merely a step to the next stage." Hence, Faiz observes, "the dynamics of this evolutionary struggle are provided firstly by what Iqbal calls 'Ishq,' or passion, in the sense of dedication to a humanist ideal, and, secondly, by what he calls "amal", or action, as opposed to the more passive contemplation or meditation advocated by mystics and idealist philosophers."

Faiz admits that "Iqbal's approach to these themes was abstract and philosophical, which frequently gave use to contradictory expositions by his followers and admirers." However, he points out, Iqbal's poetry "contributed a great deal to the rise of the progressive movement in the Urdu language, firstly because its high and purposeful seriousness demolished many decadent notions regarding the

function of poetry as trivial entertainment, like the notion of art for art's sake, and, secondly, because the core of his humanist thought held up admiration for the great human ideals of freedom, justice, progress and social equality.”

**Farooq Sulehria**

---