

Twin Poets who Lived Apart: Nazim Hikmet and Faiz Ahmed

By Qaisar Abbas

It looks like a classic Bollywood movie of long-lost twins who were similar but lived apart from each other. Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Nazim Hikmet belong to the same tribe of the twentieth –century poets who excelled in romanticism with a touch of ideological rendering in their poetic discourse. It is not only this juxtaposition of romanticism with an ideological commitment of their poetry but amazing similarities in their life-long experiences that bring them close intellectually while they lived in different parts of the world altogether.

Nazim Hikmet, a Turkish playwright, poet and novelists, is also known as a romantic revolutionary of his time who is famous for his lyrical and musical poetry deeply intertwined with love for his homeland, romantic devotion mixed with revolutionary idealization.

A poet of higher level of intellect who loved his people and culture, Nazim ironically spent most of his life either in jail or in exile and when he died he was better known in Europe than in his homeland Turkey.

Like Fiaz, Nazim also came from an influential family but he opposed class differences and economic disparities in his society. Nazim Hikmet was born in 1902 in Greece which was part of the Ottoman Empire at the time. His father was a government official in the Turkish foreign service in Greece. He started publishing poetry when he was 17.

He was raised in Istanbul but left the city after World War I to live in Moscow. He returned to Turkey after independence in 1924 and soon he was arrested for working for a left leaning journal but somehow he escaped to Russia again.

He came back to Turkey in 1928 after a general amnesty was announced where he published eight books of poetry working as a journalist, proofreader and translator. He was arrested again. It was his uncompromising struggle against the ruling elite that compelled him to escape dramatically from Turkey taking refuge

in the Soviet Union, never to come back again this time as he died in Moscow in 1963.

Most of his poetic work has been translated in English in six anthologies and biographies of known Turkish intellectuals “Portraits of People from My Land” published in 1936.

Reflection of his internal agonies of life, unconditional love for his people and homeland, opposition to tyrants of his society, and a selfless commitment to romance are the major themes of Nazim Hikmet’s poetry. His poem “After Release from Prison” poignantly looks at his life divided between prison, exile and his homeland:

*Awake.
Where are you?
At home.*

*Still unaccustomed-
awake or sleeping-
to being in your own home.
This is just one more of the stupefactions
of spending thirteen years in a prison.*

*Who's lying at your side?
Not loneliness, but your wife,
in the peaceful sleep of an angel.
Pregnancy looks good on a woman.
What time is it?
Eight.*

*That means you're safe until evening.
Because it's the practice of police
Never to raid homes in broad daylight.*

(Translation: Randy Blasing and Mutlu Konuk).

Romanticism is the soul of poetic reveries for both Nazim Hikmet and Faiz Ahmed Faiz where the reader can feel astounding similarities in the depth of their poetic imagery and their mastery over the lexicon and the metaphor they used.

Nazim in his poem “I think of You” fantasizes companionship of his beloved who, he thinks, is somewhere around him. But then he wakes up from the dream and realizes it was just his wishful thinking as there still exists a glass of distance between him and the beloved:

*I kneel down and look at your hands
I want to touch your hands
but I can't
you are behind a glass
sweetheart
I am a bewildered spectator of the drama
that I am playing in my twilight.*

(Translation: Anonymous).

Faiz was born in the undivided India near Sialkot in Punjab where his father came back from Afghanistan after serving the Afghan government as High Commissioner to the United Kingdom.

With master's degrees in English and Arabic he started teaching for colleges. His multifaceted personality and talent took him to a variety of professional responsibilities ranging from a professor of English to Editor of English and Urdu newspapers and journals to Prime Minister's Advisor on Education. He published nine poetry books and numerous articles and books in Urdu and English.

His poem “Dasht-e Tanhai” or “Desert of Solitude” depicts the same kind of emotional intensity, loyalty and high level of imagery that is also a hallmark of Nazim's poetry:

*Through the desert of my solitude
The waning vision of your lips
In the waste of my solitude.*

And beneath the dust and ashes of separation

blossom the jasmines and roses of your touch.

(Translation: Anonymous).

Both, in these two poems, feel the torment of separation from their beloveds and create an imaginary space to unite with them using an analogous poetic imagery and ecstasy.

Nazim and Faiz both struggled against tyrannies of their time and the ruling elite of their societies. Both joined armed forces of their country and then got out to be part of the ongoing political struggle for freedom in their societies. Nazim worked for Mustapha Kamal Pasha's freedom movement and left it. Faiz, on the other hand, joined the British Army to fight against fascist regimes of Mussolini and Hitler and left the institution to go to his homeland to witness freedom from the colonial power. Earlier, he played a pivotal role in the Progressive Writers' Movement in India which became a paramount intellectual force for freedom fighters.

Nazim went to Moscow to study economics and sociology and came back to his homeland to be imprisoned for his revolutionary thoughts. His poem "A Sad State of Freedom" recognizes the immense agonies of his life where freedom becomes a fallacy, only to be imprisoned again:

*You love your country
as the nearest, most precious thing to you.
But one day, for example,
they may endorse it over to America,
and you, too, with your great freedom--
you have the freedom to become an air-base.*

*You may proclaim that one must live
not as a tool, a number or a link
but as a human being--
then at once they handcuff your wrists.
You are free to be arrested, imprisoned
and even hanged.*

*There's neither an iron, wooden
nor a tulle curtain
in your life;*

*there's no need to choose freedom:
you are free.
But this kind of freedom
is a sad affair under the stars.*

(Translation: Taner Baybars).

Faiz witnessed the freedom movement and finally saw the end of colonialism in India but he became extremely disenchanted with his rulers after independence. Nazim also became disillusioned with the insensitivities of rulers to their masses after achieving freedom from imperialism.

In the poem, “You Tell Us What to Do” Faiz looks distastefully at the newly acquired freedom after national independence:

*When we saw the wounds of our country
appear on our skins,
we believed each word of the healers.*

*Besides, we remembered so many cures
it seemed at any moment
all troubles would end, each wound heal completely.*

*That didn't happen: our ailments
were so many, so deep with in us
that all diagnoses proved false, each remedy useless.*

*Now do whatever, follow each clue,
accuse whomever, as much as you will,
our bodies are still open.*

*Now tell us what we should do,
you tell us how to heal these wounds.* (Translation: Agha Shahid Ali).

Nazim was imprisoned several times in his country but his arrest in 1940 became a worldwide outcry by the known intellectuals of his time like Pablo Picasso and Jean Paul Sartre. Nazim's poem “Since I have been in Jail” narrates his ordeal and distrust toward the system:

*They whose number is as great
as ants on earth
fish in the water
birds in the sky
are fearful and brave
ignorant and learned
and they are children.
And they who destroy and create
It is only their adventure in these songs
And for the rest,
for example, my lying there for ten years,
It's nothing.*

(Translation: Anonymous).

In a new country, Pakistan, which came into being in 1947, Faiz was arrested and imprisoned for four years just after independence in 1950 for his alleged coup attempt against the government.

He was arrested again during the first Martial Law in 1958. He opted to leave the country, however, when the second dictatorial regime of Genral Ziaul Haq came to power. He lived in Beirut where he edited the Afro Asian quarterly journal, Lotus, from 1978 to 1983. When he returned back to his homeland, he died there in 1984.

Amazingly, Faiz also felt the same kind of distrust toward his rulers in one of his poems he wrote in the prison. Looking out of the prison window at night the poet appears to be thrilled with the moonlight coming down the staircase of stars conveying the message of tranquility. He continues:

*Bluish shadows coming down
to reach green bends of my heart.
Creating waves of agony each time
I remember my lover.*

*The life looks so lovely at this moment.
And those tyrants pouring poison into life
might command darkness
to march to the alleys where lovers meet
but tell me
can they snuff the moon?*

(Translation: Qaisar Abbas).

The World Council of Peace gave Nazim Hikmet the International Peace Prize along with Pablo Picasso, Pablo Neruda and other renowned intellectuals. Faiz was the first Asian poet to receive the Lenin Peace Prize, awarded by the Soviet Union in 1963. He was also nominated for the Noble Peace Prize before his death.

A product of the era when Soviet Union emerged as an unchallenged champion of socialist and progressive ideologies, both poets had an unprecedented and romantic commitment to this philosophy. In this sense they had amazing similarities in their life and work. These similarities can be seen not only in their struggle against colonialism but resistance to their own governments after independence. Their poetry, therefore, became a chronicle of this dual resistance.

Despite their similarities of thought and life experiences, however, both selected different structural formats for their poetic discourse. While Faiz continued and popularized a traditional format within the structural limitations of Ghazal, Nazim gave away the syllabic-meter style for free-a verse structure. But he never lost touch with lyrical and rhythmic traditions of Turkish poetry giving a unique musical grandeur to his poetry.

Comparison: Life and Work of Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Nazim Hikmet

Faiz Ahmed Faiz	Nazim Hikmet
Born in 1911 in undivided India in an influential family	Born in 1902 in Greece as part of the Turkish Empire, in an influential family
Died in 1984 in Pakistan at the age of 73	Died in 1963 in Soviet Union at the age of 61

Father was an Afghan ambassador to U.K.	Father was a Turkish diplomat in Greece
Joined the British army but resigned later	Joined the army of Mustapha Kamal Pasha but resigned later
Studied Arabic and English in Lahore	Studied Economics and Sociology in Moscow
Wrote 9 poetry collections and other books which were translated in several languages	Wrote 8 poetry collections and other books which were also translated in several languages
Used traditional syllabic-metric structure in poetry	Used a modern, free verse structure in poetry
Favorite poetic themes include romance, resistance, freedom, human rights, poverty, homeland and incarceration	Favorite poetic themes include romance, resistance, freedom, human rights, poverty, homeland and incarceration
Worked on multiple positions including journalist, professor, advisor to prime minister, government administrator	Worked on multiple positions as proofreader, translator, writer and teacher
Imprisoned in 1951 and 1958 and self-exiled to England and Beirut	Imprisoned in 1924 and 1928 and self-exiled to Moscow 3 times
Received Lenin Peace Prize from the Soviet Union and several international awards	Received International Peace Prize from the World Council of Peace and several international awards

When Faiz was entering into the realm of poetry, Nazim was already an established poet at par with other world-renowned writers and poets. By the time Faiz became a known Urdu poet of the Subcontinent, Nazim was touching the mirage of his popularity in the socialist hall of fame.

When Nazim died, the poetic and intellectual atmosphere in the Subcontinent was ready for a Nazim Hikmet of its own.

Faiz filled this void perfectly with his charm, poetic finesse and intellectual maturity. He used traditional heritage of Urdu poetry to create literary marvels suitable for his time while adjusting to the modern pathways of English poetry.

Faiz admired Nazim Hikmet as a stalwart poet and a charismatic role model of his time. He paid glowing tributes to him by rendering Nazim's poem "A Letter from Prison" into Urdu, which was also his own life story:

My love, let me share

This most delicate matter with you:

A man is altered by a new home.

Here I've begun to fall in love with my dreams:

for at night when sleep,

with her warm, compassionate hands, opens the gate,

the prison walls collapse at my feet.

At that moment I 'm drowned in my dreams

the way a ray falls into still waters.

I walk out and roam free,

filled with relentless joy-

how freely I roam

In wide, lit up spaces

where no word is found for sorrow and pain,

no word for prison.

"Then how crushing it will be

for you to wake up?"

No, that isn't to-my love!

Let me tell you one more thing:

*with sheer strength, with stubborn will,
I bestow only those dreams on my sleep
that it has already claimed,
the ones that are its necessary share.*

(Translation: Agha Shahid Ali)

The twin poets still remain the twentieth century icons of romantic and revolutionary poetry who continued their political struggles through unmatched poetic discourse and exemplary ideological commitment throughout their life.

Such was the resemblance of twin poets who lived apart from each other, in a different world but singing a similar song against atrocities and inequalities of their time.

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