
BOOK REVIEWS

Zaheer Ali. (2020). *Romancing with Revolution: Life and Works of Faiz Ahmed Faiz*. Aakar Books. Hardbound, pages 334, ISBN: 978-93-5002-629-8 Rs. 1295

Reviewed by T.C. Ghai

Romancing with Revolution: Life and Works of Faiz Ahmed Faiz is a biography of the revolutionary poet by Zaheer Ali. It has been published at a time when India has been witnessing large-scale protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC) (though halted by the Covid-19 pandemic). It becomes relevant in the context of the spontaneous eruption of the popularity of his *nazm* (song) *Hum dekhenge* (We shall witness...) famously sung, in defiance, by the Pakistani singer Iqbal Bano during the regime of Pakistani military dictator Zia-ul-Haq in 1986. With this song, Faiz became a household name. Faiz was a very popular and greatly admired poet, at least among Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi-speaking people in India. Though one can't ignore a few recent contrary voices that called this song anti-Indian or anti-Hindu. This book has to be read with *The Authorized Biography* written by Faiz's grandson, Ali Madeeh Hashmi, which emphasizes that Faiz is only a Pakistani poet but, of course, in the tradition of Ghalib and Iqbal. Faiz does not seem acceptable to everyone in India. However, Faiz remains a subcontinental poet for most Urdu and Hindi-speaking Indians like Ghalib and Iqbal and many other Urdu poets.

The title of the book under review very appropriately describes the substance of Faiz's poetry. Like all other people, poets have almost always found it difficult to resolve or reconcile the conflict between romantic love and an equally powerful call for revolutionary action for equality and social justice. However, Faiz did not remain a mere romantic revolutionary. He was down-to-earth, committed to his revolutionary beliefs and willing to suffer and work ceaselessly for what he believed in. Faiz never became a revolutionary in the manner of his contemporary revolutionaries like Bhagat Singh, Khudi Ram Bose, or Ashfaqulla Khan

and many others. But he actively participated in several trade unions and workers' movements without being a member of any violent revolutionary group. He chose to express his revolutionary message as a journalist and, more particularly, through his poetry.

The book provides us with a glimpse of many facets, often conflicting and contradictory, of Faiz's life and personality—as gentle and soft-spoken yet firm in his revolutionary commitment, family man and activist, poet, literary critic, journalist, democrat yet supporter of Stalinist Soviet Union, nationalist but broad-minded enough to subsume his nationalism under an equitable and egalitarian internationalism, a supporter of the Palestinian cause. The book, however, is silent on certain important issues. For example, why did Faiz choose Iqbal and Jinnah's exclusive Pakistan over Gandhi's inclusive India as many Muslim leaders and poets, like Maulana Azad, Ali Sardar Jafri and Kaifi Azmi, Sahir Ludhianvi and Faiz's close friend, Sajjad Zahir to name a few, had done? Maybe, like many Muslim Marxists of his times, and like Jinnah, he regarded Gandhi as a Hindu right reactionary and Nehru and other Congressmen not trustworthy enough to ensure an equitable share to Muslims in the governance of free India. One very plausible explanation in the case of Faiz is that he found his home on the other side of the border, and he naturally stayed where he belonged and believed he could carry on his yet incomplete revolutionary mission from there. The author of this book says that 'Regrettably, Faiz, like many comrades did not resist the Partition of India and did not take a stand against the division of the country.

Did Faiz believe in the two-nation theory? The question begs an answer but is difficult to answer. Faiz, it seems, never expressed his position openly. His poem *subh-e azadi* (Freedom's Daybreak) on the achievement of independence expresses his disappointment, *yeh daag daag ujala*, (This Blood-stained Daylight), for paying an incalculable price in the eruption of visceral hatred and cruelty resulting in unimagined bloodshed, migrations, rapes, abductions and massacres. And, of course, revolutionary freedom from British slavery was incomplete without a Marxist revolution. However, he was mistaken in hoping that 'the two divided halves could each develop an internal harmony that the undivided whole lacked.' That hope remains unfulfilled even today, although during the Bangladesh war, he was accused in his own country of being pro-Indian. The issue of India's partition is so knotted that it is

not surprising that the author of this book, like most of us, has no clear answer, and silence or vagueness is perhaps the only answer.

Apart from this, the book is a rich mine of information on Faiz, his background, his life, his activism, wrongful imprisonment and trial, his poetry, his literary and political activities and the world he lived in. Zaheer Ali refers to Faiz's friends, even though he has no access to the testimonies of close family members of Faiz. He highlights Faiz's very moving tribute to Gandhi (*Long Live Gandhiji*) as a "true servant of humanity and a champion of the downtrodden" and his passionate preaching for "justice and fair play to Indian Muslims" and recitations of his poetry in the presence of Nehru.

Another very interesting feature of the book is the chapter on the spectacular rise of Faiz's father from his village's cattle herder to a highly educated and successful person, Chief Secretary and a confidant of the King of Afghanistan and later a very successful lawyer.

Zaheer Ali has provided at the end, apart from many quotations from Faiz's poetry punctuating his narrative, many of Faiz's poems in Urdu, along with their Devanagari transcription and English translation. The English translations read more like paraphrase but are undoubtedly helpful for non-Urdu and non-Hindi knowing readers.

Faiz's poetry, whether revolutionary or not, is drenched in romance. In Urdu poetry, the ghazal is primarily an expression of unrequited love and lamentation, unfulfilment, and passionate longing for union with the beloved expressed with a refinement, variety and subtlety of feeling difficult to find elsewhere. At the centre of this theme is the ever-illusive beloved. In Faiz's poetry, both in his *ghazals* and *nazms* (songs), love for this illusive beloved is replaced by love for his country and the longing for union is transposed for a longing for a revolution equally illusive and distant. Often it is difficult to distinguish between the beloved and the country. As in this couplet: '*nahi nighah mein manzil to justju hi sahi/ nahi visaal mayssar to arzoo hi sahi*' (if destination is not in sight, let there be quest/if union is no longer possible, let there be longing).

Finally, one might say that the revolution envisioned by Faiz materialized, neither in Pakistan nor in India. The attempt to find a unified Muslim state divided the Muslims into three very different political and socio-economic entities. And the schizophrenic partitioning of the subcontinent has continued to breed and augment bitterness that shows no sign of

abatement. And no one really knows why the Partition that failed to resolve the Hindu-Muslim love and hate relationship, the major fault line in the subcontinent's history, took place and now how to negotiate this division for the mutual benefit of three constituents of the subcontinent, especially when many other fault lines have become visible during the last seventy years or so.

The book could have been more vigorously copy-edited. But it is very readable.

T.C. Ghai retired as an Associate Professor of English from Ramanujan College (formerly Deshbandhu Evening College), University of Delhi. He has written fiction and poetry in English. He has translated Punjabi revolutionary and Dalit poets and short stories of Hindi writer Premchand into English.

tcghai@gmail.com

Chawla, Gitanjali & Mittal, Sangeeta (Eds.). (2021). Indian Popular Fiction: Redefining the Canon. Aakar Books, Hardbound, Pages 278, ISBN 978-93-5002-690-8, Rs. 895

Reviewed by Indrani Das Gupta

Indian Popular Fiction: Redefining the Canon (2021) edited by Gitanjali Chawla and Sangeeta Mittal, along with the twin volume of *Indian Popular Fiction: New Genres, Novel Spaces* (2021) edited by Prem Kumari Srivastava and Mona Sinha, both published by Aakar Books and soon to be republished by Routledge, UK (forthcoming 2022), foregrounds the richness of Indian popular fiction represented in various literary and cultural undertakings.

The main argument of the edited volume *Indian Popular Fiction: Redefining the Canon* (2021) by Chawla and Mittal is underpinned by two frameworks: what denominates the 'popular' and the forms and trajectories of popular as defined in Indian contexts. The second framework subverts the valuation of 'popular fiction as marking a "travesty of taste" (Kala, p. 9). Popular fiction, relegated to the literary margins in academic circles, has often been understood as blurring the complexity of thematic