

Nagori, *Assembly Line*, oil on board, 2003

# Sharing a Metaphor with

Faiz Ahmed Faiz, the distinguished Urdu poet whose work is read worldwide in many languages, in his extensive texts on culture articulated a distinct vision for art and literature in the country. He looked at collective cultural experience as a cohesive force that could play a positive role in uniting diverse communities into a nation. In the editorials of *The Times of Pakistan* from as early as 1948 is narrated the untold political history of Pakistan with the promise of a free society fading as the state dragged its feet in dismantling the colonial authoritarian apparatus. With the ideals of Jinnah that attracted people to Pakistan under attack by political expediency, the citizens' confidence in the young democracy was seriously challenged.

When Faiz used both his pen and activism to defend the rights of the people, he was repeatedly sent to prison and exiled for his resistance. From behind bars and in solitary confinement he wrote some of his most poignant verses in which emerges the metaphor of the beloved through which he addresses his people and his country. His poetry was banned by dictators for decades, but it continued to be recited in public gatherings and six decades later, its relevance has made it a timeless anthem of resistance.

Faiz's poetry and his texts address issues of an emerging nation and its internal conflicts. Human dispossession runs like a common thread throughout his work, while poetry is an emotive response to tyranny. His essays offer a direction to the struggle with practical strategies.

Faiz explains, "*Whatever his (writer's) social status his intellect and his education will automatically place him in the ranks of the elite minority. His emotional sympathies and ideological convictions however may demand his identification with the majority, the underprivileged masses. He will therefore, be called upon to make a choice of his audience, to write for his own class or transcend the class barriers. Conversely his literary tradition may be attuned to the idiom norms and conventions again of another class and another period not his own, the ruling class of the colonial or feudal period. He will thus be called upon to satisfy the demands of both the continuities of his past and of the realities of his present. And in all cases he will be expected to combine the integrity of his experience and his people's consciousness. He has to rely solely on the passion of his commitment, the depth of his vision and the reach of his creative talent.*"<sup>1</sup>

While the Progressive Writers Association and Lahore Artists Group (which was inspired by the Progressive Artists of Mumbai), were devoted to liberal values and an egalitarian social order, the writers, of which Faiz was one, found it easier to develop an

expression in Urdu to fulfilling their mandate. The Lahore Artists Group that adopted Modernism because it was compatible with their search for a new canon, however, got drawn into the formal concerns of the new idiom. This distanced their work from the aspirations of the people and made its iconography inaccessible to the people, even though some of the artists were ideologically committed to social and human rights.

Faiz regarded art highly: '*Art, unlike culture is not the raw material, or social life, which exists independently of individuals, but a deliberate and superior manufacture created by a body of specialists.*'<sup>2</sup>

In this essay I would like to investigate the points of convergence between Faizism (the philosophy found in the poetry and writings of Faiz) and the

Visual Arts of Pakistan through the opus of three artists, Sadequain (1930 - 1987), A. R. Nagori (1939 - 2011) and Imran Qureshi (born 1972), artists of three generations that have shared the aspirations for a nation free of violence and exploitation but settled for being a part of the struggle, heeding Faiz's clarion call *chalay chalo abi wo manzil nahin ayee...* (keep going for you have not reached the destination).

Sadequain painted distorted and mutilated figures to communicate his disillusionment with repressive social and political environment in much the same way

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as Faiz used his verse. He too re-interpreted classical icons and crafted new ones in his paintings, the emaciated man usually a portrait of himself with bleeding fingers holding pen and brushes, sometimes enmeshed in cobwebs in what Faiz once called Sadequain's 'loveless and macabre world'. The works reinforced Sadequain's claim: 'I am a painter of the dustbin, the gutter', for he preferred to stand with the *mazloom* (disenfranchised). Sarmad, the dissident beheaded by the orthodox Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb reincarnated in Sadequain's work as the headless figure twisting in agony as he held up his bleeding head; this was his eulogy to Sarmad's courage to speak the truth. The synthesis of the cactus and figure that was uniquely Sadequain's creation, morphed into an emblem of survival and hardship. Throughout his oeuvre, the human torment is revisited with intensity and empathy and is often portrayed as personal anguish in a society that was becoming increasingly intolerant. This was to become a metaphor for widespread political and social repression that Faiz cites in his poem 'Yeh Dagh Dagh Ujala', an ode to the dawn of hope.

While Sadequain, unlike Faiz, never faced incarceration, he suffered from destitution and social alienation after his migration to Pakistan. This created a bond with the disinherited majority that became both his protagonist and the audience of his many public murals. In his public art he celebrated the masses as the builders of the modern industrialized society and inheritors of our civilization. Throughout his non-linear career with stylistic dexterity the painter foregrounded the concern for the proletariat. Sadequain's mural, *The Saga Of Labor* in the Turbine Hall at the Mangla Dam (1967), one of the largest in the world, is dedicated to his permanent audience which are men who toiled to generate power and their counterparts at work throughout Pakistan, to

Sadequain, *Sar Ba Kaf*, pen and ink, 1966

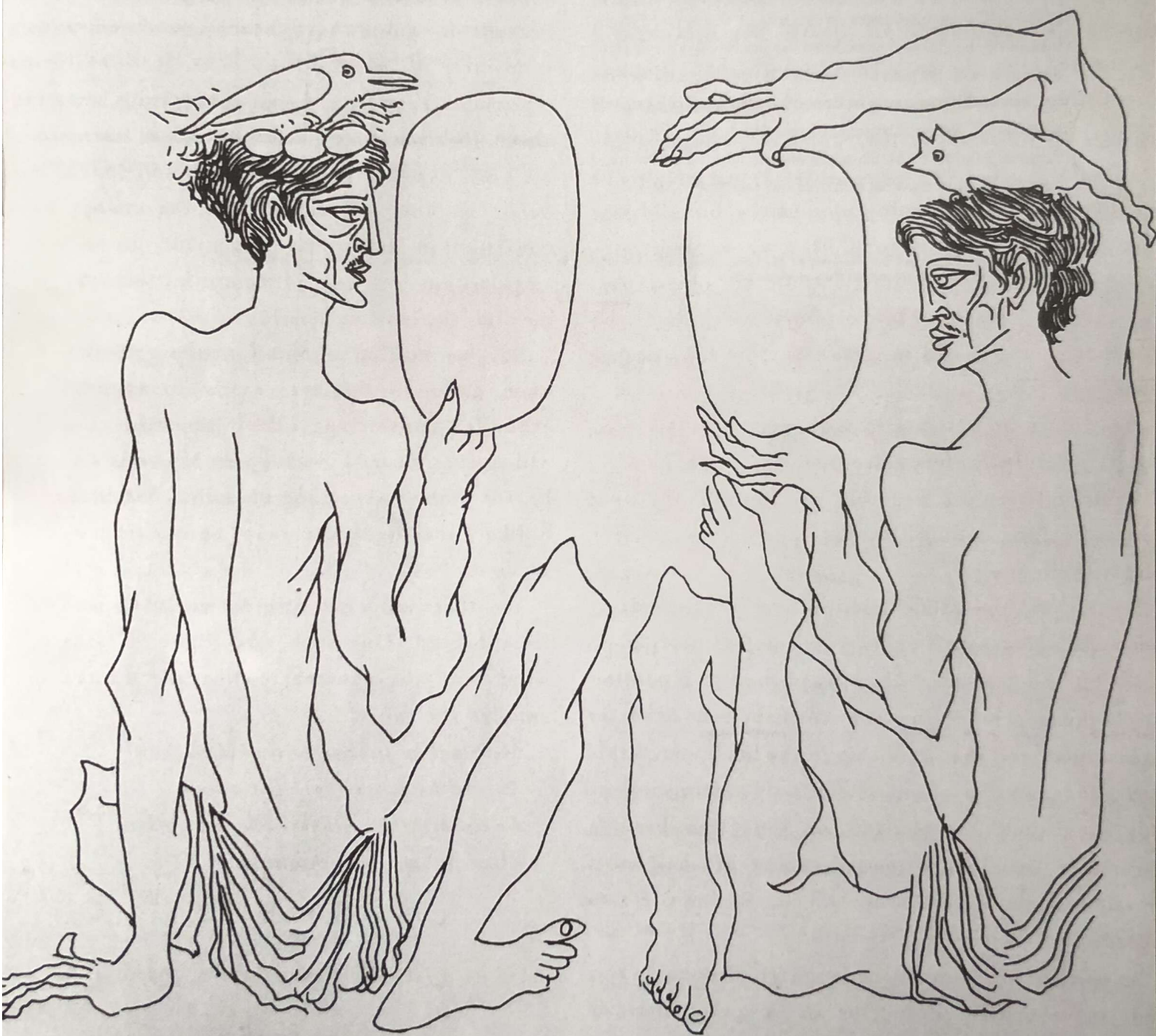


whom Faiz dedicated his poem *Ihtesaab*. It starts by sharing their plight in the verse '*Zard patton ka ban jo mera des hai, dard ki anjuman jo mera des hai*' (a land of pain and sadness).

Nagori's visual political commentary shares the defiant spirit that resonates in the poetry and editorials of Faiz, as the artist and the poet both contest human right abuses during authoritarian rule. His poems like *Aaj Bazar Mein Pa Ba Jolan Chalo* a narrative of the public humiliation of the dissidents by the law enforcers is a theme Nagori responded to in his paintings when Ziaul Haq used brute force in Sindh after the arrest of Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto in the late 1970s. The work communicates repression both through scenes of pitched battles between the army and the resistance in the jungle

and with iconic symbols. To illustrate the new political hierarchy, Nagori, in his brash style, painted a human tower with the army dictator on top and a crushed citizen in tattered clothes at the bottom with politicians and others in between. Nagori's series on the primer for school children incorporates new words of repression that become the legacy of dictatorship and people's resistance to it. This body of work also refers to the new text books introduced during the Zia era to push an agenda of fanaticism. After the restoration of democracy, Nagori, in the 1990s, turned his lens to deprivations of the people and the wretched of Sindh that live unchanged lives of abject poverty. These forgotten outcasts that live on the periphery of development like the Bheel Tribe of the Thar Desert take on the form of a woman with the head of a bird with its beak looking up expectantly for rain. The corrupt and self-serving politicians were targeted in his last exhibition as predatory wolves and owls (owl in South Asia symbolizes stupidity), and crowding trees were depicted against the lush landscape and grand monuments of the national capital. To speak out for values like egalitarianism and human rights in an environment of fear created by dictatorship despite personal hardship was the courage of conviction shared by Faiz and Nagori, for the artist too faced threats, a ban on his works

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Rauschenberg, *Untitled*, pen and ink, 1970

and setbacks in his job at the university, but at no point did it silence his protest, almost as if he was inspired by Faiz's verse:

Speak, this brief hour is long enough  
 Before the death of body and tongue:  
 Speak, 'cause the truth is not dead yet,  
 Speak, speak, whatever you must speak.

(Translated by Azfar Hussain)

The dominant thread in Faiz's poetry is a yearning for social justice articulated in the metaphor of a lover's yearning for his beloved. The country takes on the role of the beloved in the format of the classical ghazal and the poet weaves in the pain of separation with the pain of injustice. The loneliness and separation become emblematic of lost dreams. Imran Qureshi, one of the pioneers of Neo-Miniature, a movement linked to Mughal and Regional Schools of Miniature Painting in South Asia, by investing new meaning in classical elements has contributed to the

transformation of the idiom. His visual commentary on 21st Century concerns like conflict, the crisis of identity and politics of extremism is constructed from familiar aesthetics with a subversive edge that contests its received meaning. This device mimics the way the romantic ghazal has been used by Faiz as a tool of protest. A similar marriage of the miniature format and techniques with social engagement connects Imran's oeuvre to issues of the people around him.

The witty twist the painter gives to a dictator's favorite dictum 'Enlightened Moderation' by turning it into Moderate Enlightenment in his series by the same title, eludes to the limited efficacy of such slogans. The artist illustrates this through the portraits of young men and women who try to balance the correctness of their Islamic dress code with their desire for the latest in fashion accessories. Outfitted with a beard, skullcaps and a pristine white *shalwar kameez*, meticulously worn above the

Imran Qureshi, *Blessings Upon the Land of My Love*, site-specific installation, emulsion and acrylic on brick, dimensions variable, 2011  
 Commissioned by Sharjah Art Foundation, Photo by Alfredo Rubio



ankle, sport the latest branded footwear and bags fashionably slung across the chest. The same is true of girls in concealing *bijab* (veil) that draw attention to the elaborate embellishment on the garment. These humorous contradictions in the works poke fun at trappings that replace substance in political slogans, that demagogues have a penchant for imposing on a hapless nation. His comment on the arms race at a time when the nation was experiencing euphoria on the introduction of new missiles in its arsenal in the early 2000s, works like *Kagaz Kay Sanam*, *Law of Motion*, *Beginning of an End* with their somber palette, overpowering the fresh foliage, are a grim reminder of the politics of confrontation. Imran's site specific work at the Sharjah Biennale 2011 is reminiscent of a courtyard full of red stains and splashes bizarrely similar to an actual site of carnage. The only indication that this is an artistic intervention is his signature floral motifs resembling a chrysanthemum that the artist knits together like a magnified fungus. The work combines Pakistan's recent history of assassinations, bomb blasts and drone attacks and the wars in the region that have taken a heavy toll on life as well as the recent

audience, only accessible to a small minority. Faiz was fully aware of this, the 'epistemological violence' of colonialism and recommended strategies for "*Vertical integration which means providing a common ideological and national basis for a multiplicity of national cultural patterns and horizontal integration, which means educating and elevating the entire body of their people to the same cultural and intellectual level. This means that the qualitative political change from colonialism to independence must be followed by a similar qualitative change in the social structure left behind by colonialism.*"<sup>3</sup> According to him this was possible by "*salvaging from the debris of their shattered national cultures these elements which are basic to national identity which can be adjusted and adapted to the needs of a more advanced social structure, which help to strengthen and promote progressive social values and attitudes.*"<sup>4</sup> Faiz contributed to the cultural infrastructure by setting up the Arts Council as early as 1959 in Lahore and two decades later, he got a chance to set up The Pakistan National Council of the Arts and the Lok Virsa (museum and archive of rural craft and culture). In his paper on Problems of Cultural Planning in Asia, Faiz was prophetic when he warned against the politicization of art and culture by allowing an organic synthesis of regional



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uprising in the Middle East that have added a fresh chapter of bloodbath. Blood or *laboo* is a recurring theme in Faiz's poetry that has been used as a symbol of pain, defiance, patriotism and exploitation. His poem *Laboo Ka Suragh* written as a lament of the cover-up of political murders is particularly relevant today when the killers remain faceless and unpunished leaving behind a trail of pain and helplessness adding to a nation's angst.

Faiz reminds us that art modifies reality by articulating the sentiments of the people that they cannot do themselves. While artists still have the desire to speak for the people, they seem to have lost the discursive connection for the theoretical framework and the language in which they communicate about art to the

cultures into national patterns facilitated by an environment of tolerance and excellence to empower the artist to contribute towards a strong cultural identity for Pakistan. ■

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