

## “Mohaserah” of Ahmad Faraz as an Exemplum of Resistance Poetry

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### Abstract

The present paper is an introduction of Ahmad Faraz in English and a critical study of his great poem “Mohaserah” (Siege). “Mohaserah” is one of the master pieces of Faraz which requires a wide range of hermeneutics. After Ghalib, Iqbal, and Faiz, he is known as the most influential poet in Urdu humanities. His famous collection is hugely celebrated as “The Bible of Love”. “Mohaserah” is an exemplum of rebel literature which glorifies the integrity of lambent pen. Ahmad Faraz calls himself a sinning poet of righteousness in the bad times and considers poetry a source of creation. Faraz in the poem exposes the classical medieval imagination. “Mohaserah” censures the attack on the freedom of speech, human right and integrity. Glorifying the poet’s pen, the poem ends on a very optimistic note.

**Keywords:** Rebel Literature, Resistance, Memento Mori, Lambent Pen, Exemplum of Resistance.

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mai.n ki sahraa-e-mohabbat kaa musaafir thaa Faraz

ek jho.nkaa tha ki Khushbuu ke safar par niklaa

(I was a traveler of the desert of love, Faraz

Was a wave, headed onto the journey of fragrance)

([Trans: me], *Kulliyat-e-Ahmad Faraz* 659:6)

ham ko us shahr me.n ta.amiir kaa saudaai hai jahaa.n

log me.amaar ko chun dete hai.n diivaar ke saath

(In that city, we have the business of welfare— where

People insert the Architect into the building wall)

([Trans: me], *Kulliyat-e-Ahmad Faraz* 237:7)

“Mohasera” of Ahmad Faraz does not belong to the literature of consent but rebel. It is a master piece of collective resisting response in the modern Urdu poetry. He strongly stands for human integrity. The poem articulates the universal statement for both poesy and its functioning. Faraz tries to repair the [dis]order and fights against the power for the powerless and ends with a promise of the return of the oppressed or the repressed in his hermeneutics of political resistance.

Born in British India, Kohat, now in Pakistan (January 12, 1931), Pashtun in ethnicity, Ahmed Faraz was named Sayed Ahmad Shah and later he re-named himself as Ahmad Shah Kohati. Faraz was educated at Peshawar University and his first nom de plume (takhallus) was “Sharar Baqui.” It is said that he changed it on the recommendations of the legendary figures i. e. Faiz Ahmad Faiz and few others as well. Critics also record that some humors and anecdotes were made and publicly shared after his takhallus, therefore, he revised his

*nom de plume* as ‘Faraz’ only. Rahman Gul writes about the personality of the poet in the following manner:

Dense-curly hair, handsome Faraz, the poets had not been such! He should have been in Hollywood, competing Gregory and Hudson, in Elizabeth Taylor’s arms. Or, he should have been in United Nations, who could have continued the act of Peace Council’s veto-resolution. But he happened to be a unique poet without any equal, unparalleled in beauty and character (Trans: me, *Kulliyat-e-Ahmad Faraz* 868).

Ahmad Faraz breathed his last on August 25, 2008 because of his kidney failure. His demise was so shocking for his lovers (readers) that the common workers of the subcontinent got off from their workplaces and students from schools and colleges bunked their classes to mourn. It is said that not only mature readers but also majority of the teen agers would lie to their parents to buy his new collections from the bookshops. He is loved by masses all over the world. No other modern Urdu poet has enjoyed this privilege at present. Faraz became so famous that his fame many a times became turbulent to him.

Because of the delicacy of expressions, his poetic collections are commonly known as “The Bible of Love” (especially *Dard-e-Aashob*). They are also taken as revolutionary documents against the status quo. Faraz was highly influenced by Ali Sardar Jafri and Faiz Ahmad Faiz. He was honored with many prestigious awards i. e. *Hilal-e-Imtiaz*, *Sitara-e-Imtiyaz*, *Nigar Awards*, *Life-Time Achievement Award* from Houston (2005), *Aadam Jee Award* (1988), *Firaq Gorakhpuri Award* (1988), *Abaseen Award* (1990), *Tata Award* (1992) and *Hilal-e-Pakistan Award* (posthumous). His universe of versification largely covers the problems of the flood subjects.

## II

Critics sometimes inappropriately observe that Ghalib was a cavalier poet, Iqbal an Islamic missionary for college students, Faiz a Marxist comrade and Faraz a love-guru, and a poet of teenagers. Nevertheless, Faraz received all sorts of kudos for his poetic contributions from his young and old readers. In fact, he truly continued and promoted the conventions practiced by Meer, Ghalib, Iqbal and Faiz— Faraz was all at the same time. He reigned over modern Urdu Ghazal like Ghalib, exposed a bleeding heart and caged tongue like Faiz, appreciated love and beauty like Meer and Keats, talked of righteousness, justice and order like Iqbal. He had a fury in his most of the narrative verses i. e. nazms. For him, poetry was a source of creation—similar to the process of *kun-fayaku-n*:

shaa.irii taaza zamaano.n kii hai me.amaar Faraz

ye bhii ik silsila-e-kun-fayakuu.n hai yuu.n hai

(Poetry is the Architect of the modern ages Faraz

This is too a continuation of the “kun faya ku—n” way)

([Trans: me], *Kulliyat-e-Ahmad Faraz*: 1088)

Faraz reflects medieval-classical-imagination at large and writes with all his courage and honesty against the unjust social and political upheaval. He also exposes corruption and the discrimination between expectation and practice. “Mohaserah” is a response for one of the obnoxious atmospheres. Faraz also wrote fiercely against the wrong applications of Islamic knowledge, mixed and divert practices. He resisted to the level of death— knowing that he cannot be defeated. His challenging attitude is something which makes him a true poet with a difference. Faraz experienced the same pain similar to that of the African poets of his time. During his self-imposed exile in London, he translated many such poets into Urdu and those translations were published in his poetic collection *Yeh Sab Aawazei-n Meri Hai-n* [All

*these Voices are Mine*]. Faraz opens up on the crisis of righteousness and the freedom of expression in the bad times:

Wo qah'te harf-e-haq hai ke is a'hd me.n Faraz

Khud sa gunahgar payamber lage mujhe!

(That severe crisis of a letter of righteousness is in this age, Faraz

A sinner, similar to me seems to be a Prophet to me)

([Trans: me], *KAF* 472)

Faraz, therefore, stood firmly for freedom of speech, independent judiciary, human rights and integrity, reestablishment of democracy, following the institutions of law and militancy for righteousness. He appreciates beauty in the fashion of Aristotelian style and represented a Herculean courage and Sisyphean determination. He also reminds us of the lover found in old Arabic narratives, Medieval-English-Chivalry or classical Persian great heroes— fighting against the evil forces.

### III

True, This! —

Beneath the rule of men entirely great

The pen is mightier than the sword. Behold

The arch-enchanters wand! — itself is nothing! —

But taking sorcery from the master-hand

To paralyse the Cæsars, and to strike

The loud earth breathless!

Take away the sword —

States can be saved without it!

(Edward Bulwer Lytton, *Richelieu* (1839) Act II, Scene 2)

The reading of “Mohaserah” (Siege) formally unfolds its internal structure as a long-mixed-short narrative poem consisting of two couplets, eleven quartets and a sestet. Keeping its cohesive, semantic and pragmatic structures in mind, it seems to have nine distinct sections. The words and expressions are cursive and archaic. The metaphors and imagery belong to the medieval classicism— seemingly taken from Indo-Arab and Persian traditions. The first part opens the scene in epic style with the grand confrontation of poet’s collective self with some worldly rivals or powers forcing and silencing his voice. The first four lines are full of grand dramatic notes threatening for coup de forces i. e.:

mere ghanīm ne mujh ko payām bhejā hai  
 ki halqa-zan haiñ mire gird lashkarī us ke  
 fasīl-e-shahr ke har burj har manare par  
 kamāñ-ba-dast sitāda haiñ askarī us ke  
 (My rival has sent me a message  
 Closely I am encircled by his armed forces  
 On every tower and guarding place of the city wall  
 Soldiers are ready with arrows tightened in their bows)  
 ([Trans: me], “Mohaserah,” *KAF* 653:1-2)

This is the way Faraz tells the story, the siege of his mighty pen-effect after receiving the memento mori. The poem also reveals its dialogical structure and has tense dialogues with the Ailchi (the messenger). “Mohaserah” appears to be an *exemplum* of resistance poetry in Urdu literature. Without any exaggeration, the quality reaches to match the class of world literature. The intra diegetic narrator of the poem tries to tell that how the poet’s self is being

colonized by an unknown colonizer who is threatening him. The poem consists of, (i) the speaker and the 'poet' talking of poetic self, (ii) poet's people and the audience who are silent, (iii) the Ailchi with a threatening message and the very impressive and resisting reply from the receiver of the message, and (iv) poet's optimistic prophesy of the 'return' and the hope of the second coming. The poet by defending himself seems to be speaking as an angle. He is fighting for righteousness and has a mighty pen instead of a sword determined to be killed but not to be defeated.

The reading of the poem demands a vast and wide range of hermeneutics. It expresses the deeply- felt grief of the poet. The poem ebbs-up with extremely paradoxical, ironic, and violent imageries. It gives elegiac sense showing the poet's turbulent mind in the style of dramatic monologue. They reflect poet's conscience against the injustices inflicted upon his people. The medieval imagery reminds us the modern-day war-fairs of the world, full of the destructive weapons all around.

The opening quartets talk of the existing situations and also the invocation of the sensibility of poet's people with the use of irony. The speaker in the poem is annoyed with the statesmen, saints, clerics, clergies, the noble aristocrats, scholars, leaders and so called ambiguous status of the judges, especially those who were more fascinated with worldly luxuries— enslaved with their status and positions which look in a manner like begging in the street for something they ought not. All of them, Faraz thinks, believe only in the pleasure principles. The following parts of the poem are commentaries on their moral and intellectual stagnancies for the *status quo*. Faraz brings all of them to be accountable for being subjugated as a nation. He thinks that all the above mentioned bodies share the responsibilities for the poor and precarious conditions of his people. The poem portrays a picture of a decaying civilization with pathos, sweet-sarcasm and also longs for some lost/past glory.

While reciting “Mohaserah”, Faraz mentions this in one of his public appearances that once he was summoned and strictly suggested to stop words and voices coming from his pen for justice, equal rights, freedom and human integrity. (Consequently Faraz was jailed and had also gone into self-imposed exile: Mushairah recording). Faraz, therefore, expresses his extremely intense feelings on being summoned and conditioned:

so shart ye hai jo jaañ kī amaan chāhte ho

to apne lauh-o-qalam qatl-gāh meñ rakh do

vagarna ab ke nishāna kamān-dāroñ kā

bas ek tum ho so ġhairat ko raah meñ rakh do

(So this is the condition, if you wish to breath

‘put your pen and page away in the dessert of the deads’ (decapitation)

otherwise you are the target of the bow-holders

are only you, so throw down your honor in the street)

([Trans: me], “Mohaserah,” *Kulliyat-e- Ahmad Faraz* 654:11-12)

In the meanwhile, on the modus operandi in the poem, the speaker replies to the Ailchi on being told to be apartheid with the pen and page and says that hold my reply and then leave:

ye shart-nāma jo dekhā to elchī se kahā

use khabar nahīñ tārīkh kyā sikhātī hai

ki raat jab kisī k̄hurshīd ko shahīd kare

to sub.h ik nayā sūraj tarāsh laātī hai

so ye javāb hai merā mire adū ke liye

ki mujh ko hirs-e-karam hai na k̄hauf-e-k̄hamyāza

use hai satvat-e-shamshīr par ghamanD bahut

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use shikoh-e-qalam kā nahīñ hai andāza

(Having seen his term-letter, said in reply to the Ailchi

He is ignorant of the lessons history teaches

if the darkness (night) martyrs any star

the next morning brings a fine new sun

so this is the reply to my foe

neither I expect his generosity nor I fear the consequences

he has the pride of little sword

he is ignorant of the glory of pen!

([Trans: me], “Mohaserah,” *Kulliyat-e- Ahmad Faraz* 654-55:13-16)

This bold expression reminds us Voltaire’s statement where he had said that “to hold a pen is to be at war” (414). Byron in his *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809) long ahead had written:

Oh! Nature’s noblest gift—my gray-goose quill!

Slave of my thoughts, obedient to my will,

Torn from thy parent-bird to form a pen,

That mighty instrument of little men! (7).

Faraz in the same convention has also attempted to express the same spirit in the “Mohaserah”. In his reply, Faraz glorifies the integrity of his lambent pen:

mirā qalam nahīñ kirdār us muhāfiz kā

jo apne shahr ko mahsūr kar ke naaz kare

mirā qalam nahīñ kaasa kisī subuk-sar kā

jo ghāsiboñ ko qasīdoñ se sarfaraz kare

mera qalam nahīñ auzār us naqab-zan kā

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jo apne ghar kī hī chhat meñ shigāf Dāltā hai  
 mirā qalam nahīñ us duzd-e-nīm-shab kā rafīq  
 jo be-charāgh gharoñ par kamand uchhāltā hai  
 mirā qalam nahīñ tasbīh us maballigh kī  
 jo bandagī kā bhī har dam hisāb rakhtā hai  
 mirā qalam nahīñ mīzān aise aadil kī  
 jo apne chehre pe dohrā naqāb rakhtā hai  
 mirā qalam to amānat hai mere logoñ kī  
 mirā qalam to adālat mire zamīr kī hai  
 isī liye to jo likkhā tapāk-e-jāñ se likhā  
 jabhī to loch kamāñ kā zabān tiir kī hai  
 maiñ kaT girūñ ki salāmat rahūñ yaqīñ hai mujhe  
 ki ye hisār-e-sitam koī to girā.egā  
 tamām umr kī īzā-nasībīyoñ kī qasam  
 mire qalam kā safar rā.egāñ na jayega  
 (My pen is not the character of that Savior  
 Who prides in sieging his own people  
 My pen is not the bowl of that light-headed-man  
 Who honours the usurpers with panegyrics  
 My pen is not that house breaker's instrument  
 Who makes holes inside his own roof  
 My pen is not the comrade of that midnight robberer  
 Who throws launchers onto the lamp-less houses  
 My pen is not the bead of that missionary preacher  
 Who keeps an account of his own prayers

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My pen is not the balance of that Justice  
Who hides his face in the double veils  
My pen is the deposited wealth of my people  
My pen is the Court of my Conscience  
This is the reason whatever I wrote, wrote fearlessly  
It has, that's why, the bow's flexibility and speech of an arrow  
Either I am fallen dead or rescued, I firmly believe  
There will be one who would surely break down the mountains of  
Atrocities  
By all the pain and humiliations inflicted upon  
The journey of my Pen WILL NEVER VANISH IN VAIN....!)

([Trans: me], "Mohaserah" *Kulliyat-e-Ahmad Faraz* 655:17-26).

#### IV

Qalam surkhru hai  
Kehjo usne likha  
Wahi aaj main hun  
Wahi aaj tu hai  
Qalam surkhru hai  
(Triumphant is the Pen  
Whatever it wrote  
Today the same I am  
Today the same are you  
Triumphant is the pen)

([Trans: me], "Qalam Surkhru Hai," *KAF* 88).

John Davies says that the poets' Pens were plucked from Archangel's wings. Wordsworth in his *Ecclesiastical Sonnets* also writes that "the feather, whence the pen / Was shaped that traced the lives of these good men, / Dropped from an Angel's wing" (Part III. V. Walton's *Book of Lives*). Robert Burton in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* reflects on the same i. e.: "From this it appears how much crueller the pen may be than the sword" (Pt. I, Sec. XXI, Mem. 4. Sub-sec. 4). Thus, Faraz while glorifying the mighty pen indirectly refers to some historical events, political moves, allies and unethical Administration of the Government of Pakistan. He clearly indicates that his pen is not the *advocatus diaboli* at all. Faraz uses very sweet sarcasm for clerics, clergies, judges, leaders, illegal foreign invaders, western atrocities, patterned bombings, middle-east operations, state loots and state terrorism by military operations in fen-the-cycle, the down of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Whatsoever the conditions are with him, the poet strongly feels like an optimistic *ombudsman* and believes that the day of happiness, peace, and prosperity will surely arrive. The poem ends with a very strong note of optimism.

In this modest attempt, the intention was not to translate Faraz— rather it was to appreciate the beauty of his versification, critical thinking in his creative writing and seriousness of the subject. Many a times in other poems, his pen also becomes a magical and melodious clarion or a flute. This attempt was to get close to him and his self-felt subjectivity which vehemently revolted against the condition of his country.

"Mohaserah" seems to be a result of collectively suppressed furies. It is a challenging commentary on modern time and attitude of imperial machinery cynical about human values. The poem is a representation, configuration and reconfiguration of time. It talks of lived experiences of the author. It is an elegy on the stagnancy of the people responsible for the (physiological / intellectual / democratic) siege. "Mohaserah" vibrates and tries to move—

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the poet pleads his people to wake-up from long-long sleep to rise to their glories. The poem is a daring-glasnost-stand for righteousness. The couplets are full of phonological charm and pragmatic grandeur. Faraz appears to be a classicist and that of in Poppish style, serious like Eliot's impersonal subjectivity of *The Waste Land* (1929). This master piece of Faraz will surely fascinate its readers for centuries to come.

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