

The Road Less Trodden – Firaq Gorakhpuri's Poetic Journey

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Abstract: Raghupati Sahay was a renowned poet in Urdu literary canon who received critical acclamation in his lifetime. Loneliness and constant search for beauty are repeating themes in his verses that made him a popular poet of Urdu literature in India and abroad. He profoundly felt that he was separated from beauty in reality and this could be a reason for him to take the word, 'Firaq' which means 'separation/quest' as his takhallus or penname.

Firaq is a rare poetic personality who could direct his disappointment in life into creative channels. Despite his short temper, a major flaw in his personality, Firaq carved a permanent place for himself in Urdu Literary Canon with his literary efforts. His poetic journey becomes significant in the light of the setbacks in his personal life and his short temper which was his biggest weakness.

Firaq Gorakhpuri like his predecessors Mir Taki Mir, Ghalib, Miraji, and contemporary poets Jigar Moradabadi and Majaz Lucknowi achieved significant critical esteem in his quest for beauty. This article briefly studies the path taken by this eminent poetic personality in achieving lifetime recognition in Urdu literary canon.

Keywords: Urdu Literary Canon, search for beauty, Urdu poets, Firaq Gorakhpuri

I. Full Paper

Born in 1896, Raghupati Sahay was an eminent Urdu poet, prose writer and critic as well. He was a distinguished poet in Urdu literary canon who received critical acclamation in his lifetime. Though he was selected for the Provincial Civil Service (PCS) and the Indian Civil Service, he chose to follow the clarion call given by Gandhiji and was imprisoned by the British. Later he joined as an English lecturer in Allahabad University. Raghupati Sahay belongs to that group of Urdu poets whose poetry makes listeners pause, drink in the divine word flow and thirst for more of the same.

Raghupati Sahay's feelings that he was separated from beauty could be one reason for him to take the word, 'Firaq' which means 'separation/quest' as his takhallus or penname. Ghazals that echo the unrequited love of poets and eloquently express desire and hurt are popular with Urdu language lovers. Poets often integrate a pen name that expresses their feelings into the last couplet of their poetry as seen in the poetry of Jigar Moradabadi, Firaq Gorakhpuri, Majruh Sultanpuri, Majaz Lucknowi etc. Loneliness and constant search for beauty are repeating themes in Firaq's verses that made him a renowned poet of Urdu literature in India and abroad.

Firaq's constant search for physical beauty made his personal life difficult not only for him but also for those who were related to him. His short temper combined with his disappointment regarding the absence of beauty in his life made his attitude intolerable at times [3].

The life story of Firaq is a message to many as the manner in which he channelized his despair is highly inspiring. In spite of the despondency he felt that had enveloped his life, Firaq rose to conquer great heights in Urdu literary canon. Though his repertoire consists of Urdu prose, poetry anthologies, around 40, 000 couplets and articles on English literature and Hindi as well, the present study concentrates only on Firaq's Ghazals. Firaq excelled in Ghazal, nazm and rubae forms of Urdu poetry. This paper is an attempt to explore the path taken by Firaq to unite with beauty through his Ghazals.

Fortunately, his literary efforts were recognized in his lifetime and he was awarded the Jnanpith Award, the highest literary award of India, Sahitya Akademi Award in Urdu, Padma Bhushan, Soviet Land Nehru Award and Ghalib Akademi Award [1].

II. Introduction to Ghazals:

The literal meaning of the word 'Ghazal' is 'communicating with the fairer sex.' 'Ghazal is a form of poetry which generally follows Arabic poetry tradition and is basically adapted from Persian literature. The standard Ghazal is short and consists of only one well-defined metre and rhyme. The themes of these Ghazals are mostly divine love, mutual love between two individuals, and greatness of mankind. They convey an amazing range of expressions using minimum number of words. Sufi centres, by and large, are supposed to be the place of origin of Ghazals. Hafez (1399) of Shiraz is generally considered the master of the formal Ghazal form in Persian language. The Mughal rule in India introduced and encouraged Ghazal form of poetry in India.

Amir Khusrau (1253 - 1325) is credited by many as the doyen of poetry who excelled in many forms like Mathnavi, Geet, Ghazal, Rubai and Riddles [4].

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, Nazeer Akbarabadi carved an enduring place for himself in the literary canon of Urdu literature by introducing everyday themes, political and social satire in nazms. In the early nineteenth century, Altaf Hussain Hali and Muhammad Hussain Azad attained new heights in imagery and themes continuing the influence of Akbarabadi. Later, Allama Iqbal captured the literary arena by combining the Eastern and Western thought philosophies and idealisms with great dexterity [4].

In the early nineteenth century two great poets, Mir Taqi Mir (1810) and Mirza Ghalib (1869) transcended to great literary heights through sheer brilliance of poetic exuberance. The rejected and dejected still try to mitigate their sorrows with the aid of Mir and Ghalib's poetic verses, centuries of elapsed time notwithstanding. From Khusrau to Faiz Ahmed Faiz, poets did not deviate much from the conventional forms of poetry. In fact, the poems were liberally interspersed with classical images and symbolism relating to Persian and Arabic traditions [4].

1920s to 1940s was the peak period for Urdu literature with the Progressive Writers' Movement at its zenith. Many poets ruled Urdu literature and the masses swayed to their tunes. That was also a period when most literati suffered due to the Partition of India and some were overwhelmed by their personal problems as illustrated by the lives of Jigar Moradabadi, Majaz Lucknowi, Sadat Hasan Manto, Kazi Nazrul Islam etc.

Literature of any country is influenced by their culture, times and customs. Ghazals are born out of the shackles of traditions. Contrary to popular opinion, Ghazals are not restricted to love alone. The repertoire of Ghazals includes divine love, the greatness of mankind, pathos of intense love, unfulfilled desires and separation. Ghazals are verses that voice love despite imminent separation. They are a mirror to a poet's heart and feelings. Many people are able to appreciate Ghazals because they recollect incidents where they experienced similar feelings. Moments of abandoned sanity in the name of love emerge afresh as cherished memories in the luminosity of Ghazals. The magical verses of the Ghazals resonate with recollection of the past and enchant the devoted time and again.

In Ghazals where the theme is love, poets extol the beauty of their beloveds or constantly voice grievances regarding their attitude towards them. Love, desire and grief due to unfulfilled yearnings are interwoven to form marvellous and unforgettable lines that remain etched forever. The words consistently and indiscriminately haunt the lovers and those who are in love with Urdu language. No wonder they are eternally popular with all sections of people.

The Ghazal writers immortalize their wounds with captivating words that remain original and popular with passing times. Ghazals espouse not only clear notions of realism but they are also about the reactions of the poet through poetry to the *assumedly* critical situation in his life. In reality, a sense of subjugation due to societal and ethical values becomes apparent in Ghazals.

Poets are typically susceptible to the influence of beauty. Moreover, they react immediately to sensitive issues. Fortunately, they record the feelings in words for posterity. Yet, at the same time, regrettably, they get engulfed in the aftermath of their feelings. Sometimes they end up paying with their life and sanity when life seeks its pound of flesh. It is inspiring to note that Firaq did not compromise his poetic journey in spite of his grievances against life. The life he led was exemplary and is a message for those who cling to disappointments without making an effort to come out of intricacies in life. Acclamations from readers/critics and appreciation from the government of India and literary organizations were regular milestones in his poetic journey. This paper looks into some recurring themes of his Ghazals, loneliness, love, sensuousness, zest for life, and current affairs.

Firaq's couplet on loneliness:

Logon ki samajh mein aa na sakaa kuchh mujh ko
bhi hai taajub sa
Sunn meri udaasi ka kaaran aey humdum bahut
akela huun

ⁱⁱTranslation:

People can not comprehend, I too am perturbed
Listen to the reason for my despondency, my
friend, I am terribly lonely

Keeping one's balance when loneliness threatens to dismantle one's very existence is extremely trying. In spite of the presence of family and friends, with no understanding soul in sight, loneliness gnawed at Firaq's heart. Yet Firaq succeeded in channelizing his anguish into creative energies. In the above verses, he attempts to share his grief with the readers.

In yet another couplet, Firaq states:

Tabiyat apni ghabraati hai sunsaan raton mein,
Hum aese mein teri yaadon ki chaadar taan lete
hain

Translation:

The silent nights send shivers down my spine
At times like these, your memories serve as a
protective blanket

Loneliness is experienced not only while alone but amidst people also. Every other matter appears inconsequential when loneliness strikes. In the above verses, Firaq reveals that he turns to his memories to help him overcome his fears. Like many a forlorn soul, Firaq depends upon the memories of his beloved to endure his loneliness.

His verses mentioned below manifest his pain on separation from his beloved.

On separation:

Garz ke kaat diye zindagi ke din aey dost
Woh teri yaad mein ho ya tujhe bhulaane mein

Translation:

I was obliged to spend my life dear friend,
Be it remembering you or failing to remember you.

Firaq is adept at juxtaposing paradoxical thoughts in his verses. The above lines are one such example. He says that he spent his life, at times with the thoughts of his friend or at times forgetting his friend.

On love:

Firaq's poem Phir Bhi extols the power of love even on the wise and well-informed.

Teri nigaah se bachne mein
Umar guzari hai
Uttar gaya rage-jaana
Ye neshtar phir bhi.

Translation:

I spent my entire life
Trying to escape your vision
The dagger went right through me
Despite all my efforts

These lines reveal the futility of mind over the power of heart. Even well versed intellectuals are known to throw caution to wind over the matters of heart.

Yet, Firaq extols love saying that love can also bring out humanity in a person.

Ishq mein kehte ho hairan hue hain
Yeh nahin kehte ke insaan hue jaate hain

Translation:

It is said that love is perplexing
It is never said that it is humanizing as well

Another couplet which speaks volumes of the poet's aesthetic sense:

Shaam bhee thee dhuun dhuun, husn bhee tha udaas
udaas
Dil koi kai kahaaniyan yaad sa aa ke rah gai

Translation:

A fog-filled eve, a melancholy-filled beauty
Several stories of love emerge as memories and
linger

Firaq uses 'yaad sa' in the second line, which means 'like a memory.' The creativity of the poet lies in the use of the simile 'memory' for 'memory.' The imagination and ingenuity of the poet is beautifully crafted in a nutshell. Even though these are small techniques they speak volumes about their creator's originality.

The verses mentioned below vividly account for the folly of countless people in the lanes of love:

Kisi ka kaun hua umr bhar yun to hai phir bhee
Ye husn aur ishq to dokha hai magar phir bhee
Hazaar baar zamana idhar se guzraa hai
Nai nai see hai kuch teri rahguzar phir bhee

Translation:

Loyalty for a lifetime is an illusion
Beauty and love are false, yet
The universe travelled a million times through
these lanes
The lanes remain fascinating as ever

He goes on to say:

Dil jo maara gayaa Firaq to kyaa
Zindagi bhar issi ka maatam ho ?

Translation:

So what if the heart is dead, Firaq?
Does one grieve over this throughout one's life?

The above lines proclaim that Firaq does not allow his personal loss to control his life. Firaq surmounts his grief with tremendous strength and towers above everyone as a role model for the common man. His verses bring solace to many lonely and depressed individuals.

Firaq is known for sensuous poetry as well as seen in the rubai mentioned below:

Ajata hai gat men salonapan aur
Chanchalpan, balpan, anelapan aur
Kat-te hi suhag raat dekhen jo use
bad jata hai rup ka kanwarapan aur.

Translation:

Softness, loveliness, charm and innocence
Embrace the body
The night of consummation seems to Increase her
chastity

The beauty of this couplet lies in the paradox that the poet uses in the last two lines. According to the poet, lovemaking increases the innocence of a new bride. He probably means that consummation is the virtue of a married woman and complements her feminine graces.

Yet another inimitable verse which reveals the sensitive side of the poet:

Ye udi udi si rangat
Ye khule khule se gesu
Teri subah kah rahi hai
Teri raat kaa fasaanaa

Translation:
The heightened color
The open hair
Your morning tells tales
About your night's tryst

The body language of a woman after a night of intimacy seems to reveal her contentment. Firaq expresses that the beauty of a woman is enhanced due to proximity with her lover.

The Ghazals on love are evident of the fact that Firaq does not bow before life's predicaments. His unflinching optimism in life can be seen in the lines below:

Dikhaa to deitii hai behtar hayaat ke sapnay
Kharaab ho key bhi yeh zindagi kharaab nahin.

Translation:
Life's beautiful dreams can no doubt be envisioned
Despite being decomposed, life is not that decayed

The greatness of Firaq lies in his struggle for order in the throes of chaos. Those who experienced this phase can comprehend Firaq's predicament. Firaq Gorakhpuri is one of those rare personalities who make a difference and lead society by example. Firaq's life is an impressive journey from taking part in the non-cooperation movement to becoming an English lecturer with his loyalty to Urdu language and finally being rewarded with India's highest civilian awards and literary awards. The above lines reveal his faith in the purpose of life. With faith, man can conquer adversities that threaten the very existence of life.

The lines given below declare the status of poets throughout the world thus:

Nirdhan kavi ke paas kyaa-kuchh peeda kuchh
preet,
Kuchh andekhay sapne hain – dard bharey kuchh
geet

Translation:
What does a penny-less poet possess? – several
travails, little love
Some unseen dreams – a few songs filled with
pathos

This couplet can be attributed to most of the poets worldwide. Most poets are creative and uncompromising. They end up paying a hefty price in the guise of poverty to the materialistic world which is a hard taskmaster. Akin to a candle that brightens its surroundings as it dies, Firaq Gorakhpuri brought beauty in many lives as he was enduring loneliness and pining away for beauty.

"Aadhi raat ko," a long poem composed by Firaq in 1944 is a testimony of the expertise of the poet. This was at the time of Second World War and the poem gives us a glimpse of the visionary in Firaq who hoped for the end of war. While the beginning of the poem is on the loneliness that envelops a person when he is all alone, he goes on to integrate world affairs in this exceptional poem [5].

Sipah-e-roos hain ab kitni dur?
--jaga raha hai koi adhi raat ka jadu—
Chhalak rahi hai khum-e-ghaib se sharab-e-wajood,
Faza-e-neem shabi nargis-e-khumaar aalood,
Kanwal ki chutkiyon mein band hai nadi ka suhaag

Translation:
How far is the Russian Army now? (from
conquering Germany)
--the magic of midnight is awakening—
The wine of life sprouts from a mysterious spring
This midnight, universe, and air,
The river's bridal pride rests in the folds of the
lotus flower.

The skill of the poet can be fathomed from the dexterous interweaving of the description of his loneliness in the middle of the night with world affairs. The lonely poet was never far from the monumental changes taking place in history all around the world. In fact, he sacrificed his career to fight for the freedom of his motherland. Furthermore, his love for Urdu language is evidenced by the fact that he advocated for the propagation of Urdu language irrespective of religion. Firaq strongly believed that Urdu is a language to be learnt and enjoyed by everyone.

Another famous couplet of Firaq on life:

Bahut pehle se un kadmon ki aahat jaan lethe hain
Tujhe ye zindagi, hum dur se pehchan lethe hain

Translation:
I can sense the sound of your feet even before your
arrival
O life, I can acknowledge your presence even from
a distance

In the above lines, Firaq personifies 'life.' He states that he can sense the arrival of life even from a distance. The kind of experiences and disappointments meted out to him could have made him an expert to gauge life. The mystic in Firaq could predict the onset of happiness and sadness based on preceding signs and incidents.

In conclusion it is impossible not to agree with Firaq's verses;

Aanay waali naslein tum par naaz kareingi
humasron
Jab inn ko yeh dhyaan aayegaa tum ne Firaq ko
dekhaa thaa

Translation:

The future generations will take great pride in you,
O my contemporaries,
Whenever it comes to their attention that you are
familiar with Firaq.

The above couplet not only reveals his confidence regarding his poetic skills but also illustrates his belief in the poetry appreciating skills of the future generations. Firaq could not only predict the onset of life but also prophesy acclaim from future generations. His poetry reveals that hope is alive and eternal in him. Despite the feeling of loneliness in his life, and temperamental at times, he was never miserable. He rose out of his predicaments like a phoenix to serve as an example to people burdened with problems. Firaq's significant poetic journey becomes more impactful due to the personal disappointments he faced in his life. Definitely, the path he travelled is a path to be extolled and emulated.

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ⁱⁱ Translation of all the couplets cited in the article was done by the author of the article.