

Incarcerated Reflections: Exploring Space and Time in Faiz Ahmed Faiz's Prison Poetry

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Abstract:

This paper offers a nuanced exploration of the themes of space and time in the poetry of Faiz Ahmed Faiz, particularly focusing on the poems composed during his periods of imprisonment. Faiz, a renowned Urdu poet, spent a significant portion of his life either incarcerated or in exile, with both experiences shaping poetic oeuvre. By examining Faiz's prison poetry as collective and personal reflections, this study delves into the spatial dimensions of confinement, both physical and metaphorical, and their intersection with temporal elements. Drawing upon Faiz's imagery wherein lies his spatiality, the paper analyses how space functions as a locational entity, a metaphorical structuration, and a reflection of inner complexities within his poems. Furthermore, it explores the parallels between physical incarceration and exile, positing that both states represent forms of spatial constraint and deprivation of liberty. Through a close reading of Faiz's poems, this study seeks to elucidate the connection between space, memory, and in the context of his literary corpus. By situating Faiz's poetry within the thematic framework of "Space and Time in Literature and the Arts," this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the interplay between creative expression, lived experiences, and the spatial-temporal dimensions of human existence.

Keywords: Aesthetic; Exile; Imagery; Language; Prison; Revolutionary; Resilience; Spatial; Temporal.

Introduction:

Faiz Ahmed Faiz(1911–1984), a towering figure in modern Urdu literature, navigated the tumultuous historical and political landscapes of British India, Pakistan, and the broader post-colonial world through his poetic exploration of human dignity in all forms. Central to his work is the interplay of space and time, which is particularly evident in the poetry composed during his periods of imprisonment and exile. He is widely regarded as one of the most significant literary voices of the 20th century. Faiz was a leading figure in the Progressive Writers' Movement, which sought to use literature as a tool for social change, focusing on themes like social justice, revolution, and resistance against oppression. His poetry is known for blending romantic and revolutionary ideals, with prominent themes of love, longing, exile, and political defiance. Born in British India, Faiz's early life was shaped by the Indian independence movement. He became involved in leftist politics and was a vocal critic of authoritarianism in post-independence Pakistan. His political beliefs led to multiple imprisonments, most notably in the 1950s during the Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case, where he was accused of plotting a coup against the Pakistani government. This event marked the beginning of his first significant period of incarceration, which lasted from 1951 to 1955. The Rawalpindi Conspiracy Case was a politically charged event, reflecting the broader tensions in post-colonial Pakistan. During this time, Faiz wrote some of his most renowned works, including "Dast-e-Saba" (Poems from Fingers of the Wind) and "Zindan Nama" (Poems from Prison Thoughts), which articulate his reflections on confinement and resilience. His prison experience shaped his poetry, blending themes of personal suffering, political injustice, and the hope for liberation. These years of imprisonment reinforced Faiz's role as a voice for the oppressed, transforming his poetic expression into a powerful form of protest against tyranny. His time in jail also cemented his status as a revolutionary poet, whose works transcend the personal to speak to universal themes of justice, freedom, and resistance. He also experienced periods

of exile during the later years of his life, particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. His exile was largely due to his outspoken political views, involvement with leftist movements, and criticism of authoritarian regimes in Pakistan. After his release from prison, Faiz spent time abroad in places like London, Beirut, and Moscow. During this period, Faiz continued to write prolifically, drawing on his experiences of displacement, longing, and loss, which deeply influenced collections such as “Mere Dil Mere Musafir” (My Heart, My Traveller).

Faiz's poetry embodies the lived realities of spatial confinement and temporal dislocation, turning the limitations of his physical surroundings into profound reflections on freedom, resistance, and human resilience. Faiz's experiences in prison, often a direct consequence of his political activism, led him to contemplate both literal and metaphorical spaces. The physicality of the prison cell in his poetry contrasts sharply with the vastness of his imagination, where personal memories and revolutionary dreams expand beyond the immediate confines of captivity. Similarly, time in Faiz's poetry is fluid—marked by moments of intense introspection, memory, and anticipation of a future unshackled from oppression. These reflections on space and time echo in many of his famous works, this paper deals with those in “Dast-e-Saba” (Fingers of the Wind), “Zindan Nama” (Prison Thoughts) and “Mere Dil Mere Musafir” (My Heart, My Traveller).

Faiz Ahmed Faiz's choice of language is also instrumental in shaping the themes of space and time in his poetry. This paper uses the English translations of Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poetry by V.G. Kiernan, an esteemed historian and translator. Kiernan's translations in the collection *Poems by Faiz*, have played a crucial role in introducing Faiz's work to a global audience. His sensitive renderings capture not only the lyrical beauty of Faiz's Urdu poetry but also its revolutionary spirit and political depth. Kiernan's translations bridge the linguistic gap, maintaining the emotional intensity and socio-political resonance that are central to Faiz's work, making it accessible to readers unfamiliar with Urdu. Faiz Ahmed Faiz wrote primarily in Urdu, a language known for its lyrical elegance and rich poetic tradition. His mastery of the Urdu language allowed him to convey deep emotional, philosophical, and political messages through intricate metaphors, classical forms like the *ghazal* and *nazm*, and vivid imagery. Urdu's flexibility enabled Faiz to explore complex themes such as love, exile, resistance, and revolution with subtlety and grace. Faiz utilizes its rich poetic traditions, metaphorical depth, and linguistic nuances to capture the intensity of emotions during imprisonment and exile. Urdu, with its roots in Persian and Arabic, allows for a fluid interplay of allegory and abstraction, giving Faiz's work an almost timeless quality. His use of formal and colloquial registers reflects a duality—conveying both the sophistication of classical literary forms and the immediacy of everyday struggles.

To further contextualize Faiz's treatment of space and time, this paper draws on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the “chronotope” and Paul Ricoeur's theories of narrative temporality. Bakhtin's chronotope, which refers to the inseparability of space and time in narrative, provides a valuable framework for analyzing how Faiz compresses and manipulates these dimensions in the structure of his poems. Ricoeur's ideas about how narrative structures time help elucidate Faiz's ability to blur the lines between personal memory and collective history, creating poetry that transcends the limitations of linear temporality. Through this theoretical lens, the following sections will explore how Faiz transforms the constrained space and slow time of prison into a site of revolutionary resistance and personal reflection.

Prison as a Space for Faiz

I taste their bitter wrongs without regret,
But while breath lasts will nurse each malady-
While yet the tavern stands, with its red wine
Crimson the temple's high cold walls; and while
My heartblood feeds my tears and lets them shine,
Paint with each drop the loved one's rosy smile.
Let others live for calm indifferent peace;

I listen to earth's pangs, and will not cease.

(Faiz, "Tablet and Pen" 7-14)

Faiz Ahmed Faiz's prison poetry is deeply rooted in the spatial realities of confinement, where the poet reflects on both the physical and psychological limitations imposed by incarceration. The prison, as a literal space, is often depicted in his work as oppressive and suffocating, with its narrow confines mirroring the restrictions placed on his body and mind. Yet, despite the tangible limits of his surroundings, Faiz's poetry transcends these boundaries, offering a vision of mental escapism and resistance.

Faiz writes, "If my ink and pen are taken away, what grief is it, / When I have dipped my fingers in the blood of the heart?". In these lines from "Fingers of the Wind," he presents a duality: the stark reality of imprisonment juxtaposed with the liberating power of creativity. The imagery of ink and blood symbolizes not only the tools of writing but also the deep emotional investment that art demands. When Faiz states that the removal of his ink and pen is insignificant, he highlights that his true essence lies beyond material constraints. The act of dipping his fingers in "the blood of the heart" implies that his creativity is intrinsically linked to his emotions and experiences, infusing his poetry with authenticity and depth. This metaphor conveys that, despite physical confinement, his spirit remains unchained, capable of traversing vast emotional landscapes. These lines illustrate the spatial tension between the physical boundaries of prison and the boundless expanse of Faiz's creative imagination. While the prison limits his physical movement, his poetic spirit transcends the space of confinement, expanding into the metaphorical realm of inner freedom and resistance. The ink and blood metaphor not only speaks to Faiz's resilience but also underscores the mental and emotional escape he achieves through art. Art serves as a vehicle for resistance. In a prison environment designed to suppress, his imagination breaks free, crafting narratives that challenge oppression and speak to the collective suffering of his people. The tension between the physical and the metaphysical is critical here; while the prison walls aim to confine him, they cannot stifle his thoughts or creativity. Ultimately, Faiz's assertion becomes a powerful testament to the resilience of the human spirit. It underscores the belief that true freedom is found not merely in physical space but in the ability to express oneself, to create meaning, and to connect with a broader human experience. Through his poetry, Faiz transforms his anguish into a source of strength, illuminating the enduring power of art as a means of personal and political liberation. Faiz uses the confined space of his prison cell to represent the broader societal and political oppression. The image of "walls" and "bars" signifies not just his physical incarceration but the pervasive power structures that constrain freedom. Yet, even within these confining spaces, Faiz invokes resilience, a testament to the uncontainable nature of the human spirit.

In "Prison Thoughts", for instance, Faiz juxtaposes the claustrophobic imagery of prison walls with symbols of freedom and expansiveness, such as wind, sky, and light. In the poem, "The Window",

In my barred window is hung many a cross,
Each coloured with the blood of its own Christ,
Each craving to hug tight a divine form.
On one the heaven's spring cloud is sacrificed,
On one the radiant moon is crucified,
On one is torn asunder the trance-filled grove,
And on another the delicate breeze has died.
Daily these kind and beautiful godlike things
Come weltering in their blood to my bitter cell;
And day by day before my watching eyes
Their martyred bodies are raised up and made well.

(Faiz, "The Window" 1-12)

The window is the poet's expansive reflections on the outside world, a place of movement, growth, and liberation. This contrast highlights the spatial tension between confinement and mental escape, where the prison cell becomes not just a physical space but a metaphor for broader societal oppression. Faiz's spatial

metaphors echo the experiences of other exiled or imprisoned poets, such as Mahmoud Darwish, whose works similarly explore the tension between physical dislocation and imaginative freedom. In Darwish's poetry, exile is not only a physical separation from home but a metaphor for the displacement of identity, memory, and history. Like Faiz, Darwish creates a poetic space where the imagination resists the constraints of physical reality, offering an alternative geography of freedom and resistance.

Faiz's spatial reflections can be analyzed through the lens of Bakhtin's chronotope, which emphasizes the intrinsic connection between space and time in narrative. In Faiz's poetry, the prison cell collapses time and space into a single, oppressive moment, where the past (freedom), present (confinement), and future (hope for liberation) coexist simultaneously. For example, in "Fingers of the Wind", Faiz evokes the imagery of the morning breeze—a symbol of freedom and new beginnings—to contrast the monotony and stasis of his cell. The "breeze" in the poem functions as a chronotopic element, representing both a spatial dimension (the open air outside the prison) and a temporal one (the potential for future liberation). Thus, Faiz's prison poetry is not only a reflection of the physical space of confinement but also a meditation on how the mind can navigate, escape, and resist these limitations. The prison cell, while a site of suffering, becomes a transformative space where the poet imagines both personal liberation and collective resistance.

Faiz's spatial metaphors take on new meaning in his poem "Today Come in Fetters to the Marketplace". The public "marketplace" is used here as a symbol of defiance and collective resistance against tyrannical forces. He writes, "Come today in fetters to the marketplace, / Walk with waving hands, run in a drunkard's dance,". In these lines, Faiz transforms the public square into a space of liberation, despite the shackles that bind him. His use of the marketplace, typically a symbol of commerce, becomes a metaphorical space for revolution—an arena where resistance is both seen and performed. Thus, Faiz blends physical space with political action, turning the city's marketplace into a battleground of ideas.

The Temporal Dimensions of Faiz's Poetry

In Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poetry, time emerges as a fluid concept, marked by its ability to transcend the linear constraints typically associated with minutes and hours. This characteristic fluidity allows Faiz to navigate the complex interplay of past, present, and future, particularly in the context of his experiences during imprisonment and exile. Rather than a straightforward progression, time in Faiz's poems often appears cyclical or suspended, reflecting his introspective engagement with memory, loss, and hope. One of the most poignant themes in Faiz's prison poetry is the relationship between time and memory. Within the confines of prison, time often feels stagnant—days merge into one another, each moment heavy with the weight of confinement and uncertainty. Yet, Faiz's verses frequently reach into the past, drawing solace and strength from memories that resist the erosion of time. In "My Heart, My Traveller", he articulates this temporal disjunction, "The nights are long, the days are short, yet the wounds of the heart remain." This line encapsulates the contrasting experiences of time; while the external world appears monotonous and drawn out, the emotional scars linger, unbound by the passage of time. His exploration of memory is also evident in lines like, "Life is a shadow, a fleeting dream, / But the heart remembers every sigh." Here, Faiz emphasizes the persistent presence of memory amidst the transience of life, suggesting that the heart retains what time tries to erase.

Faiz's manipulation of time is particularly evident in his blending of temporal boundaries. His personal suffering does not exist in isolation; rather, it is juxtaposed with broader historical struggles, creating a tapestry that connects individual experiences with collective histories of oppression. In "Prison Thoughts" he writes, "These walls, these bars, this silence, this night, / Are all but a reflection of the tyrant's might." In these lines, the immediacy of his present condition serves as a microcosm of historical tyranny, suggesting that the poet's struggles are part of a larger continuum that extends far beyond his own lifetime. This interplay allows Faiz to explore the interconnectedness of individual and collective narratives, linking personal trauma to societal injustices.

Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative temporality offers valuable insights. Ricoeur posits that time in narrative is structured not merely as a sequence but through memory, expectation, and experience. Faiz's poetry mirrors this layered structure, as his verses navigate between memories of the past, the suffering of the present, and aspirations for the future. In another poem, Faiz expresses this blend beautifully, "I sacrifice myself at your streets, / Where every stone echoes the stories of the past." This non-linear narrative approach reflects both the stagnation experienced in prison and the persistent hope for liberation, creating a rich temporal fabric that resonates with readers. By collapsing and expanding time within his work, Faiz crafts a sense of timelessness that speaks to universal human experiences. Faiz's nuanced manipulation of time not only reflects the realities of imprisonment and exile but also offers a framework for understanding broader themes of memory, identity, and resistance. His ability to weave together the threads of past experiences and future aspirations creates a resonance that transcends specific historical contexts, allowing readers from diverse backgrounds to connect with his work. Through the exploration of time in his poetry, Faiz captures the essence of his own struggles and articulates a collective yearning for freedom and justice, rendering his verses both timely and timeless.

In "An Evening in Prison" Faiz poignantly reflects on the oppressive stillness of his surroundings, "This silence of night, this stillness of iron walls / This is not life, this is a curse." This stark imagery underscores the stagnation that characterizes his experience of imprisonment. The "silence" and "stillness" symbolize a time devoid of movement, creativity, and hope. Faiz's keen observation of the iron walls around him conveys a sense of claustrophobia—not only in a physical sense but also in a temporal one. The prison becomes a space where time feels frozen, marked by a lack of progress and vitality. Yet, within this suffocating environment, Faiz's poetic voice emerges as a form of protest. By articulating his suffering and isolation, he transforms the stillness into a medium of resistance. The very act of writing becomes an assertion of life and agency in the face of dehumanization. Faiz illustrates that even in the darkest confines, creativity can flourish, pushing back against the oppressive silence of the walls.

In "My Heart, My Traveller", Faiz further delves into the cyclical nature of time with the lines, "The nights are long, the days are short, / Time passes, but the heart's wounds remain." This verse captures the paradox of time in exile: although days may feel fleeting, the emotional scars persist, rendering the experience of time deeply subjective. Faiz's exploration of memory reveals a landscape where past grief intertwines with present pain, emphasizing that the heart bears the weight of its wounds regardless of the temporal flow. The cyclical nature of his suffering suggests that personal and collective histories of oppression are inextricably linked, creating a repetitive pattern where trauma is not easily escaped. Faiz's ability to weave past experiences with current realities reflects a broader narrative structure that transcends linearity. Instead, it evokes a sense of nostalgia and longing, where moments of hope and despair coexist, highlighting the endurance of the human spirit amidst suffering.

In "Prison Thoughts", Faiz's manipulation of time becomes even more evident, "The storm is brewing in the silence of the night, / The dawn is rising amidst the tears of the past." This powerful juxtaposition compresses the temporal dimensions of his imprisonment, suggesting that past suffering gives rise to future hope. The "storm" signifies the brewing resistance, while "dawn" symbolizes the potential for liberation. Here, time is not merely a passive backdrop; it becomes a dynamic force capable of fostering both destruction and renewal. Faiz's reflections on time in this context are imbued with political significance. The storm implies that change is imminent, and the collective struggles of the oppressed are poised to culminate in a transformative dawn. This connection between personal experience and broader societal movements reflects Faiz's belief in the eventual triumph of hope over despair. His poetry thus embodies the resilience of those who endure suffering, revealing a narrative where time serves as both a witness and a catalyst for change.

Conclusion

In this exploration of Faiz Ahmed Faiz's prison poetry, we have navigated the intricate relationship between space and time as central themes that shape his literary voice. Faiz's experiences of incarceration

and exile have profoundly influenced his artistic expression, creating a body of work that transcends personal anguish to resonate with broader social and political contexts. By examining the spatial and temporal dimensions of Faiz's poetry, we uncover how he transforms the limitations imposed by physical confinement into powerful narratives of resistance, resilience, and hope. Faiz's depiction of prison as a physical space highlights the oppressive reality of incarceration, yet it also serves as a backdrop against which his imagination flourishes. The stark images of "iron walls" and "barred windows" convey a sense of claustrophobia, encapsulating the constraints of both body and mind. However, Faiz's poetry reveals that these limitations cannot stifle his spirit. The act of writing becomes an essential form of liberation, allowing him to transcend his immediate surroundings and engage with the world beyond. As we noted in our analysis, lines like "If my ink and pen are taken away, what grief is it, / When I have dipped my fingers in the blood of the heart?" illustrate this duality beautifully. Here, Faiz asserts that true freedom lies not merely in physical space but in the emotional and intellectual realms that creativity can access. The metaphors of ink and blood signify a deeper emotional investment in his art, underscoring the relationship between personal suffering and the collective struggle for liberation. Faiz transforms the prison cell into a site of mental and emotional resistance, where the very act of creation becomes an assertion of agency against oppressive forces. This tension between physical confinement and imaginative freedom resonates throughout his poetry, reflecting the broader experiences of those subjected to similar forms of repression.

Time in Faiz's poetry emerges as a fluid and complex construct, intertwined with themes of memory, trauma, and hope. His reflections often reveal a cyclical perception of time, where past and present coexist, shaping the poet's emotional landscape. In works such as **Mere Dil Mere Musafir**, Faiz captures the paradox of temporal experience: while days may pass swiftly, the emotional scars of confinement linger, unbound by the flow of time. This interplay between personal memory and collective history creates a rich tapestry that connects the poet's individual suffering to broader social injustices. The concept of the "chronotope," as articulated by Mikhail Bakhtin, provides a useful framework for understanding Faiz's manipulation of time within his poetry. The prison cell compresses time into a singular moment of oppression, where past experiences of freedom, present suffering, and future aspirations for liberation intersect. Faiz's poetry thus serves as a reminder that the scars of history are ever-present, influencing the narratives of individuals and communities alike. Paul Ricoeur's theories of narrative temporality further illuminate Faiz's approach to time, as he weaves together memories, expectations, and experiences. This layered structure allows readers to engage with the complexities of Faiz's emotional and political landscapes, rendering his work both deeply personal and universally relevant. Through his poetry, Faiz articulates a longing for freedom that transcends the confines of his immediate circumstances, echoing the sentiments of countless individuals who grapple with oppression.

Faiz's poetry does not exist in isolation; rather, it resonates with the struggles of oppressed peoples across time and space. By examining the parallels between his experiences and those of other poets, such as Mahmoud Darwish, we can see how the themes of exile and confinement are emblematic of broader socio-political struggles. Both poets employ their art as a means of resistance, transforming personal pain into a collective call for justice and liberation. The imagery of public spaces, such as marketplaces, in Faiz's work symbolizes defiance against tyranny. In poems like "Today Come in Fetters to the Marketplace," he reclaims these spaces, turning them into arenas of resistance. This transformation is significant; it underscores the notion that collective action and solidarity can emerge even from the depths of despair. Faiz's poetry thus becomes a rallying cry for the oppressed, urging them to stand together in the face of adversity. Moreover, the intersection of personal and political themes in Faiz's work serves as a reminder of the interconnectedness of individual experiences with larger historical narratives. The poet's ability to weave his own struggles into the fabric of collective resistance highlights the role of art in fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose among those facing oppression.

The exploration of space and time in Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poetry reveals a profound understanding of the human condition. His ability to articulate the complexities of confinement—both physical and

metaphorical—allows readers to connect with the emotional weight of his experiences. Through rich imagery, nuanced language, and powerful metaphors, Faiz constructs a poetic landscape that reflects the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity. Faiz's legacy as a revolutionary poet endures, inspiring generations of readers and writers who seek to challenge oppression through their art. His work transcends cultural and linguistic boundaries, offering a universal message of hope, resistance, and the transformative power of creativity. As we have seen, Faiz's poetry serves not only as a record of his own struggles but also as a testament to the enduring fight for justice and human dignity.

Faiz Ahmed Faiz's exploration of space and time in his poetry underscores the vital intersection of art and activism. His commitment to social justice, political resistance, and the celebration of human resilience is woven throughout his body of work. By examining the spatial and temporal dimensions of his poetry, we gain a deeper appreciation for how Faiz transforms personal suffering into a collective narrative that resonates with universal themes of hope and liberation. In a world still grappling with issues of oppression, injustice, and displacement, Faiz's poetry remains relevant, offering a voice to the silenced and a vision for a more equitable future. His mastery of language and imagery continues to inspire readers, encouraging them to engage with their own experiences of struggle and resistance. As we reflect on Faiz's contributions to literature and social change, we recognize that his work serves as a powerful reminder of the enduring impact of art as a tool for liberation and a catalyst for change.

Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poetry stands as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit and the transformative power of creative expression. Through his nuanced exploration of space and time, Faiz crafts a narrative that not only reflects his own experiences but also resonates with the struggles of countless individuals seeking freedom and justice. His legacy as a revolutionary poet continues to inspire and challenge us, reminding us of the power of art to transcend boundaries and ignite hope in the darkest of circumstances. In his poetry, the intertwining themes of space and time create a profound framework for understanding personal and collective struggles. His depiction of confined spaces—whether literal prisons or metaphorical realms of exile—captures the claustrophobic reality of life under oppression. Simultaneously, his manipulation of time, which oscillates between reflective nostalgia and anticipatory hope, blurs the boundaries between past and future, personal and political. Faiz's poetry offers not only a narrative of suffering but also an enduring call to resistance and transformation. By weaving together the threads of his experiences, he constructs a vision where the constraints of physical space are challenged by the expansive reach of the poetic imagination. The passage of time in his work reflects both the trauma of the present and the hope for an emancipated future. Ultimately, Faiz Ahmed Faiz's exploration of time and space serves as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit. His verses resonate across generations, inviting readers to confront their own struggles while reminding them of the enduring power of art as a tool for resistance. Through Faiz, we see that even in the most confining circumstances, the poetic voice can rise above silence, crafting a narrative of hope and defiance that echoes far beyond the confines of oppression. While his poetry is deeply rooted in Urdu's literary heritage, the universality of his themes allowed his work to resonate beyond linguistic boundaries. Faiz's work continues to inspire movements for justice and equality around the world.

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