



In honour of Professor C.M. Naim

A Wilderness of Possibilities

Urdu Studies in Transnational Perspective



edited by
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'The Meaning of the Meaningless Verses': Ghalib and His Commentators



FRANCES W. PRITCHETT

The 'classical' (*klāsiki*) Urdu ghazal is a Persian-derived genre of romantic/mystical lyric poetry that was widely cultivated in north India during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Its hegemony ended only when the aftermath of the Rebellion of 1857 destroyed the aristocratic Indo-Muslim society and patronage networks that had kept the tradition alive: there was less and less leisure for master poets (*ustād*) to correct the poetry of the pupils (*shāgird*) they were training, and the famously conflict-prone *mushā'iras*—at which poets performed for each other and for a small circle of patrons and connoisseurs—could no longer be maintained.

Mirzā Asadullāh Khān 'Ghālīb' (1797–1869) is universally considered to be one of the two greatest poets of the classical ghazal tradition. Lovers of Urdu ghazal have struggled over the past century to maintain access to his poetry, which at its best is some of the finest in the world. Ghalib is also known as a notoriously 'difficult' poet, and more than a hundred commentaries (*sharḥ*) have been written to explicate his work (Anṣārullāh 1972, 1998). Ghalib is the only Urdu poet to have acquired such a commentarial tradition. Even today, still more commentators are constantly appearing; I am now, for my sins, in the process of becoming one of them. (My commentary is available at <http://www.columbia.edu/ffp7>.)

Yet the commentators are for the most part astonishingly unhelpful. Their work is radically limited, often in ways that seem actually counter-intuitive. Their explanations do not at all suffice to elucidate for a serious reader what Ghalib is actually doing. How to explain such a failure? How to account for so many voices earnestly saying such a limited, narrow range of things?

Historically speaking, there might seem to be an obvious place to point the finger. The development of the commentarial tradition coincided with the growth of the post-1857 'natural poetry' movement, which emphasized a Wordsworthian notion of poetry as realistic, biographically informed, emotionally 'sincere', sociologically accurate, progressive, devoted to inspiration and national uplift—everything, in short, that the classical ghazal was not. The rise of the 'natural poetry' movement, like the death of the classical ghazal, resulted from the complex changes wrought by the (intellectual and cultural) aftermath of 1857. I have written in detail in *Nets of Awareness* about the 'natural poetry' movement and its hostile approach to classical ghazal, and so will not provide an extensive account here. It might seem that the 'natural poetry' movement would provide an obvious culprit—can it not readily and plausibly be blamed for promoting unsatisfactory commentary on Ghalib? As we shall see, Āzād and Ḥālī, the two canonical founders of the movement, both contributed to the body of commentary on Ghalib's poetry.

But in this case such finger-pointing will not get us very far. After all, the commentators stepped forth as admirers and defenders of Ghalib, rather than hostile detractors; they were volunteers, and they spent hundreds of hours of their lives analysing the whole corpus of his verses. Why would so many of them take so much trouble to provide their readers with (however inadequate) readings of the poetry, if they did not themselves feel that their work had value, and that they were accomplishing something significant?

In this essay I would like to lay out the dimensions of the problem, and then offer my own best guess at a solution.

Let us, therefore, take a brief tour through commentarial history. For demonstration purposes I shall choose the first verse of the first ghazal in Ghalib's *divān*. Ghalib himself selected and arranged his verses for publication; he was the first Urdu poet to have had the opportunity to do so. His poetry was popular enough, and printing presses were by then widely enough available, to permit four editions of his *divān* to appear in his lifetime (in 1841, 1847, 1861, and 1862). He knew that this verse would be in a specially marked position, and particularly exposed to scrutiny.

I want to show that most commentators, including Ghalib, provide only prose paraphrase; and when they do engage in literary argumentation, it is often a thrust-and-parry about 'meaning'.

'The Meaning of the Meaningless Verses'

The first verse of the first ghazal is, by tradition, the only verse from a classical poet's whole *divān* that has a strongly prescribed theme: everybody knows

that it is to be a *ḥamd*, or verse in praise of God. And what does Ghalib give us instead ('Arshī 1982: 159)?

naqsh faryādī hai kis kī shokhī-i tahrīr kī
kāghazī hai pairahan har paikar-i taṣvīr kī

- 1) The image/painting is a plaintiff—about whose mischievousness of writing?
- 2) Of paper is the robe of every figure in the picture.

The translation is mine (as are all others in this essay except where marked); it is of course painfully literal. The verse is one that has proved confusing to many readers, and has provoked extraordinary outbursts by commentators. But certainly no serious critic has ever mistaken it for a genuine *ḥamd*.

We know that the hue and cry about it began during Ghalib's lifetime. The ghazal that contains it goes back to 1816, when the poet was all of nineteen years old. The earliest form of the ghazal had nine verses, of which verses 1–4 and verse 9 were—twenty-five years later—selected for publication (Raṣā 1988: 112). Throughout his lifetime, Ghalib's friends and correspondents asked him for interpretive help with his poetry. Maulvī Muḥammad 'Abd ur-Razzāq 'Shākīr' was one such correspondent. Writing to him in 1865, near the end of his life, Ghalib gave a direct and straightforward explanation of several difficult verses:

First listen to the meaning of the meaningless verses (*pahle ma'nī-i abyāt-i be-ma'nī suniye*). As for *naqsh faryādī*: In Iran there is the custom that the seeker of justice, putting on paper garments, goes before the ruler—as in the case of lighting a torch in the day, or carrying a blood-soaked cloth on a bamboo pole [to protest an injustice]. Thus the poet reflects, of whose mischievousness of writing is the image a plaintiff?—since the aspect of a picture is that its garment is of paper. That is to say, although existence (*ḥastī*) may be like that of pictures (*taṣāwīr*), merely notional, it is a cause of grief and sorrow and suffering (Khalīq Anjum 1985, 2: 837–8; Daud Rahbar 1987: 281–3).

Ghalib's explanation is direct and straightforward, that is, except for the first sentence. How are we to judge the implications of a cryptic phrase like 'the meaning of the meaningless verses'? The words themselves are clear. They seem to respond to a query by Shākīr, but in what tone of voice? Teasing? Irritated? Rueful?

To find Ghalib's verses difficult—or even at times 'meaningless'—is a common frustration, and to have any explanatory words from him is a rare luxury. By my count, he has only commented on fourteen verses out of the 1,459 in his published Urdu *divān*. Yet at least to this limited degree, we must

consider Ghalib himself to be the first and in some obvious ways the most significant commentator on his poetry.

Leaving aside for the present two early works of little influence (Vālah Dakanī 1893; Shaukat Merathī 1899), the second important commentator was Aṭfāḥ Ḥusain Ḥālī (1837–1914), and the third was ‘Alī Ḥaidar ‘Naẓm’ Ṭabāṭabā’ī (1852–1933). Ḥālī completed his great work *Yādgār-i Ghālib* (A Memorial of Ghalib) in 1897, and Naẓm published his commentary *Sharḥ-i Divān-i Urdū-i Ghālib* (A Commentary on the Urdu *Divān* of Ghalib) in 1900. These two early commentators have been quoted constantly ever since, both with and without attribution, by later entrants into the field.

These two primal commentators assumed archetypally opposite attitudes. Ḥālī was the devoted and admiring pupil, the collector of anecdotes and provider of lavish praise. (Never mind the inconvenient fact that his ‘natural poetry’ ideology had helped to overthrow the popular reign of the classical ghazal; here he is almost doing penance for his iconoclasm.) Ḥālī has nothing to say in the whole course of his memoir about *naqsh faryādī*. He apparently found the verse to be neither a major problem nor a great glory, and thus did not feel that he had to make a point of mentioning it.

In marked contrast to Ḥālī, Naẓm Ṭabāṭabā’ī is something like a fellow-*ustād* with a prickly ego: he judges Ghalib not reverently but critically, even jealously, and definitely as an equal. Throughout his commentary he is acerbic and nit-picking; although he occasionally offers high praise, he is more than ready to point out flaws and problems. And Naẓm makes a point of starting out the way he means to go on. No other opinion of his has been so famous, so controversial, so shocking to the sensibilities of later commentators, as his all-out attack on the verse *naqsh faryādī*. This attack is here translated in full:

The author's meaning is that in life, we become separated and divided from the True Source, and separation from that Beloved is so grievous that even a figure in a picture complains about it. And after all, the existence of a picture is no existence! But it too longs to become lost in God: it laments its life.

The suggestion of the paper dress of a plaintiff is present in Persian too, and in Urdu in the poetry of Mīr Mammūn, and I've seen it in the poetry of Momin Khān too. But the author's saying that in Iran there is a custom that the justice-seeker puts on paper robes and goes before the ruler—I have never seen or heard any mention of this anywhere.

As long as in this verse there is no word that would make manifest an ardour for becoming lost in God, and a hatred for worldly existence, we cannot call it meaningful. Nobody deliberately composes things without meaning. What happens is that because of the constraint of metre and rhyme, there was no scope for some necessary words, and the poet considered that the meaning had been expressed. Then, however many

meanings have remained in the poet's mind, they should be called [in Arabic] 'meanings internal to the poet'.

In this verse, the author's intention was that the figure in the painting is a plaintiff about an insubstantial, unworthy existence. And this is the reason for its paper robe. There was no scope for 'insubstantial existence' (*hasī-i be-'itibār*) because it was awkward and his purpose was to compose an opening verse (*maṭla'*). In place of 'existence' he put 'mischievousness of writing', and from this no presumption about the cutting out of 'existence' was created. Finally, even to his face people said, 'This verse is meaningless' (Naẓm 1900: 1–2).

This famous attack raises a number of issues. The one that I want to leave out of our present discussion is the question of whether in ancient Iran justice-seekers really did customarily wear paper robes. Naẓm's rather hair-splitting critique is not clearly developed. (If he has never heard of the custom, does that in itself constitute a poetic flaw? If in truth the custom never existed, does that constitute a poetic flaw? If so, why, when the ghazal is full of such conventions?) With few exceptions, later commentators simply produce more examples of poetic reference to the custom, but this does not advance the discussion, since Naẓm has already recognized that such literary examples exist. In fact, Naẓm seems to be objecting to the claim of historicity that Ghalib makes in his letter, rather than to the paper-robe imagery in the verse itself.

Naẓm's real attack rests on the alleged meaninglessness of the verse. He intends this claim of meaninglessness in a technical sense, and he locates and explains his objections clearly—or at least, relatively clearly—as these things go in the world of Ghalib commentary. The verse is meaningless, he says, because the phrase 'mischievousness of writing' does not specify precisely enough the nature of the complaint made by the paper-robed justice-seekers. The poet should have contrived to put in something like 'insubstantial existence' instead, and then the verse would in fact have the meaning that the poet intended it to have. Naẓm himself, however, seems to find no difficulty in understanding and explicating the intended meaning of this 'meaningless' verse—a fact which must cast significant doubt on his argument.

Naẓm wraps up his attack with a stinging report of audience response, one of very few such observations in the whole commentarial tradition. The verse is so patently incoherent, he says, that people actually confronted the poet and told him so. 'Finally, even to his face people said, "This verse is meaningless."' Which of course makes us wonder: does this fit in with Ghalib's reply to Shākir's query? Did Shākir report such continuing objections, and is that why Ghalib began his reply as he did? Probably we will never be able to be sure, but the possibility is well worth considering.

In the commentarial tradition, a gap of twenty-odd years follows Ḥālī and Nazm, punctuated only by the fragmentary work of Muḥammad 'Abd ul-Vājid 'Vājid' (1902) and the brief and partial work of 'Hasrat' Mohānī (1905), who, on this verse, merely paraphrases Ghalib's own words. Then we find another pair of important commentators, the two 'Bekḥud's: Sayyid Muḥammad Aḥmad 'Bekḥud' Mohānī (1883–1940), writing around 1923, and Sayyid Vahid ud-Dīn 'Bekḥud' Dihlavī (1863–1955), writing around 1924. Both of them, and in fact all the later commentators, generally agree with the paraphrased prose 'meaning' of the verse as outlined first briefly by Ghalib himself, and then at more length by Nazm. In fact, it is striking how little the commentators disagree among themselves in their explication of this 'meaningless' verse; many of Ghalib's verses generate a considerably wider range of commentarial readings.

Of all the commentators, Bekḥud Mohānī is unique in the passion he brings to refuting Nazm's charges of 'meaninglessness'. He is moved to a furious defence that goes on at much more length than Nazm's original attack. These excerpts are typical of its lively, readable, polemical tone:

I am entirely astonished at Janāb [Nazm]'s words. Five objections to one verse, and those objections too such that a sound taste puts its finger to its teeth [in amazement]! The aforementioned gentleman does not find any word in this verse that expresses aversion to insubstantial existence. Although in the first line, not to speak of aversion, a powerful word like 'plaintiff' is present. And the complaint too is such that the plaintiffs, like those seeking vengeance for the murder of an innocent, have donned paper robes. 'Aversion' was a commonplace word; so in such a place why would a pulse-taker of words and meaning like Mirzā have selected it? After a look at what I have submitted, probably (*ghālībān*) it cannot be said that the verse is in the realm of 'meanings internal to the poet'....

As for the claim that people told Mirzā to his face that this opening verse was meaningless, in my opinion it is not necessary to give a reply, because the aforementioned gentleman has not given any source for this information. But it is necessary to say this much: if such a thing happened, it is no cause for astonishment. There are many such 'connoisseurs' today; nor were they few in Mirzā's time either....

I am astonished at Janāb [Nazm]'s presumption—that he did not even reflect that Mirzā chose this opening verse (*maṭla'*) for the opening verse of his *divān*. He ignored the fact that the rank Mirzā held as a poet, he also held as a judge of poetry. The pitilessness with which Mirzā made a selection from his own poetry [for publication]—such examples are not to be seen even in the case of the Persian purists. Then, those venerable elders were destined to have the honour of taking part in the making of the selection. In that day there was heartfelt acceptance of their understanding of poetry, their grasp of subtle points; and even today people do not dispute their

decisions. Everyone also knows that Mirzā's *divān* was published in his lifetime. Even after the publication of his *divān*, Mirzā lived for some time. It's astonishing that he never had the suspicion, 'My opening verse is meaningless!' [Arabic:] 'Take heed, you who are insightful' (Bekḥud Mohānī 1970: 1–3).

What a fine and vigorous riposte! According to Bekḥud Mohānī, why is Nazm's accusation groundless? 1) because the word 'plaintiff' and the wearing of paper robes show plenty of aversion to 'insubstantial existence'; 2) because no source has been given for the allegations that contemporaries found the verse meaningless; 3) because even if some contemporaries did make such claims, they were pretentious poetasters seeking to augment their own glory; 4) because Ghalib himself was both an excellent judge of poetry, and an admirably severe critic of his own work; and 5) because his friends who helped him choose verses for publication were revered connoisseurs. Here, one might think, the battle has been fairly joined. How will later commentators advance the debate?

As it turns out, they will advance it minimally if at all. Bekḥud Dihlavī, writing at almost the same time as Bekḥud Mohānī, illustrates a much more typical commentarial approach. His remarks are given in their entirety:

The meaning is that existence is a cause of pain and suffering because of its instability and mortality. The commentary is that the world—that is, the population of the world—is a plaintiff, about the Eternal Engraver's mischievousness of writing. (The dress of a plaintiff, according to an ancient custom of Iran, used to be of paper, the way in Hindustan those with complaints used to carry a lighted torch in the day, or in Arabia they used to put a murdered person's clothing on a spear and go to seek vengeance.) The meaning of 'mischievousness' is 'not to stay fixed'. And 'not to stay fixed' is already proved because of the picture's having a paper robe. That is, the common custom is that a picture is made on paper, and paper is a thing that gets ruined quickly. By 'every figure in the picture' is meant the totality of animals and plants. And all these things are destined for oblivion. The only difference is that a flower withers in the course of a day; for a human's death, no [fixed] interval has been decreed. Even things made of wood, stone, metal finally become useless and broken. When all the things in the world are in this state, for an image of existence to be a plaintiff about its instability and contingency is a complete proof of the poet's lofty imagination and uncommon inventiveness. In my opinion this verse is meaningful, and the thought is one heretofore untouched. To call this verse meaningless is to do violence to the claims of justice (Bekḥud Dihlavī 1934: 9).

Bekḥud Dihlavī thus takes the high road: he does not argue with Nazm in detail, but simply provides an eloquent prose paraphrase and explanation of the verse. He then concludes that the verse is so manifestly meaningful

that to call it meaningless is 'to do violence to the claims of justice'. Bekhud Dihlavi unquestionably represents the commentarial mainstream. The synthesizing commentator Āghā Muḥammad 'Bāqir' (1917?-72), writing in 1939, sums up the situation pretty accurately: 'Except for [Naẓm], all the commentators call this verse meaningful' (Bāqir 1943: 7).

Thus, the main line of the commentarial tradition: prose paraphrase including disputes about 'meaning', interspersed with prose paraphrase not including disputes about 'meaning'. If space permitted, I could provide many more examples, most on the order of Bekhud Dihlavi's comments. But let us move on to consider some of the neglected possibilities—tools that were conspicuously available to every commentator, and were conspicuously not used.

Roads Not Taken, Tools Not Used

We can also marshal internal evidence from the commentarial tradition to provide a sort of minority report: to show rare examples of the use of some of the critical tools that the commentators so routinely neglected.

Around 1950, there appears a brief and unusually lucid commentarial analysis of *naqsh faryādi*—that of Labbhū Rām 'Josh' Malsiyānī (1883-1976). Josh provides a more precise and technically focused analysis than any we have seen before, including Ghalib's own:

Some say that this verse is nonsensical. But this is entirely an injustice. Mirzā Ṣāhib says in a style of 'sophisticated naiveté' (*tajāhul-i 'arīfāna*), 'Who has, through his artisanship, displayed so much mischievousness in the image of every creature, that each individual is unable to endure that mischievousness, and can be seen to make a complaint?' In the second line is the verbal device (*ṣan'at*) of 'elegantly assigning a cause' (*ḥusn-i ta'līl*). The clothing of a picture is of paper. Mirzā takes that clothing to be the clothing of plaintiffs. 'Mischievousness' refers to the coming into being, and destruction, of substances, and thus to the various types of events that keep erasing one creature after another (Josh 1950: 49).

For the first time, we see a commentator who goes beyond arguments about meaning, and beyond prose paraphrase. Josh's use of technical terms enables him to describe the verse more incisively and compactly than any previous commentator. Let us pause to consider the critical tools that enable him to say a lot in a small space.

'Elegantly assigning a cause' (*ḥusn-i ta'līl*) is a well-established technical term in the classical poetics of the Persian-Urdu ghazal. It is defined by an authoritative modern handbook as follows:

Ta'līl means 'to establish a reason' or 'to express a reason'. *Ḥusn-i ta'līl* is to give a fine and superior example of that action. If a reason is expressed for something such that even if it is not real, it has in it some poetic richness and subtlety, and it has some affinity with reality and nature as well, that is called *ḥusn-i ta'līl* (Fārūqī et al. 1981: 49-50).

In the most massive classical handbook of poetics, Najm ul-Ḡhanī's 1232-page *Baḥr ul-Faṣāḥat* (Ocean of Eloquence), *ḥusn-i ta'līl* is not only defined in similar terms (though with more detail), but is systematically analysed into four subclasses, each of which is then elaborately explained through the analysis of many illustrative verses (Najm ul-Ḡhanī 1925: 1076-82.).

Josh has, it seems to me, identified exactly the primary 'verbal device' that Ghalib was using in his verse. In classical ghazal, most lines were end-stopped; enjambement, though by no means non-existent, was relatively uncommon. And because each two-line verse had to make its own independent poetic impact, manipulating the relationship(s) of the two lines to each other was one of the poet's most effective strategies. One line could give a cause, and the other its effect; one line could ask a question, and the other could answer it; one line could make a general assertion, and the other provide a specific example; and so on. Handbooks of rhetoric provided many subtle analyses of possible intra-verse (which in practice almost always meant inter-line) relationships (Najm ul-Ḡhanī 1925: 1015-1117). Reversing the expected logical order (first effect, then cause; first answer, then question; and likewise) was another source of piquancy, especially under conditions of oral performance in a *mushā'ira*. Such reversal forms the framework of *naqsh faryādi*: the first line expresses an interrogative reaction, while the second line—for which, in oral performance, the listeners would have had to wait—provides the crucial piece of observational evidence on which the first is based.

So relevant are the traditional Persian-Urdu analytical categories, in fact, that Josh has casually invoked not one but two of them. For he points as well to Ghalib's use of what I have translated as 'sophisticated naiveté' (*tajāhul-i 'arīfāna*); this is itself considered a verbal device. Its meaning is 'to knowingly become unknowing'. That is, 'despite knowing about something, to express one's unawareness, so that extravagance can be used in explaining it' (Fārūqī et al. 1981: 46). And in this case too, *Baḥr ul-Faṣāḥat* not only recognizes the device but carefully analyses its use into two subcategories: those in which the poet proposes two possible explanations for something; and those without such an either-or structure (Najm ul-Ḡhanī 1925: 1059).

I want to offer one further example, this one from the very recent commentarial tradition: two excerpts from an extended analysis by the

distinguished modern critic and all-round literary figure Shams ur-Raḥmān Fārūqī (1935–), whose own selective commentary was published in 1989. Fārūqī makes several additions to our repertoire of technical terms; and in the process, further deepens our understanding of the verse:

In addition to the 'semantic affinities' (*murā'āt un-naẓīr*) ('image', 'writing', 'of paper', 'robe', 'figure', 'picture') Ghalib has also taken good care in this verse to have 'resemblance of sound' (*tajnīs-i ẓawtī*) (*faryādī, kis kī, shokhī, kāghazī hai pairahan har paikar*). In the second line there is a special emphasis on *har*, which knocks against the two *r*'s of *paikar-i taṣvīr* and increases the elements of intensity and mystery in the line (Fārūqī 1989: 23).

Here we notice two technical terms, suggesting two kinds of analysis that can be performed on the verse. The meaning of the first term, *murā'āt un-naẓīr*, can be recognized simply from the examples Fārūqī gives: the verse is crammed with interrelated and mutually evocative words from the vocabulary range pertaining to painted/written images. In fact, out of the verse's fifteen words, six are part of this domain. Technically, *murā'āt un-naẓīr* (which is so fundamental a poetic quality that it goes by several other names as well, such as *tanāsūb* and *munāsibat*) is defined as occurring when 'in the poem words are gathered together the meanings of which have a relationship to each other, but this relationship is not one of contrariety or opposition' (Fārūqī *et al.* 1981: 56–7). In fact, this semantic affinity goes deeper in Urdu than my translation can even show. Consider just the following multi-faceted examples: *naqsh*, which I have translated as 'image/painting', is defined as: 'a painting, a picture; portrait; drawing; a print; a carving, an engraving; a map, or plan'. And *paikar*, which I have translated as 'figure', means: 'face, countenance, visage; form, appearance, figure; resemblance, portrait, likeness' (Platts 1930: 1145, 300).

The other term that Fārūqī uses, 'resemblance of sound' (*tajnīs-i ẓawtī*), refers to a broad range of sound effects and kinds of alliteration. These are indeed conspicuous: in the nine words he mentions, *-ī* occurs four times, *-ai* and *-ar* three times each. And then there are, of course, the special effects created in the second line by the use of *r* sounds, as he points out. To see how closely sound effects are analysed within the classical poetic tradition, consider just one example: the special term 'stitched-together resemblance' (*tajnīs-i marfū*) applies to lines like this one of Dabīr's: *lo tegh-i barq dam kā qadam darmiyān nahīn*, in which stitching together *barq dam* replicates the sound of *qadam* (Fārūqī *et al.* 1981: 59–62, esp. 61). And of course Baḥr ul-Faṣāḥat analyses a whole range of such *ṣan'at-i tajnīs* into a remarkable number

of categories, with examples even more detailed and varied (Najm ul-Ghanī 1925: 894–920).

Commentators do sometimes point out 'semantic affinities' within a verse of Ghalib's, though usually only casually: they may mention a couple of strikingly related words, but without undertaking a careful survey of the whole verse. However, far more commonly, they do nothing at all along these lines. As the reader will have noticed, in the case of this verse, which has extremely conspicuous semantic affinities involving fully 40 per cent of its total words, no commentator so far has even once alluded, even in passing, to the presence of this important structural device.

But the second sentence in Fārūqī's analysis is far more remarkable, indeed even unique, in the tradition of Ghalib commentary. On the face of it, it looks quite normal: 'In the second line there is a special emphasis on *har*, which knocks against the two *r*'s of *paikar-i taṣvīr* and increases the elements of intensity and mystery in the line.' And yet, it is not normal within the commentarial tradition. Not only in the analyses of this verse, but in all the analyses on all the verses that I have read so far, I cannot recall that even one commentator has ever closely analysed the sound effects in even one verse. And this despite the fact that quite a number of Ghalib's verses, which after all were composed for oral recitation, have the most astonishing sound effects. The verse *jān dī dī hu'ī usī kī thī / haq to yūn hai kī haq adā na hu'ā* ('Arshī 1982: 193) comes to mind at once, but many others cry out almost as loudly for analysis in terms of sound effects. Invariably, they cry out in vain; the commentators are simply not listening.

Let me conclude this brief tour through the commentarial approaches to *naqsh faryādī* with one more excerpt—the conclusion of Fārūqī's analysis of the verse:

The first line is also constructed as *inshā'īya*, that is, interrogative. Interrogation is Ghalib's special style. It is possible that he learned the art of interrogation and other *inshā'īya* principles from Mir. But the first verse of the *divān*, the theme of which ought to have been founded on praise of God, calls the arrangement of the two worlds into question. This mischievousness, or free-spiritedness, or lofty-mindedness, is Ghalib's characteristic manner. Mir too has called the arrangements of the Creator of the universe into question; for example, in his very first *divān* he says,

*ko'ī ho maḥram-i shokhī tirā to main pūchhūn
kī baẓm-i 'aish-i jahān kyā samajh ke barham kī*

If anyone would be intimate with your mischievousness, I would ask:
What were you thinking (that it was) when you overthrew the gathering of enjoyment of the world?

Seeing the word 'mischievousness' the suspicion arises that Mir's verse might have stuck in Ghalib's mind. But to use the theme of the mischievousness of the Creator of the universe, and on top of that to turn that mischievousness into a subject for question and place such a verse at the head of the *divān*—this mischievousness was possible only from Ghalib (Fārūqī 1989: 23–4).

This resonant and suitable conclusion gives Ghalib and Mir well-warranted praise of a kind that they surely would have appreciated. It invites us to consider the term 'mischievousness' (*shokhī*), as many other commentators do as well. In fact, Yūsuf Salīm Chishtī (among others) also makes the point about the special 'mischievousness' of using such a verse as a *ḥamd* (Chishtī 1983: 231–2). But no other commentator has directed our attention towards the poetic value of *inshā'īya* speech, although interrogative discourse is such a prominent feature both of this verse, and of Ghalib's poetry in general.

The concept of *inshā'īya* or non-informative (i.e. interrogative, prescriptive, hypothetical, or exclamatory) discourse, as opposed to *khābarīya* (informative or falsifiable discourse), is far from new within the Arabic-Persian-Urdu poetic tradition (Fārūqī 1993: 23–37, 1997; Pritchett 1994: 106–8). It is considered at length in *Baḥr ul-Faṣāḥat*; and just look at how elaborately it has been appreciated and analysed. Its internal categories, all individually discussed, consist of:

bayān-i tamannā, 'expression of desire', twenty examples, some explained;
bayān-i istifhām, 'interrogative expression', twenty examples, some explained
 (with subsections devoted to all the important interrogatives);
bayān-i amr, the imperative mood, thirty-four examples, some explained;
bayān-i nahī, prohibitive expression, fourteen examples, some explained;
bayān-i nidā, the vocative mood, thirty-six examples, some explained;
bayān-i du'ā, expression of supplication, five examples, some explained (Najm ul-Ghānī 1925: 595–627).

In short, the classical Urdu ghazal poets did not exactly lack for technical explication of their poetics; *Baḥr ul-Faṣāḥat* alone is 1,232 pages long.

Since these off-the-shelf analytical categories were so readily available, why do the commentators generally ignore them? Ghalib himself, when he explains his own verses in letters, rarely goes beyond the simple prose paraphrase level he employs in explaining *naqsh faryādī*. And why does a major critic, literary figure, and connoisseur like Nazm generally ignore these well-established analytical categories? And why do virtually all the other commentators do the same? (I have not looked at every commentary, but I have looked at the most important and influential ones.) In the case of this

particular verse, Josh has mentioned two such categories, but within Josh's whole commentary such terminology, alas, remains rare. Fārūqī has given us three more categories, but he is quite exceptional within the commentarial tradition, since he is, among other qualifications, a devoted student of classical poetics.

To sum up, two features of the commentarial tradition are worthy of note. First, commentators almost always provide an interpretive prose paraphrase of a verse, either brief or expanded (or sometimes twofold, for two interpretations); once in a while they will also defend or (more rarely) attack the 'meaning' of the verse. And second, commentators generally ignore both the technical terminology of Persian-Urdu poetics, and the formal analysis that this terminology is designed to facilitate; though they occasionally use a technical term or briefly point out a formal feature within the verse, this is haphazard and rare.

It is this second observation that I have found so perplexing. Here we have in the ghazal an extremely stylized genre of poetry, one that takes shape within the tiniest possible verbal space, one that both possesses and requires a tremendous repertoire of technical knowledge. And here we have a poet who writes its most difficult and complex verses. And here we have a number of volunteers, some of whom were, in theory at least, highly competent insiders within the tradition, who offer to help us understand the poetry. Why in the world do they do so partial and limited a job of it? Why do they not use the wide range of tools their own tradition had developed for exactly this purpose?

What Price 'Meaning'?

As we have seen, Ghalib undertook to tell Shākir 'the meaning of the meaningless verses', starting with *naqsh faryādī*. And what he then provided was a brief, coherent prose paraphrase, spelling out in more detail the thought that was latent in the fifteen words of the verse. He also offered some background information about the history and meaning of paper robes as plaintiff's attire (though he did not point out the extra piquancy of positioning this verse as the *ḥamd*). Not only did he not mention such terms as 'elegantly assigning a cause', 'sophisticated naiveté', 'semantic affinities', 'resemblance of sound', or 'interrogative discourse', he also did not suggest in layman's language any of the domains they were designed to investigate. That is, he did not say, 'Take a look at how many of the words in the whole verse come from the domain of painted/written images', or 'How about those interesting sound effects involving *i* and *ri*', or 'Did you notice that you first get the

conclusion (and that too in the form of a question), and only afterward learn the reason for it." Even if Ghalib had considered Shākir a poetic novice, he himself was a masterful letter-writer and could certainly have conveyed this kind of analytical information if he had wished to do so. Apparently, to tell 'the meaning of the verse' was, for his purposes at the time, to provide something much simpler than a full exposition or analysis of the verse.

This letter was written late in his life, and perhaps in a spirit of courtesy and resignation. For after all, by then he was used to being asked variations on this question. He had been asked them at frequent intervals for almost fifty years. We have a smallish amount of anecdotal evidence that documents a much larger amount of controversy on the subject—controversy that apparently continued throughout Ghalib's life.

Muhammad Husain 'Āzād, author of the great canon-forming literary history *Āb-i Hayāt* (Water of Life, 1880), conspicuously dislikes Ghalib, and never misses an opportunity to take potshots at him. Introducing the classical ghazal tradition, Āzād explains that Ghalib's work has grave problems as compared to that of earlier *ustāds*: 'Ghalib, on some occasions, followed excellently in their footsteps—but he was a lover of "meaning creation" (*ma'nī āfirīnī*), and he gave more attention to Persian, so that in Urdu, the number of his largely (*ghāliban*) unblemished verses has not turned out to be more than one or two hundred' (Āzād 1982: 77; Pritchett and Fārūqī 2001: 103–4.).

Poor Ghalib, what a piquant situation: because of his love of 'meaning creation', his poetry is attacked as flawed and even meaningless. The situation is so dire, in Āzād's eyes, that only one or two hundred of Ghalib's Urdu verses are really satisfactory. In case we might have missed the point, Āzād spells it out for us later on with even greater care. Because of the central role of *Āb-i Hayāt* in shaping poetic attitudes over the past century, the relevant passage is given at length:

One day the late *ustād* [Zauq] and I were discussing Mirzā [Ghalib] Shāhib's style of 'delicate thought' (*nāzūk khiyālī*), and Persian constructions, and people's various temperaments. I said, 'If some verse manages to come out without convolutions, it's as devastating as Doomsday!' He said, 'Very good!' Then he said, 'Even his better verses, people fail to appreciate. I will recite some of his verses to you.' He recited a number of individual verses. One is still in my memory:

daryā-i mā'āsi tumuk-ābi se hu'ā khushk
merā sar-i dāman bhī abhī tar na hu'ā thā
 The river of sinfulness dried up for lack of water;
 As yet, not even the hem of my garment had become wet.

There is no doubt that through the power of his name ['Asad' means lion], he was a lion of the thickets of themes (*maḡmūn*) and meanings. Two things have a special connection with his style. The first is that 'meaning-creation' and 'delicate thought' were his special pursuit. The second is that because he had more practice in Persian, and a long connection with it, he used to put a number of words into constructions in ways in which they are not spoken. But those verses that turned out clear and lucid are beyond compare.

People of wit did not cease from their satirical barbs. Thus once Mirzā had gone to a *mushā'ira*. Ḥakīm Āghā Jān 'Aish' was a lively-natured and vivacious person [who recited some verses that included the following]:

We understood the speech of Mīr, we understood the language of Mirzā [Saudā],
 But his speech—he himself might understand, or God might understand.

For this reason, towards the end of his life he absolutely renounced the path of 'delicate thought'. Thus if you look, the ghazals of the last period are quite clear and lucid (Āzād 1982: 494–6; Pritchett and Faruqi 2001: 405–6).

As Āzād tells it, Zauq emphasizes the unappreciatedness of even Ghalib's better verses, while 'Aish mocks him in a specially composed verse sequence. And this is not the only such incident reported by Āzād. He also tells us a long story of how this same 'Aish sets up a foolish, bumbling schoolmaster as a poet, giving him the pen-name 'Hudhud' (Hoopoe) and making him a figure of fun at court *mushā'iras*. Composing his poetry for him, 'Aish puts into his mouth many satiric verses:

At the secret instigation of the Ḥakīm Shāhib, Hudhud pecked at the nightingales of poetry with his beak. Thus he recited some ghazals before the whole *mushā'ira*, of which the words were extremely refined and colorful, but the verses absolutely without meaning. And he would say, 'I've written this ghazal in the style of Ghalib'. I remember one opening verse:

markaz-i mahvar-i girdūn ba-lab-i āb nahīn
nākhun-i qurṣ-i qarakh shubh-i mizrāb nahīn
 The circle of the axis of the heavens is not at the lip of the water.
 The fingernail of the arc of the rainbow does not resemble a spectrum.

The late Ghalib was a flowing river. He used to listen, and laugh (Āzād 1982: 469; Pritchett and Faruqi 2001: 381).

Āzād thus pretends, in his clever and sneaky way, to end with a tribute to Ghalib's sense of humour. But the rhetorical point has been amply made: Ghalib wrote poetry in which 'the words were extremely refined and colorful, but the verses absolutely without meaning', and everybody knew this and mocked him for it.

Nor is Āzād our only source for such anecdotes. Ghalib's loyal biographer and *shāgird*, Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī, contributes another such wryly amusing account:

Once Maulvī 'Abd ul-Qādir Rāmpūrī, who was a great jester by temperament, and who had for some time been connected with the Fort of Delhi [the Court], said to Mirzā [Ghalib], 'I don't understand one of your Urdu verses.' And at that moment he composed two lines of verse and recited them before Mirzā:

*pahle to roghan-i gul bhains ke ande se nikāl
phir davā jīmī bhī hai kul bhains ke ande se nikāl*

First take the essence of the rose out of the eggs of buffaloes—
And other drugs are there; take those out of the eggs of buffaloes.

Hearing this, Mirzā was quite astonished, and said, 'Far be it from me—this is not my verse!' Maulvī 'Abd ul-Qādir said, keeping up the joke, 'I myself have seen it in your *divān*! And if there's a *divān* here, I can show it to you right now.' Finally Mirzā realized that in this guise the Maulvī was objecting to his work, and was insisting that there were verses like this in his *divān* (Ḥālī 1986: 112; Russell and Islam 1969: 40).

Ḥālī notes that Ghalib was not easily intimidated: to the contrary in fact, for he incorporated into his verses a firm defiance of his critics. Perhaps the most explicit example was this one (Ḥālī 1986: 112; 'Arshī 1982: 266):

*na satā'ish kā tamannā na šīle kī parvā
gar nahīn haiṁ mire ash'ār meṁ ma'nī na sahī*

Neither a longing for praise, nor a care for reward—
If there's no meaning in my verses, then so be it.

Both this and another similar verse cited by Ḥālī (Ḥālī 1986: 112–3; 'Arshī 1982: 259) are quite early (1821), and Ḥālī goes on to argue, just as Āzād does, that in later life Ghalib duly saw the error of his ways and ceased to write such difficult poetry. This is the official 'natural poetry' view, and we do not have the scope in which to discuss it here; but whether we accept this view or not, it is clear that despite all the friendly and not-so-friendly harassment he received, Ghalib never repudiated the 'meaningless' poetry of his youth. He retained dozens of verses like *naqsh faryādi*—and some far more obscure and rebarbative—in his *divān* through all four editions (1841, 1847, 1861, 1862), and still seemed quite content with the 'meaningless' verses that he explained to Shākir only four years before he died. In the case of another of these 'meaningless' verses, he wrote to Shākir with apparent pleasure that it contained a 'new idea I have brought forth from my temperament', and he explicated all three verses without the least hint of anything other than pride in them (Khalīq Anjum 1985, 2: 837–8).

Certainly Ghalib had to endure the hostility of those who genuinely preferred a simpler and more colloquial style, and of those who preferred an emphasis on romantic emotion rather than a more cerebral metaphysics. In general, people who liked their ghazal verses to be flowing (*rawān*) and readily, colloquially, intelligible, ended up furious at him: he could write such verses brilliantly when he chose, as his *divān* amply demonstrates, yet he so often did not choose! Why did the wretch not write more verses like: 'The river of sinfulness dried up for lack of water, / As yet, not even the hem of my garment had become wet'? Behind the mockery of his contemporaries one can sense the deep irritation of envious colleagues and frustrated connoisseurs who see a major talent being misdirected into folly.

And in some cases, one can quite well sympathize with the critics. No one could possibly understand *naqsh faryādi* without knowing that plaintiffs wear paper robes when they come in search of justice; but at least that literary convention, whether or not it was historically true, had a proper 'warrant' (*sanad*), or historical lineage of prior use by authoritative *ustāds*, within the ghazal world. Consider a far more dire situation: a totally arbitrary warping of language, with no other defence than sheer caprice ('Arshī 1982: 283).

*qumrī kaf-i khākastar-o-bulbul qafas-i rang
ai nāla nishān-i jigar-i sokhta kyā hai*
Turtledove, a fistful of dust, and nightingale, a cage of colour
Oh lament, what is the sign of a burnt liver?

Now this is one that you could think about for an awfully long time without being able to figure it out. It is another very early ghazal, composed (like *naqsh faryādi*) in 1816. (Composed by a nineteen-year-old boy!) But please note that Ḥālī was not even born until 1837, and his conversations with Ghalib took place in the last thirteen or so years of Ghalib's life. Here is his report on this particular verse:

I myself asked Mirzā the meaning of this. He said, 'In place of "oh" (*ai*), read "except" (*juz*); the meaning will come to your understanding by itself. The meaning of the verse is that the turtledove, which is not more than a fistful of dust, and the nightingale, which is not more than a cage of elements—the proof of their being liver-burnt, that is, lovers, is only from their warbling and speaking.' Here, the meaning in which Mirzā has used the word *ai* is obviously his own invention.

One person, having heard this meaning, said, 'If in place of *ai* he had put *juz*, or if he had composed the second line like this, "Oh lament, except for you, what is the sign of love," the meaning would have become clear.' This person's utterance is absolutely correct, but since Mirzā avoided common principles as much as possible, and did not want to move on the broad thoroughfare, rather than wanting every

verse to be widely understandable he preferred that inventiveness and unheard-of-ness (*nirālāpan*) be found in his style of thought and his style of expression (Ḥālī 1986: 114; Russell and Islam 1969: 39).

Who would not sympathize with this hapless 'person', whose own plaintive lament is perfectly justified? Such a spectacular level of youthful poetic arrogance does seem to be an aberration; it is hard to find other such blatant, in-your-face redefinitions of common words elsewhere in the *divān*. In the case of a verse like this one, the charge of making 'meaningless' poetry could be said to be well grounded. Ghalib is guilty at times of his own form of *shokhī-i taḥrīr*, 'mischievousness of writing'. But there is no evidence that in his conversations with Ḥālī—or anywhere else, for that matter—he ever showed any regret for this youthful arrogance and *shokhī*.

Ghalib the poet of 'meaning creation' (*ma'nī āfirīnī*) and 'delicate thought' (*nāzūk khīyālī*) was always a high flyer, as he himself insisted and as Ḥālī points out so aptly (and as Āzād points out so accusingly). He wanted to create his own meanings, and to have them apprehended subtly. He wanted to do brilliantly what others had done well; and he also wanted to do what no one had done before. He wanted to make more meanings, and more complex meanings, and in a more compressed and multivalent way, than anybody else in the whole Persian-Urdu poetic world. To a large extent he succeeded, and he knew it. But his success was contested and controversial, and came at a price. He died in poverty, humiliated at the end, dependent in old age on unresponsive patrons.

Throughout his life he expressed frustration that he did not find hearers or readers who could grasp the full dimensions of what he was doing. He did not suffer fools gladly, but he responded to genuine *shāgirds* and lovers of the *ghazal*. He no doubt gave Shākir the 'meaning' that he thought was suitable and sufficient to the occasion. And he gave Ḥālī rather more. In the case of another verse, Ḥālī tells us how Ghalib suggested to him not only interpretations, but also an interpretive process:

kaun hotā hai ḥarf-i mai-i mard-afgan-i 'ishq
hai mukarrar lab-i sāqī merī ṣalā mere ba'd
 Who can withstand the man-killing wine of passion?
 Many times there is a call on the lips of the cup-bearer, after me.

This verse ('Arshī 1982: 199) is another early one (1821). It was certainly not unfathomable, since it had an 'apparent' meaning that was perfectly clear to Ḥālī. But Ghalib did not want him to stop there. Ghalib urged him to think harder, and to dig more deeply into the verse. As Ḥālī reports:

The manifest (*zāhirī*) meaning of this verse is that since I have died, the cup-bearer of the man-killing wine of passion—that is, the beloved—many times gives the call—that is, summons people to the wine of passion. The idea is that after me, no buyer of the wine of passion remained; thus he had to give the call again and again. But after further reflection, as Mirzā himself used to say, an extremely subtle meaning arises in it, and that is, that the first line is the words of this same cup-bearer's call; and he is reciting that line repeatedly. At one time he recites it in a tone of invitation.... Then when in response to his call no one comes, he recites it again in a tone of despair: Who can withstand the man-killing wine of passion! That is, no one. In this, tone (*lahaja*) and style (*tarz-i adā*) are very effective. The tone of calling someone is one thing, and the way of saying it very softly, in despair, is another. When you repeat the line in question in this way, at once the meanings will enter deeply into your mind (Ḥālī 1986: 130–1).

Mirzā used to say that 'after further reflection' another meaning—in fact, an 'extremely subtle/refined/delightful meaning' (*nihāyat laṭīf ma'nī*)—arises in the verse. And how is that meaning created? Why, first of all, by rearranging the relationship of the two lines, so that instead of reading the second as an explanatory sequel to the first—'1) Who can endure the wine of passion? (not me, I died of it!) 2) (Thus) after my death the cup-bearer often calls out (in vain)'—we read the first as a result of the logically prior second: '2) After my death the cup-bearer goes around calling out many times, 1) Who can endure the wine of passion?' In short, more meanings can be provided by rearranging the logical and semantic relationships of the two lines, just as classical poetic theory would lead us to expect; and with a special piquancy provided by putting the secondary or reactive line first, and the logically prior or informative line second—just as in *naqsh faryādī*.

Moreover, we notice that the first line is in the *inshā'īya* mode, and in Ghalib's greatly favoured *inshā'īya* category, the interrogative (just as in *naqsh faryādī*). Ghalib has been guiding Ḥālī not only to read the verse with two different line relationships, but also to read it with different kinds of *inshā'īya* intonation. And he has tactfully implied to Ḥālī that such subtleties have become evident even to Ghalib himself not initially but only 'after further thought', although it is impossible to believe that a veteran 'meaning creator' like Ghalib would not do these tricks with deliberate intention, subtle planning, and the maximum possible technical expertise. We know that Ḥālī had had a patchy, often interrupted classical education with which he was never satisfied (Pritchett 1994: 13–14), so perhaps he was not too good on his terminology; perhaps Ghalib is patiently playing the *ustād* here, and explaining technical tricks in non-technical language. But explain them he does, so that Ḥālī ends up provided with a cluster of meanings for that verse

that he did not have before. Moreover, he can then explain them clearly and intelligibly to us, and does so. We see that it can be done, and that he can do it. Why does he so rarely carry over this excellent critical approach to other verses? (And why does Ghalib never do so at all?)

How Much 'Meaning' Is Enough?

In short, why the parlous state of the commentary on *naqsh faryādi*, and of the commentarial tradition in general? It is clear that the typical, least-common-denominator commentarial entry for any given verse is a prose paraphrase of the 'meaning', rather than anything analytically more sophisticated; but it is much less clear why this is so consistently the case. Why do the commentators give us so frustratingly little access to the huge, sophisticated, invaluable set of analytical tools developed within the Persian-Urdu poetic tradition?

S.R. Fārūqī writes in his commentary about verses that have 'layer upon layer of wordplay (*ri'āyateh*) and verbal affinities (*munāsibateh*), but the commentators have generally not mentioned them, because...they have followed the opinion of [Naẓm] that wordplay and verbal affinities are nothing worthy of respect' (Faruqi 1989: 61). Faruqi's view, however, does not account for the fact that Ghalib himself explains the 'meaning' of his verses in a similarly stripped-down way.

To me, the most plausible explanation for the commentators' tunnel vision is the fact that the commentarial tradition springs directly out of the lifelong, no-holds-barred conflict between Ghalib and his critics, on the question of meaning. The commentarial tradition assumes that Ghalib is always under suspicion of creating the kind of poetry that Āzād mocks: verses that are full of 'extremely refined and colorful' words, but that remain 'absolutely without meaning'. Ghalib's verses are thus in danger of having zero meanings; the commentators seek to vindicate them by providing at least (and usually at most) one meaning apiece. The commentators' primary goal is to provide not ten meanings rather than one, but one meaning rather than none. A verse with one meaning is quite sufficiently vindicated and equipped, and need not be greedy for more. Once the commentators have winkled out such a meaning, they tend to show the pride and enthusiasm of successful crossword puzzle solvers. Shaukat Merathī, author of one of the earliest commentaries, entitles his work *Hal-i Kulliyāt-i Urdū-i Mirzā Ghālib Dihlavi* (A 'Solution' to the Complete Urdu Verse of Mirzā Ghālib Dihlavi). Bekhūd Mohānī uses the same term, 'solution', for his interpretation of each verse; if he finds two meanings for a verse, each one is labelled as a separate

'solution' (*hal*), and numbered accordingly. When you have finished a crossword puzzle, it is done; the problem has been solved, and you are well entitled to move on.

How egregious this notion is, readers of Shamsur Raḥmān Fārūqī's work will understand. However it is to be explained, the impoverished state of the commentarial tradition with regard to the very resources that one might think would be most suitable and closest at hand—the technical analytical categories of the classical Persian and Urdu poetic tradition—is a striking and depressing reality. The commentators' 'solution' approach is opposed to Ghalib's own poetic practice and theory, as well as to the best poetic practice and theory of our own time (and, of course, of practically every other time too). How the Empson of *Seven Types of Ambiguity* would have loved to work on Ghalib!

To us, of course, the best defence would be a good offence: to insist that Ghalib offers not one meaning, but *four or five*! Four or five meanings in two little lines! Plus wordplay, sound effects, and every poetic device he could fit in! Reading the commentators makes you feel like putting on paper robes, carrying a lighted torch in the daytime, and going in search of justice.

And yet the deficiencies of the commentarial tradition serve also to highlight a strange triumph: that Ghalib's poetry lives, and is loved, despite more than a century of naturalistic criticism and grossly inadequate interpretation. And the commentaries serve also to evoke the memory of another of Ghalib's great verses about letters on paper and their all too ephemeral fate ('Arshī 1982: 337):

yā rab zamānā mujh ko miṭātā hai kis liye
lauḥ-i jahān pe harf-i mukarrar nahīn hūn main
Oh Master, why does the age erase me?
On the tablet of the world I am not a repeated letter.

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To You Your Cremation, To Me My Burial: The Ideals of Inter-Communal Harmony in Premchand's *Karbala*



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Literature is not merely for entertainment. Its supremacy is presently gauged by the extent of emotions it produces to stir our imagination.

(Premchand)

South Asian literary establishments rightly take pride in Dhanpat Rai Shrivastava (1880–1936), popularly known as Premchand, as a visionary and reformer who contributed much to twentieth-century Hindi-Urdu aesthetic sensibilities. As a leading figure who shaped what is perhaps the most consequential strain of twentieth-century South Asian literature, the Progressive movement or *taraqqī pasand adab*, Premchand committed himself to pursuing a utilitarian ethics of literature. Literature is valuable insofar as it acts as a medium through which the socio-economic well-being of a society is enhanced. Such an enhancement entails a reassessment of existing literary standards, including a thorough re-evaluation of notions of beauty. 'We must change the standard of beauty', proclaimed Premchand, and the Progressive Urdu movement subsequently invoked these words as the most important clarion call resonating from the subcontinent's literary circles (Ja'fri 1994: 46).

The task of this essay is to explore the text and context of one of Premchand's dramas, *Karbala*. The central research question to be addressed in this study is how Premchand's *Karbala* constitutes a utilitarian nationalist allegory, a source of trans-communal edification, above and beyond simplistic syncretist-separatist polarities. I shall discuss how history is re-enacted in