

ON READING GHALIB WITH WESTERN EYES

The View from Brian Quayle Silver's Book *The Noble Science of the Ghazal: The Urdu Poetry of Mirza Ghalib*

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All modern critics of Ghalib, including the author of this interesting volume, are the children of Altaf Husain Hali (1837-1914), whose seminal *Yadgar-e Ghalib* (Memorial to Ghalib), first published in 1897, is still widely read and admired. Hali's work placed Ghalib in the perspective of Indo-Muslim poetry and poetics. More important, the book also placed Ghalib in the vanguard of the coming century. Ghalib was presented as a poet who repaid reading even by a modern reader, notwithstanding the fact that 'Asiatic'—Hali's word—or old style Persian poetry (and by inference, Urdu poetry too) were no longer popular or highly regarded in India, and 'the taste for Asiatic poetry was day by day being absorbed by the European civilization.'¹ This was because, as clearly implied by Hali, the popularity of indigenous ('vernacular', in Colonial parlance) was being swamped and overshadowed by the prestige commanded by English. Although there was 'nothing major or important in Ghalib's life except his poetry and literary activities, yet this one thing made his life a grand event of the concluding era of the (Royal) capital.'² Hali granted that his book wasn't likely to be of a type which would be considered of any use to the country at that time, or which could be seen as fulfilling a felt need,³ yet he wrote his book out of a sense of personal attachment to Ghalib. Also, Ghalib's life and poetry did indeed present material from which the nation could draw useful lessons. (Note the emphasis on drawing 'useful lessons'; for according to Hali's understanding, Western poetics demanded that poetry be socially useful, instructive.)

Hali asserted Ghalib's modernity, but not in the form of direct statements. Rather, he attributed to Ghalib qualities of mind and art which signalled an open or implied break with the tradition. For example: 'It is clear that not only in poetry, but also in his manners, dress and address, food-habits, life style, and even in the art of living and dying, Ghalib disliked to follow the popular, conventional ways.'⁴ (It must be remembered that had Hali been writing even half a century earlier, he wouldn't have dared to make the characterization of Ghalib that he did in 1897, long after the traumatic changes and disconnections of 1857. What was high praise in 1897 was not necessarily so fifty years before.) A couple of pages on, we find Hali telling us that the older masters showed their excellence and virtuosity by improving upon the themes and modes of their forebears, whereas Ghalib 'constructed the mansion of his ghazal on entirely different foundations. His ghazal mostly consists of themes which are unique, which haven't at all been

touched by the creative genius of other poets. Even plain themes were rendered by him in such a way as to make them entirely original, and they are adorned with such subtleties as are not to be found in the works of other masters.’⁵ (Here again, we can clearly hear the footsteps of ‘modernity’, of ‘departure from the old’, of ‘ringing in the new’.)

Hali’s other major contribution in ‘modernizing’ Ghalib was to emancipate him from a trap which was to a certain extent of Ghalib’s own making. Up until the end of the 18th century, Indians writing in Persian were quite confident of their right, prowess and position as genuine Persian writers, not just derivers and imitators of the Iranian corpus. They regarded Indian-Persian literature as something not essentially different from, and equally authoritative as the Iranian Persian. They regarded themselves to be entirely competent and capable readers, producers, critics and evaluators of Persian literature. The term *sabk-i hindi* (Indian Style) was coined much later—and by an Iranian—but a distinct and valid Indo-Persian identity was well-established in the minds of readers and practitioners of Persian in India. Persian words and phrases were used in Urdu with a healthy unconcern for their ‘original’ and ‘authentic’ Persian connotation, or construction, or pronunciation. Just as in Indian Persian, authority lay with the Indians, so in Urdu, authority vested with actual users of Urdu, not with some shadowy master in far away Iran.

All this seems to have changed with the advent of the 19th century. Indians developed some sort of self-hatred in the area of Persian language-use. Nothing that the greatest Indian Persian poet, lexicographer or linguist did, could stand the scrutiny of the *ahl-e zaban* (competent native speaker), and an Indian could never be described as *ahl-e zaban* in Persian. Ghalib, third generation Indian himself, seems to have discovered the putative inadequacies, and the unreliability, of the Indian Persian poets and grammarians in 1827-1828 when, during his long sojourn in Calcutta (Kolkata), some persons objected to a few of his Persian usages on the authority of Qateel (1747/8-1818), a Hindu who converted to Islam and went on to become a major Persian writer of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Ghalib flatly refused to accept Qateel, or any other Indian for that matter, as an arbiter in matters of Persian poetry and usage. Even in his Persian apologia in verse, which he composed to appease Qateel’s supporters, he said:

*God forbid! I am not a bad-mouther,
And whatever I say, I don’t say on my own,
But those who are expert knowers of Persian
Are all of this view and belief
That Qateel was by no means from among the native
speakers.
He certainly didn’t come from Isphahan.*

*Doubtless, he's not worthy of reliance
And his utterances are not suitable as authority.*

*How can I release myself from the hands of Talib, and
Naziri, and Urfi?*

*One who has travelled to such destinations
Of what account could he hold *Qateel* and *Vaqif*?⁶*

This couldn't by any stretch of favourable interpretation be treated as an apology acknowledging the authority and authoritativeness of the Indian Persian poets. In this poem, Ghalib spared the great Abdul Qadir Bedil (1644-1722), the hero and ideal of his younger days. In later life, he denounced even Bedil. He wrote to Abdul Ghafur Surur in March/April 1859, 'Nasir Ali, and Bedil, and Ghanimat, for what does their Persian avail? Examine the poetry of each with the eye of justice; to see the bracelet on your own wrist needs no looking glass.'⁷

To the very end of his life, Ghalib continued to sharply criticize and ridicule and castigate Indian Persian writers (except Khusrau) and to claim exemption and privilege for himself. He must have been aware of the contradiction inherent in his position: as an Indian Persian writer, he was open to the same derision and scorn that he heaped on other Indian Persian writers. That's why he claimed special entitlement for himself. He asserted that he had 'natural affinity' with the language of the Iranians (a claim, he omitted to observe, could have been made by thousands of Persian writers in India). He also asseverated that he had been, as a young student in Agra, the disciple of an 'Iranian master' who instilled in him all the discriminations and subtleties of the standard, pure Persian of the Iranians.⁸

No one was really fooled, but Ghalib's fulminations against Indian Persian writers affected his own reputation as a master of Persian language and poetry. Shibli Numani (1857-1914)'s five-volume history of Persian poetry called *She'r ul Ajam* (Poetry of Iran) barely mentions Ghalib⁹. Thanks to the Iran-oriented syllabuses of Persian prescribed for graduate and post-graduate students in the universities of the sub-continent, very little scholarly attention was paid to the Persian poetry of Ghalib until about the last quarter of the twentieth century. And even then, nobody cared to cite Ghalib's authority for a Persian

usage: he was, at best, a major *Indian* poet who wrote in Persian too.

Hali and those who came after him dealt with the problem of Ghalib's Persian in a typically modern manner. First of all, Hali declared that Ghalib's Persian was as good as that of the Iranians, especially the Iranians who lived and worked mostly in India. Hali contended that they (the Iranian masters who worked and lived mostly in India) were the true masters of innovation and imagination. Although the current Iranian fashion may be against them, he insisted, all that it proved was that, 'if something was constructed in the past according to a particular mould, it cannot be fitted later in a mould of another, later, design.'¹⁰

Now this is a particularly modern argument: if the current trend was in favour of the ancients (Hali was referring here obliquely to the movement of 'the literary return' (*bazgash-t-e adabi*) that gained force in Iran toward the end of the 18th century and which called for practically abandoning what the later Iranian critics labelled 'the Indian style' and returning to the more pristine ways of the ancients), such change of fashion or mode didn't prove that the writers who came after the ancients were unworthy. It was just that each age had its own preferences. One age need not conform to, or go back to an earlier mode.

Hali also made the interesting point that according to Ibn Khaldun, practice and study could enable a person to write Arabic like a native. So, Hali's argument ran, if one could achieve a native's competence in Arabic by study and endeavour, then why not in Persian, which, 'in comparison to Arabic, is a much narrower and smaller language.'¹¹ Although he quotes Macaulay to the effect that non-native speakers cannot compete with the native speakers in writing poetry of a high order, Hali's love for Ghalib, and his desire to prove him equal to the Iranians is so great is that for once, he rejects that august authority—he had deferred to the English, especially Macaulay, almost everywhere else in this book—and says that Macaulay's assertion may be true of 'Europe, where in fact, poetry is the representation and interpretation of nature...and the demands of such poetry can be discharged properly only in the mother tongue.'¹² Ghalib therefore was in a win-win position: he wrote in a poetic tradition where one need not be a native speaker to achieve excellence, and Ghalib had, in any case, a native's command of Persian.

Hali also invested Ghalib with a romantic halo, a halo that later criticism, and certainly not popular opinion, could do nothing to pierce or tarnish, and which was of particular appeal to the 'modern', post-1857 Indian who was being assaulted day in and day out by stories and anecdotes and fiats 'proving' European (or English) excellence, almost always at the expense of Indians. The Indians were always somehow found wanting by 'European' (read 'English') standards in morals, mores, intellectual and political attainment. Social sophistication and refinement, the narrative went, was as alien to the Indian ethos as was a 'scientific temper' leading to the unfolding of the mysteries of the universe.

In such a climate of feeling, it was extremely comforting and reassuring to know that there was one Indian who, though almost always hard up, was generous to a fault, a gallant gentleman, a witty conversationalist and letter writer; a proud and self-respecting Indian who also had a sense of humour. Above all, he was a lonely figure; one who was much admired, though not in proportion to his talents, and was little understood by his contemporaries and was in fact often accused of obscurity. In short, something like Keats in the *avatara* of Browning: someone whom even most strait-laced *burra sahib* could relate with, if not truly admire.

'Once he [Ghalib] went straight from the [Red] Fort to the house of Navab Mustafa Khan and began to say,' writes Hali, 'Today the Presence honoured me greatly, expressing appreciation. I took with me today a qasida in felicitation of Id. After I had recited it, he graciously commanded: "Mirza, you recite beautifully!" Upon this, the Navab and Mirza Ghalib sat together for a long time, deploring the callous and unappreciating times.'¹³ Ghalib was thus like a prophet in his own country, out of synch with his times.

The question whether the image of Ghalib, the man and the poet, as reflected in Hali's writings, is authentic, is misplaced. Doubtless, it wasn't false in any substantive sense. But much more important, it was an image that evoked positive feelings in the mind of the post-1857 Indian and fulfilled some of his deepest felt needs. Hali defined, for the next hundred years, the role model of a great poet. The English educated Indians loved every detail of Ghalib's image as purveyed by Hali. S. M. Ikram, historian and Ghalib scholar and a distinguished member of the Indian Civil Service, wrote: 'This book on Ghalib, written from the modern critical point of view

was composed by a person was practically illiterate in English, that is, Hali.¹⁴

Hali's view that it was possible for a non-native speaker to compose poetry in a foreign tongue (especially if the language was Persian and the poet, Indian) as successfully as in his own, is of a piece with his views about the norms of judgement in literature. Without actually saying so, Hali had implied throughout his powerful theoretical pronouncements attached as 'Preface' to his divan (1893)—the famous *Muqaddama-e She'r o Sha'ri*—that there are universal norms for literary excellence. Again, without stating this in so many words, Hali made it clear that 'universal' here meant 'European' or 'English'. The Preface became an independent work in its own right and is still the most literary theoretical work in Urdu. In a section notorious (but nevertheless accepted almost in its entirety) for its dogmatism, quotability, and abiding influence, Hali prescribed for the Urdu poet a recipe for good poetry based on what he thought were the ideas of Milton and Macaulay.¹⁵ Hali prefaced his remarks by proclaiming that, 'The treasury of nature is always open for the poet. And there is no dearth of its true food for the power of the imagination. Thus, instead of sitting at home, devising flowers and petals from paper, the poet should observe the sights of the power of God in forest and hill, and in his own being.'¹⁶ So much for the qualities, attributes, and conventions, specific to different literary cultures. Here is, instead, a totalizing agenda aimed at flattening out all local differences.

Hali's agenda is but a coda to the West centric, anti-pluralistic cultural-political regimen that was the order of the day in the late nineteenth century world-view. Where modern authors like Brian Silver (and there aren't many like him) make a radical departure from Hali is in recognizing that foreign cultures should be approached on their own terms. Once, in reply to certain Anglophile Urdu critics who blame for instance, Ghalib for not writing sonnets, I wrote that if it is legitimate to demand that Ghalib write sonnets, it should be equally legitimate to blame, for instance, Wordsworth for not writing ghazals. It is somewhat ironical that Urdu had to wait for Western scholars like Bausani and Brian Silver before it could know that its literature had the right to be read in its own idiom and on its own terms.

Brian Silver says in his Introduction:



Without an understanding of the Urdu Ghazal, any inquiry into the Indo-Muslim culture will necessarily be incomplete. ... The literary explorations in the following pages are motivated by the desire to see the Ghazal, as shaped by a master practitioner of the genre, within the traditional perspectives of Indo-Muslim culture.

One of the benefits that this study has derived from such an approach is an understanding, and demonstration, of the fact that the Urdu Ghazal is not so limited in its scope as both its friends and detractors have apparently persuaded themselves to be the case.

Of course, Brian Silver seeks the support of Western concepts of meaning and Western modes of rhetorical devices to prove the worth of his enterprise. It is another irony of history that it will come as a surprise to most mainline Urdu critics and intellectuals that such support is possible, and valid. It was Hali and his followers who taught Urdu poets and their readers that rhetorical devices should be eschewed by the poet so that he could write ‘natural poetry’, poetry unburdened by the ebullience of imagination and complexity of thought. All poetry ‘tainted’ by metaphor, or ambiguity, or profusion of meaning, or wordplay and similar ‘gimmicks’ was by definition frivolous, unworthy or incapable of expressing lofty, personal or universal sentiment—which was the true office of poetry, as explained by Macaulay, and proved in practice by Walter Scott and other ‘European masters’. It is therefore good to see Brian Silver say that the poetic techniques he has discussed to demonstrate Urdu Ghazal’s ‘dynamic structure’ are ‘ellipsis, inversion of word order, phonetic manipulation, repetition, parallelism, comparison and contrast, interrogative forms, allusions, personification, meter, rhyme, elision and those techniques such as hyperbole, ambiguity, paradox, and kinetics in imagery, which particularly distinguish Ghalib’s poetry.’

One must note two things here before venturing further into Brian Silver’s territory: Most, if not all, of the categories listed by Brian Silver above would leave Ralph Russell, and his collaborator Khurshid-ul Islam, cold, and somewhat puzzled. The response of Nazm Tabataba’i (1852-1933), Ghalib’s next great critic—his still influential and in print commentary on Ghalib was first published in 1900—wouldn’t have been very different. Although pre-modern Urdu literary theory would have unhesitatingly recognized many of the categories listed above, the stock of traditional values had sunk so low by the

end of the nineteenth century that even a confirmed classicist, Persianist and Arabicist like Tabataba'i felt uncomfortable with most of them. Even Shibli Numani, who was the greatest classical scholar among the Urdu modernizers and whose love for Persian and Arabic, and by extension, Urdu poetry was legendary, disdained and heaped live coals of scorn on all practitioners of complexity, abstract metaphors, wordplay, regardless of who was guilty of such solecisms, be they the Iranians Sa'ib or Zahuri, or poor benighted Indians like Bedil or Ghalib.

It is interesting, gratifying even, to see Brian Silver placing high regard on what he calls 'interrogative forms'. This was one territory where both Shibli and Tabataba'i would have been his happy companions. It is only now that Western literary theory has arrived at the recognition and appreciation of the value of the interrogative and other non-falsifiable modes of utterance as employed in rhetorical or poetic discourse.¹⁷ It may be worth recalling that the distinction between falsifiable (*khabariyya*) and non-falsifiable (*insha'iyā*) utterances was made by the Arab grammarians in the ninth century. They were quick to recognize the semantic potential of *insha'iyā* statements. Brian Silver doesn't seem to have studied Tabataba'i on this point and seems to have arrived at his discovery of the uses of the *insha'iyā* on his own.

Interrogative, subjunctive, vocative, imperative utterances are *insha'iyā*; no determination can be made about their being true or false. It's obvious that such statements are of great interpretive possibilities for the purpose of a poetic utterance. Consider the following:

It is raining.

Now this is a plain proposition and it can be said it is either true or false; that is, regardless of the fact whether the proposition is actually true or false, a statement can be made about its truth or falsehood.

Now look at the following statements:

Is it raining?

Oh that it would rain!

Let the rain come.

Why is it raining?

It is clear that the above statements do are not verifiable or falsifiable, each of these, in a poem, can be made do duty for generating more meaning than any affirmative utterance about raining.

Is it raining? At the level of immediate comprehension, this is plain interrogative. But consider other possibilities which arise according to the context and environment: Ironic; satirical; hopeful; surprise; wonderment; sceptical; apprehension, and maybe more

The other point to be remembered here is that mechanical application of the categories listed by Brian Silver can easily become a soulless exercise, if not a kind of self-parody. Silver avoids the fate, woefully common to many academic critics, by not labouring on any one thing; and by singling out some key concepts or meaning/emotion-bearing words from the corpus of Ghalib's Urdu ghazal. Some of these words, like *shauq*, *ulfat*, *ishq*, *muhabbat* are known to all ghazal readers or listeners. The value of Silver's exegeses is in the fact that he understands these and other, similar, words to exist as a part of a matrix, or mosaic. He says:

The words, motifs, and images of the ghazal are important, not in isolation, but rather, in their relationships to each other, for it is the primary function of the ghazal to portray different types of relationships, and to examine, analyze, and suggest different tensions and connections between the individual elements of existence.

This insight enables Brian Silver to avoid many errors in which many west centric critics of the ghazal fall with distressing regularity. However, the traditional apparatus which enables the ghazal to achieve meaningfulness is so different from that of the Western lyric that misprisions (though not in the Bloomian sense) are bound to occur. One such misprision is to read, or hope to find, autobiography, or social reality, or expression of personal emotions (or all of the above) in the ghazal, unmediated by the conventions of meaning or the source of meaning in a poetic utterance. Brian Silver comes out successful here too, though not without conceding that 'the impact of a glimpse of the beloved behind her veil is, in purdah society, quite understandable—hence the emphasis in the ghazal on *seeing* the beloved' (chapter II). This concession to Russell and Islam ignores the fatal contradiction in their position, for they are equally emphatic that 'pederastic' love (or boy-love, or whatever) informs a large part on the ghazal because of the segregation of the sexes.¹⁸ The point is that the male lover/beloved was not in purdah, so then what was the need to place so much stress on 'seeing'? Surely, it's more

persuasive to argue that the emphasis on ‘seeing’ refers to the distance in the landscape of the imagination, thus, a state of mind intensified a thousand-fold by the very nature of the experience of love. Then there is the almost equally relevant concept of the promised *liqa-i rabbani* (coming face to face with God) because the Qur’an clearly states that man will come face to face with God some day. The Qur’an actually uses the word *liqa’* which means ‘to meet, to come face to face’.¹⁹

Also, it must be remembered that in the antiquity there were civilizations like the Greek where there was no segregation of women, but pederasty or homosexual relations were not frowned upon. In fact, Plato encouraged homosexuality as a means of population control. To attempt facile explanations of literary conventions with the help of doubtful and unanalyzed social evidence is a path in literary criticism which one should undertake at one’s own peril.

Another part of this work which I should single out for special mention is Brian Silver’s treatment of what he calls ‘the personae of the ghazal’. Although the persons in the world of pre-modern ghazal (and even the modern ghazal to a large extent) are essentially stereotypes, or at best notional and conventional, centuries of poetic practice, and individual invention, have invested them with the force of metaphor, of living symbols. Brian Silver provides a long, analytical list of ghazal characters, some of which, he points out rightly, are drawn from ‘real life’ (if ‘real life’ matters in these things, that is) and which are recognizable also as members of the world of ghazal. For example, the *ma’shuq* (beloved) is recognizable as *dost* (friend); *yār* (friend, lover, paramour); *but* (idol, image, statue, beloved object); *kāfir* (infidel, impious, one denying God, a mistress, sweetheart); *qatil* (murderer, assassin, one whose beauty kills, that is, makes the lover give up normal things, even his life); *dildār* (possessing or winning the heart, having or possessing [the lover’s] heart, lover, mistress, sweetheart); *jān* (the breath of life, the essence, beauty, sweetheart, darling); and so on. Thus Silver establishes the ‘worldliness’ of the ghazal in a concrete, analyzable way and brings it closer to the quotidian without trivializing it or depriving it of its essential mystery.

Had Brian Silver attempted to establish the deeper, metaphorical connections and the interior meanings of these terms (or characters or personae as Silver would like to say), he would have added another and maybe deeper dimension to his

exploration of Ghalib and also the ghazal, especially pre-modern ghazal. For instance, *kāfir* is applied to both the beloved and the lover. Now this puzzles most students of ghazal, though the sub-textual connections are easy to follow, once they are laid bare:

1. The beloved is described as idol, or image/statue (*but*, *sanam*, so forth) because she is not moved by the lover's entreaties; she is unaffected by the pitiful state of the lover; or even more reductively, the beloved—like a stone idol— does not answer when the lover calls out to her or tries to tell her about the state of his feelings. So obviously, she is like an idol, or similar entity. Thus, logically, the beloved is of the category of *kāfir*.
2. Since the beloved is by definition beautiful, and idols, statues, images are also by definition beautiful, hence the beloved is, by definition, an idol, etc.
3. The lover is supposed to adore the beloved. 'Adore' is the same as 'worship', 'treat as deity', therefore if the beloved is a *but* or a *sanam*, the lover of such an entity is bound to be a *kāfir*, or an infidel.
4. The lover is supposed to renounce everything—even his faith, religion, custom, creed—in love. Such a person is certainly as bad as a *kāfir*.
5. The beloved is cruel and heartless; only a *kāfir* can be so cruel, so heartless, so unmoving. The situation becomes direr when we understand that the beloved desires, even demands, fidelity even if the lover loses his life and or his religion in the process. Thus both beloved and lover are established to be *kāfir*.

Now take another ghazal theme: The beloved 'kills' the lover. This seems preposterous, especially when we find the beloved using all kinds of killing weapons: sword; dagger; spear; a killing look, so forth. And we are also often told of the effect of the beloved's bloodthirstiness and her propensity toward shedding blood most mindlessly. People who deride and berate the ghazal because of the abundance of themes in it of bloodshed, forget that the pre-modern ghazal, both Urdu and Persian, and indeed all pre-modern ghazal, be it Turkish or Pushto or Uzbek, operates on the then universal theme of the beloved 'slaying' the lover. When I say 'universal', I mean truly universal, because the theme of beloved as killer is found

in pre-modern western poetry too. Who but Shakespeare could be a better witness?

*Come away, come away death,
And in sad cypress let me be laid.
Fie away, fie away breath,
I am slain by a fair cruel maid:
My shroud of white, stuck all with yew,
O prepare it.
My part of death no one so true
Did share it.*

(Twelfth Night, II, 4, 51-58)

Here we can see clearly enunciated four chief themes of the ghazal: The cruelty of the beloved; the lover slain by his beloved; the enshrouding and burial of the lover; the lover's steadfastness in direness and death. And let's not forget that everything here is metaphorical.

Metaphor, as we all know, is one of the the most stable features of all poetry. The concept of *mazmun* (theme) in Urdu-Persian poetry is basically the same as metaphor: There are things, ideas, situations, even abstract notions, which can be used in the ghazal to make a she'r; these are mazmuns, or foundation blocks of she'rs. But the mazmun can come to life only when it has a metaphorical side to it, that is, when it is presented as a metaphor, or is given a metaphorical slant. This can happen when one or more of many things can be executed in a she'r: wordplay, simple or complex; creation of a surplus of meaning (or, to use Todorov's phrase, to bring symbolism into play); using a technique of intensification and making the poetic utterance more powerful than an ordinary utterance, though the content of meaning may be equal in both cases (that is, the intensified utterance may not have an actual surplus of meaning when compared to the un-intensified utterance); using the poetic conventions to metaphorize the mazmun (that is, treat the metaphor as fact then construct another metaphor from it) and suggest multiplicity of meanings even though the utterance itself may not seem pregnant with meaning.

In order to illustrate this last point, let's look at a plain sounding she'r from Ghalib:

*It was widely rumoured that Ghalib will be
pulverized into shreds today,
So I too went to see, but entertainment there was
none.²⁰*

Apparently there is no metaphor, no implied meanings here. But in order to correctly appreciate the sense of this she'r, one must take apart the underlying assumptions and the metaphorical ramifications of the mazmun, which are as follows:

1. The beloved kills the lover (vide Shakespeare, above).
2. In fact, she's fond of killing, even *en masse*, and publicly. (This is because she is cruel (vide Shakespeare, above, where the lover talks of 'the fair cruel maid' and exhorts his friends to bury him in a coffin made of cypress wood [the cypress being the symbol of sorrow], and his shroud being bedecked with yew leaves [yew leaves imply mourning]. All this implies public ceremony and mourning.
3. For the lover-protagonist (*not* the person called Asadullah Khan Ghalib), the experience of being pulverized may be something painful, even annihilating, but there are others involved in the show: The people of the city (or at least, the neighbourhood), the lover-protagonist's ill wishers, or just lovers of a spectacle (typical of the public of Delhi in the pre-modern times, or even modern times, for that matter), who bear maybe some sort of malice with the lover-protagonist, or they are just rubbernecks. The point is that the business of loving is not something necessarily carried out in private: It is performed in the public space. This again is just like Shakespeare's song-poem where the lover-protagonist addresses his friends or companions, or in fact just anybody to take part in the ritual of dying.
4. Lastly, there's something here which traditional love songs don't have: The poet, or the lover-protagonist, is mocking himself. The act of self-mocking brings the whole issue of loving and dying because of love in question.

This last element here takes Ghalib rather out of the traditional zones of the ghazal. To be sure, self-mocking is not something unknown for the lover in the ghazal, but it is certainly unusual to juxtapose the theme of self-mocking with

that of a public spectacle. This is what brings Ghalib closer to the modern poetic strategy where the poet doesn't take himself seriously, or perhaps he does, but he cloaks it under the pretence of not taking himself seriously, and thus he leaves the reader guessing about the poet's intent.

There is much truth in Brian Silver's observation that, 'The limitations inherent in the traditional settings of the ghazal ... should not pose an insurmountable challenge for the capable poet.' But he rather misses the point when he also speaks of 'novelty' as a legitimate aim for the poet. Actually, Ghalib would have preferred to say 'invention' or even 'creation of theme/meaning.' When he or his Persian predecessors spoke of *taza go'i* (new speech) or *taza khiyali* (new imagining), they stressed a radical departure from the received ways of poem making. The departure entailed new practices of metaphor making and introduction of words and phrases generally regarded as out of the pale of the ghazal. Novelty is generally without an active role in a poem; that is to say, it doesn't play any decisive role in creating the ontology of the poem. It is something superadded to the structure, not an integral part of it. Invention is the poem itself.

Ghalib stands at the cross roads of modern Indian history and literary culture. This position he occupies not by just historical accident, for there were many poets contemporary to him who were very good and who were highly regarded in the literary culture. While they can—and sometimes still are—read today with pleasure, none of those contemporaries seem to be aware at all of the great paradigm shift in Indian political and cultural environment because of the advent of colonization. Ghalib tried his best to cope with the new world; in fact, he even tried to imagine himself in the role of the poet-laureate of the new, though alien regime. But more importantly, in his poetry he trod the very difficult path of a classical poet whose experience of the new order puzzled and dismayed him, but who understood better than most that if there could be new things in culture and politics, there could also be new things in poetry. Most important, he introduced the culture of the question in the ethos of Urdu ghazal. It's not earlier poets trod warily around questioning or scepticism, but Ghalib questioned the very logic of being and existence. There are distinct trends of Vedantic and Sufi thought which seem to question or even deny the truth of being. Ghalib indulges in

those too, but he also questions the very reason for Creation. There's too much loss here, and too little recompense.

*I renounce the world because I am so lethargic
I gain nothing from gaining nothing.*

*Tribute accrued from the deserted village—
A handful of dust,
Wilderness, I am happy to be your sovereign.*

*Thousands of flames shot up elsewhere in the air,
But I was so slothful; I remained the scar that I was.*

*God, that's He who is kinder than a father,
I wandered from door to door;
For none would accept me.²¹*

Although he would have indignantly spurned the suggestion, Ghalib was the first modern Indian poet: conscious of not just change, but also of the arrival of an entirely new order of existence. It was not for nothing that he characterized Calcutta as 'the eighth realm' (Classical geography recognized only seven realms), but also as a place where *dād* (the word means both 'justice' and 'praise') wasn't ever to be found:

*I asked then about
Calcutta. He said,
Call it the eighth
Continent.*

*I asked, is man
To be found here?
He said: From all climes and
All disciplines.*

*I said: I've come
To seek justice
He said, Go away
Don't beat your head
against stone.²²*

Shamsur Rahman Faruqi,
Allahabad, December 2016

Author's Note:

1. Originally written in 1996 as Foreword to Brian Quayle Silver's *The Noble Science of the Ghazal: The Urdu Poetry of Mirza Ghalib*, (New Delhi, Manohar, 2015). Heavily revised and expanded, 2016.

2. All translations from Urdu and Persian are by me.

1 There are numerous extant editions of *Yadgar-e Ghalib*. For facility of reference, I have cited from the first edition, Kanpur, 1897. For this quote, see page 5, op.cit. All translations from Urdu and Persian are by me.

2 *Yadgar*, p. 3.

3 *Yadgar*, p. 420.

4 *Yadgar*, p. 116.

5 *Yadgar*, p. 119.

6 Masnavi called *Bad-e Mukhalif* (The Adverse Wind), in *Kulliyat-e Ghalib Farsi*, ed. Murtaza Husain Fazil, vol. I, Lahore, 1967, pp. 290-291. Talib (d. 1625), Urfi (d. 1590), and Naziri (d. 1612) are major Persian poets of the Indian style. They're Iranians, and therefore acceptable to Ghalib. (In a letter of a much later date, Ghalib declared that Urfi was his leader and master, and nothing that he ever said or did in the language could be wrong.) Nurul Ain Vaqif (d. 1781) was from Batala in Panjab. He lived in Lahore and Delhi and was very highly regarded by his contemporaries.

7 Khaliq Anjum (ed.), *Ghalib ke Khutut*, vol. II, Delhi, 1985, p. 594.

8 For 'natural affinity', see Khaliq Anjum, op. cit., vol. IV, Delhi, 1993, pp. 144, 137. For the Iranian Master, see Khaliq Anjum, op. cit., vol. II, Delhi, 1985, p. 744, and vol. III, Delhi, 1987, p. 1202. For a detailed discussion, see Malik Ram, *Fasana-e Ghalib*, Delhi, 1977, pp. 52-77.

9 Published in Urdu from 1909 to 1918, these somewhat slim five volumes have been and remain extremely influential. It has been translated into Persian, and is made use of by all Persian scholars worth the name.

10 *Yadgar*, p. 429.

11 *Yadgar*, p. 434.

12 *Yadgar*, p. 435.

13 *Yadgar*, p. 90.

14 S. M. Ikram, *Asar-e Ghalib*, Bombay, n. d., p. 188 originally published, 1939.

15 Altaf Husain Hali, *Muqaddama-e She'r o Sha'ri*, Allahabad, 1953, pp. 65-67.

16 *Muqaddama*, p. 65.

17 See for instance, John Hollander: *Melodious Guile, Fictive Patterns in Poetry*, Yale University Press, 1988. The second chapter, entitled 'Questions of Poetry' is devoted to the possibilities of semantic richness in the interrogative.

18 Russell and Islam: *Three Mughal Poets, Mir, Sauda, Mir Hasan*, Harvard, 1968, pp. 98-99, 103n, and passim. Recently, Ralph has reemphasized his position on these points. See his 'Rejoinder' to Frances Pritchett and William Hanaway, in Muhammad Umar Memon (ed.), *Annual of Urdu Studies*, no. 10, 1996.

19 See, for instance, the Qur'an, chapter 18, verse 110:

Say: 'I am a man

Like yourselves, (but)

The inspiration has come

To me, that your God is One God: whoever expects

To meet his Lord, let him work righteousness and

In the worship of his Lord,

Admit no one as partner.' (trs. Abdullah Yusuf Ali)

20 Diwan- Ghalib, Ed. Imtiaz Ali Khan Arshi, New Delhi, Anjuman Taraqqi Urdu (Hind), 2nd edn., n. d., p. 193.

21 Diwan- Ghalib, Ed. Imtiaz Ali Khan Arshi, New Delhi, Anjuman Taraqqi Urdu (Hind), 2nd edn., n. d., pp. 98-99.

22 Ghalib: The Persian Kulliyat (Collected Poetry), Vol. I, Ed. Murtaza Husain Fazi, Lahore, 1967, p. 164.