

Gopi Chand Narang: Symbolizing Creative Dexterity with Critical Acuity and Beyond¹

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It is incredible that a language pilloried for allegedly promoting cultural inconsonance leading up to the partition of the country becomes a vibrant site of integrative cultural discourse through the perceptive and incisive writings of one of its prominent exponents. His awe-inspiring scholarship pegged down two hostile nations, one of which conferred its highest honour upon him. This is the intriguing tale of Urdu and its distinguished academic Professor Gopi Chand Narang (1931-2022), who was awarded the Padma Busan (2004) and the Sitara-e Imtiaz (Pakistan,2012). He passed away on June 15, 2022, in the USA.

Despite producing several poets and authors whose creative dexterity got widespread acclaim, and not many could vie with Mir, Ghalib, Prem Chand Manto, Qurratul ain Haider, Ismat Chughtai, Firaq Gorakhpuri, Faiz, Naiyar Masood on engaging the readers with their unmatched creative prowess, Urdu looks exacting in nurturing polymaths. However, Professor Narang supplements what is missing. He has more than seventy books in Urdu English and Hindi, carrying the fruits of academic rigour, growing acquaintance with new theories and judicious application of critical acuity, meticulously spelt out and well-defined literary poetics that helped Urdu criticism extricate itself from the bond of theme centred evaluation. A profound interest in new criticism, stylistics, semiotics, and sociolinguistics runs through his literary journey spread over more than seven decades.

History finds Professor Narang on the right side of many significant literary trends, and ideological discourses and his writings betray a sharp critical insight. One can see a perceptive engagement with different

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ideological positions without the traces of a totalitarian authorial discourse. His writings aim not only to suggest possibilities in reading literature but also examining every genre from the ghazal to the fiction by deftly applying Arabic and Persian literary theories, Sanskrit poetics, structuralism and post-structuralism. *Sakhtiyaat, Pas Sakhtiyat aur Mashriqi Sheriyat* (Structuralism, Post-structuralism and Eastern poetics, 1993) is a theoretical and analytical tour de force of his speculative intelligence and profound scholarship. With even-handed attention to western and eastern poetics, Professor Narang has divided his stimulating work into three sections, referred to as three books. The book sets an engaging debate on the concept of language and literature and how they construct reality. The author delineates how Structuralism strikes at the roots of the metaphysical concept of reality. The certitude of literature that mirrors reality owes much to common sense and historicity. Professor Narang judiciously connects Saussure's sound pattern of words and psychological phenomena with Prakrta Dhavni (the psychological) and Vaikarta Dhavni (the physical). Drawing parallels between Saussure's views that language has no positive value except in opposition to something else with the Apoha theory of Buddhist logicians for whom the meaning of a word does not lie in its positivity but the contra-distinction of its correlates.

The book seeks to initiate a vibrant tripartite dialogue between Structuralism, Sanskrit poetics and Persio-Arabic poetics. Having yoked eastern poetics with Structuralism and post-structuralism, Narang spells out the contours of the new model of criticism. The debate also explores the simultaneous quest for a universal and national identity.

Professor Narang deftly uses new critical insights, especially deconstructionist reading, to re-evaluate the whole range of Urdu poetry, including Mir, Ghalib, Iqbal, Faiz, Firaq, Shahryar, Mohammad Alvi, and many more Urdu poets.

Much ink has been expended on the iconic Urdu Poet Mir Taqi Mir ((1723-1810), but his nuanced and multisensory poetry is usually read through the prism of his personal life caught up in nagging deprivation. Namby-pamby critics who abound in Urdu employ several slippery terms such as agony, angst, and a deep sense of loss, longing, and pangs of unrequited love to evaluate the lucent opus of Mir, and it produced ubiquitous but illusionary labelling that describes Mir as a poet of simplicity, emotional flourish and flow. Cliché-ridden critical idiom has always piqued Professor Narang, and his latest book, *The Hidden Garden: Mir Taqi Mir* (Penguin Random House 2021), subverts the dominant critical jargon by unravelling various layers of the “deceptive simplicity” of Mir. The celebrated critic seeks to locate Mir in the epoch of untruth

we live in by roping in close readings of his ghazals. Spelling out the defining features of the creative opus of Mir, Narang asserts,

Mir is not a simple poet by any means. I have tried to unwrap every hidden pathway, every dark trail that zigzags, every footprint that shows something new, and every trajectory leads to a more hopeful future. Mir is not a poet of unrequited love; his voice reveals and recreates echoes of the medieval age's soul-searching transcendental thought of the bhakti tradition and spirituality that runs parallel to the self-consuming mystic narrative of Mansur and Majnu. (Narang *The Hidden Garden*)

The language of pestering agony and loss frequently used by Mir is described as conversational and straightforward. However, Narang goes well beyond generalization and points out that Mir curiously fashions a new dialogic language which is quite distinct from what William Bakhtin (1875-1975) as dialogic. For Narang, it stems from conversational creativity, and he candidly explains the term using a couplet of Mir that is a part of cherished public memory:

*kahā maiñ ne gul kā hai kitnā sabāt
kalī ne ye sun kar tabassum kiyā*

I asked the rosebud, how long is the life of a flower?

The bud listened and smiled.

The couplet, seemingly wrapped in easy-to-understand words, prompts Narang to delineate it in the term of conversational creativity, and he points out:

First, there is the quality of the dialogue itself. The question comes from a living voice, and it is directed toward a non-living entity. Second, the answer is not in words; the only response of the bud is a smile followed by silence. Third, the simile can be interpreted in many ways. A simile is sometimes an answer to a question that has no logical answer. The simile is a metaphor for a momentary life that lasts only as long as a smile lasts. Thus, we see in Mir's hands ordinary language goes through a creative transformation. (Narang *The Hidden Garden*)

Narang sounds convincing as simplicity here attains the level of heightened sensitivity. It makes it clear that depth resides in easily understood and unornamented words, not in little-known or high-sounding obscure words. Mir's poetry does create an illusion of simplicity and spontaneity, but in reality, it is intense and nuanced. For Narang, it is deceptive simplicity that continues to mislead the critics.

The various phases of Mir are studied from the standpoints of his scantily referred long poems –masnavis-, *Muaamalaat e Ishq* and *Khawab O Khayal* and Professor Narang makes Mir's psychic disorder and love

interest the vantage point. Personality-centric criticism is fraught with hermeneutical misunderstandings and hardly attuned with modern literary canons, but Narang's insightful readings made these sorts of references quite fascinating. Narang's interpretation, laced with academic rigour, provides a detailed assessment of Mir and deflates many myths about him. Certainly, he was a poet of oral tradition and was fully alive to the inner aesthetic of the word. However, his evaluation barring some exceptions is done in a cliché-ridden language. The increasing dissatisfaction with the dominant narrative surfaces in the book, and discerning analysis makes Narang's appraisal a sharp-witted and judicious read.

Similarly, there is no dearth of the run of the mill book on the much-admired poet of the subcontinent Mirza Asad Ullah Khan 'Ghalib' (1797-1869), but locate his creative genius in describing the world as made up of banality and void two hundred and fifty years ago is intriguingly done by Gopi Chand Narang. His trail-blazing book on Ghalib, *Ghalib: Arthvatta, Rachnatamakta evam Shunyata* (2020), tries to understand Ghalib's world view in the context of the ongoing debate that truth is not an absolute concept; it is what we construct through language to fulfil our cultural needs. Narang asserts that Ghalib was the first Urdu poet who made us realize that the world we live in is essentially incongruous where the otherness shapes everything; hence it is unreal. Curiously it is something that post-modernism harped on for centuries. Ghalib suspects and turns attention to hypocrisy and inherent contradictions in our social mores, and it impels him to upturn all norms of social behaviour and faith. "For Ghalib, faith denotes an unending puzzle; whether it heals or festers, it is not certain" points out Narang in his finely etched and well-researched study of Ghalib. Why does Ghalib tend to defy all existing postulates that draw heavily on common sense? This pertinent question serves as a plumb line in Narang's book. Modern man, trapped in the quagmire of intolerance, bigotry, jingoism subjugation, unbridled consumerism and deafened by booming violence, has become oblivious of the language of unsaying. Ghalib breathes new life into man by exploring the possibilities of silence, cogently argues Professor Narang, who also mentions that Ghalib's reticence brings together the diverse strands of our chaotic life.

Narang wrote extensively on Ghalib, but in his latest book, he attempts to collate the heterogenous poetic traditions in which his poetry is located. Mapping the complex terrain of Ghalib's poetry, the author quotes and explains his widely quoted couplets to delineate that these verses powerfully reveal a state of no mind. It closely resembles the Buddhist philosophy of *shunyata*. Narang skillfully highlights the contours of *shunyata* and says neither is it a religious, or metaphysical concept nor it is a means of meditation. It is a way of thinking that upends

very concept, ideology, belief, and social practice. It enables one to go beyond the apparent to see the otherness of it .it is what that runs through Ghalib's poetry. Salvation is not something Ghalib longs for he turns attention to the sufferance of people. Time and again, Ghalib through his unmatched wit, turns defiant against insensitivity, power and money. For him poetry is an act of subversion. Narang marshals unflinching evidence to assert that Ghalib's much talked about poetry hardly weaves a pathos filled narrative around overwhelming sense of loss, unreciprocated love, human frailties and despair. Ghalib zeroes in on human psyche that causes dreams and desires, essentially express itself in ways beyond rationalizing. His verse mirrors the paradoxical shadow lines of truth and existence and reveal what ideologies conceal. Narang offers a refreshing perspective on reading Ghalib and his book acquaints with the intellectual and cultural milieu of India, not told by the colonial historians.

Fiction criticism has not taken firm roots in Urdu and here again Narang tries to supplement what has been lacking. His book *Fiction Sheriyat: Tashkeel-o Tanqeed; Nine Poetics of fiction: Formation and Criticism* proffers a perceptive discussion on how fiction readjusts innate human impulses. A discerning textual study of Manto, Premchand, Rajender Singh Bedi, Intizar Husain, Balwant Singh, Sajid Rasheed, Anjum Usmani and Gulzar makes it clear that ideology, philosophy, history, aesthetic and linguistics constitute the cultural space from which fiction draws its breath.

Narang deconstructs well-known stories of Premchand, Bedi, and Manto. Making Premchand's story "Kafan" (the shroud) the object of close reading, Narang asserts that the title of the story turns attention to binary as the title shroud does not refer to the cloth that covers the body of Budhya but it calls her womb the shroud as it turned out to be what the covered her unborn child.

Narang's departure has caused a heavy pall of gloom that loomed large over the literary horizon of the subcontinent and may one recall a couplet of Mirza Ghalib:

har ik makān ko hai makīn se sharaf 'asad'
majnūn jo mar gayā hai to jāngal udaas hai
 (Every household is honoured by its householder 'Asad'
 Now that Majnu has passed away, the jungle is miserable)

or this one by Ram Narain Mauzun

ghazālān tum to vāqif ho kaho majnūn ke marne kī
divāna mar gayā ākhir ko vīrāne pe kyā guzrī
 (O gazelles, you are aware, tell me of Majnu's death
 What became of the wilderness after the lunatic lover died)