

Cultural Exuberance of Metaphor in Khiyal Bandi

Ghalib's Imaginings in the Urdu Ghazal: the Dark Complexed Beloved

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Where, oh Lord, is the second step of the ambition?

The wilderness of possibility, I found, was just a single footprint

From the Urdu Divan of Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (the first mss,
compiled around 1816)

A popular notion about Urdu literature, at least among a certain group of scholars, is that it is Iranian in spirit. The connection of Iranian literary traditions is inevitably made with Arabic literature and literary traditions, perhaps under the assumption that Persian literature and language were heavily influenced by Arabic. Ram Babu Saksena in his influential *History of Urdu Literature* begins his chapter on the general characteristics of Urdu poetry with the sentence: "Older Urdu poetry was not an indigenous product. It drew its inspiration from Persian and copied foreign models. It was dominated by the prosody of the Persians which had been invented by the Arabs. It tacitly adopted Persian metres and its canons of versification [...] Urdu poets not only appropriated the metres

but annexed the ready-made, much exercised imagery and hackneyed themes of the Persian.”¹

Another manifestation of this kind of thinking can be seen in the notion—not much perceptible before the Partition, but frequently brought up after it—that Urdu was one of the main causes of Partition. It became a general assumption around the middle of the 20th century that the case for Pakistan was also the case for Urdu; Pakistan was constructed as a "homeland" for the Muslims, and since Urdu was the language of Muslims alone, its proper place was in Pakistan, not in India. A cursory look at the history of Urdu literature, especially since the 18th century, would be enough to belie the belief that Urdu was the language of Muslims alone. Languages are not born or develop as the exclusive property of a group of people, religious or political. It was well known then, as it is now, that Muslims had written literature on clearly Hindu topics since at least the late 14th century. That literature is mostly in Awadhi or Brajbhasha, languages which were spoken by both Hindus and Muslims.

The Hindi-Urdu question nevertheless constituted an emotional and emotive issue in the complex interplay between language, religion and politics in north India from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. The political design underlying the theory of Urdu being a language of only Muslims has been examined by several competent literary historians who have shown that the political design was motivated by extra-scholarly concerns; the notion that Urdu was a ‘Muslim’ language is not true.² Still, the idea seems to

¹Babu Ram Saksena, *A History of Urdu Literature*, p 23.

Not only is the main proposition that ‘older’ Urdu poetry was modelled upon Persian false, but also the sub-propositions, that Urdu lifted ‘hackneyed’ themes from Persian, and the Persian metre was invented by the Arabs not true.

²Paul Brass’s classic study, *Language, Religion and Politics in North India*, (Cambridge, 1974) examines the political design underlying interplay between language and religion; Christopher King’s book shows how the

have a firm hold in the average South Asian's mind which includes the Muslim minds as well. In this essay, I will argue that in spite of its so called foreign or Iranian-Arabic orientation, the spirit, the tradition and the culture of Urdu literature have always been, and will always remain, ineluctably Indo-Muslim. This is because the literature has been created by the "Indian" mind and not by an Iranian or Arab mind. By "Indian", I mean the indigenous sensibility of the people of the Indian subcontinent as developed by the Indo-Muslim social culture over six or seven centuries. It is the sensibility which Persian speakers referred to as "Hindi", that is "Indian" as against the "Iranian". It transcends religion and includes traditions and beliefs prevalent in the social culture. It also embodies a literary mind saturated in the sensibility and the world view of the Indian Muslim the Hindu element of whose psyche is inseparable from the element which we call Muslim.

If we examine the history of literature and literary traditions across the world we will find that Urdu is not the only language where external literary cultures have influenced or even been deliberately imported to construct a native literary tradition and culture. English for example, is so steeped in the Greco-Roman tradition that even its poetic meters are borrowed from Greek. This is in spite of the fact Greek metre is quantitative and English metre is just the reverse, for it is strongly qualitative. The Greek metres were made to suit the accent-based English language. Marlowe and Shakespeare had perfected an indigenous version of Tragedy which, though written in the Greek Iambic Pentametre, and was unrhymed like the Greek, was so different in spirit from Greek Tragedy that Aristotle would have refused to recognize it. John Milton wrote a Tragedy in English in strict accordance with the rules of Tragedy as enunciated by Aristotle in his *Poetics* more than twenty centuries ago. The resulting play, *Samson Agonistes* doesn't rank among the

Hindi movement was part of a process "in which Hindu supporters of Hindi strove to transform the existing equations of Urdu= Muslim +Hindu and Hindi= Hindu+ Muslim into Urdu=Muslim and Hindi=Hindu." *One Language Two Scripts: The Hindi Movement in 19th Century North India*, Bombay, Oxford University Press, 1994; p 15

best English plays even though it is a perfectly “correct” Greek Tragedy. Milton deliberately rejected a vibrant tradition of his own language to write a “Greek Tragedy” because Shakespeare wasn’t Greek enough in Milton’s eyes. Thomas Gray however, adopted the Greek metre but wrote about local subjects.³

Urdu adopted local themes, Persian tropes, Arabic legends, Hindu legends and mythology where it suited the writer’s mode. Persian had been intermingling with Indian genres since at least the 11th century when Mas’udSa’d Salman wrote his *barah masa* like poems in Persian and many more about his love of Lahore and how he missed that city.⁴ Urdu appeared on the literary scene around the 15th century by which time the assimilation had reached down to the grassroots. Urdu’s first known poet was the Gujarati Sufi Shaikh Bahauddin Bajan (1388-1506). Sheikh Bajan wrote in Indic and also Persian metres; he helped create and develop a new genre of devotional poetry called *Jikri*. The name was borrowed and indiginized from the Arabic *dhikr* or *zikh*, meaning “remembrance” (of God). Shaikh Bajan was greatly interested in Indian classical music and that’s why he chose *Bajan* as his *takhallus*, from the Urdu *baja*, which means “a musical instrument”. *Jikri* is a genre which is entirely unknown in Persian or Arabic; it is a poem on Sufi themes with a heavy overlay of Hindu tropes and ideas. There can be no greater refutation of the canard of Urdu’s “foreignness” than the poetry of Shaikh Bajan.

The instances I have presented above show that it is *not* the external form of a literary tradition that determines its primary characteristics. One can then ask: what determines the

³Thomas Gray, who fame rightly rests on his *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* (1751) wrote that poem in—about the unknown English buried in a country graveyard—in a “foreign” metre, that is, the Iambic Pentametre, most meticulously observed. Gray also wrote *The Bard*, an ode in strict imitation of the Greek poet Pindar—calling his poem ‘A Pindaric Ode’—but the theme of the poem was based upon a Welsh legend.

⁴Sunil Sharma, *Persian Poetry at the Indian Frontier*, is a succinct study of Masud Sa’d Salman, one of the earliest Persian poets from India.

primary characteristics of a literary tradition? An example would serve to illustrate this elusive point. The Iranian author, Malikush-Shu'ara Muhammad TaqiBahar in his epoch making but generally misguided morphology of Persian poetic styles (*Sabk Shenasi*) diagnosed that the Indians had their own literally styles which he called *Sabk-e-Hindi*.⁵ Bahar decreed that the "Indian Style" should be ruled out of the Iranian literary canon because it was not compatible with the Iranian mind even though he fully realized that many of the practitioners of this style had been Iranian! In fact some of them like Mir Tahir Waheed and Shawkat Bokhari, had never been to India.⁶

⁵ The term *sabk-i-hindi* was coined by Maliku'sh Shu'ara Muhammad TaqiBahar (1886-1951) in the first quarter of twentieth century. It signposted a poetry in the Persian language, especially ghazal, written mostly from the sixteenth century onward by Indian and Iranian poets, the latter term to include poets of Iranian origin who spent long periods of their creative life in India. "Iranian" here means a native of "greater" Iran, a cultural entity that was generally meant to comprise all of present day Iran and Azerbaijan in the North and West, and Afghanistan in the South and Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in the East.

Bahār's scholarly works include: *Sabk-shenāsī* (3 vols. Tehran, 1321 Š./1942, repr. 1337 Š./1958), a detailed standard history of Persian prose illustrated by many examples.

Shibli Nu'mani does not use the phrase *sabk-i-hindi*, in *She'ru'l Ajam* (his five volumes were written between 1909 and 1914, published 1909-1918, and the work of Bahar came later). But he clearly credits Fughani with being the "founder" of the "new age" in poetry which is marked by "subtleties of thoughts and themes" and he describes Fughani as the "*grandpère* Adam of this new age" and "the inventor of the new style". Later, he twice mentions the influence of India on this new style: The [literary and cultural] taste of this place [India] engendered yet more sumptuous colourfulness and delicate subtlety in the poetry of Urfi and Naziri. Intermixing with India generated delicate subtlety of thought and imagination. The delicate subtlety of thought and imagination that one sees in the poetry of the Iranians who made India their domicile is not at all to be found in the [Iranian domiciled] Iranians."

⁶ According to Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, "The Iranians' disapproval of the Indian Style betrays a certain puzzled anxiety—for the poetry, though

If Iranian poets of the Indian Style were marginalized from the Persian literary canon, poetry produced in Persian by non-Iranians was, and continues to be almost entirely excluded from the Iranian canon. Interestingly, even in Indian and Pakistan universities, very few of the Sabk-e-Hindi poets are prescribed for study. To repeat, if Indian Persian literature was marginalized and even decried aside by Iranians as not conforming to the Iranian mind, it should become clear that Urdu which is twice removed from the so called Iranian mind should never be treated as having anything to do with Iranian cultural traditions. This shows that the roots of literature are in the psyche of a culture and not in the external conventions and formal traditions that it may accept either entirely, or accept and modify for its own use. Differences in the nature of the concept of knowledge, (that is, what constitutes knowledge?) of poetry, the autonomy and innovativeness of the poet and issues of communication and reception are vital factors in shaping this psyche of a literary culture.⁷

The great nineteenth century Urdu poet Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1797 – 1869) is an important case in point. Ghalib began his career writing poetry in Urdu at the age of perhaps 10 or 12 (or at the age of seven if a certain tradition is to be accepted) and had compiled a collection of nearly 1800 she'rs by the age of 19. Subsequently Ghalib began writing mostly in

occasionally bristling with uncomfortably high imaginative flourishes and unusual images and unconventional constructs has yet a potency, vigour and éclat which mainline Iranian poetry would be hard put to match. One reason for the Iranian eagerness to find a non-Indian place of origin for the Indian Style could lie in the fact that some of the major Iranian poets of that style never went to India: the names of Shifa'l Mashhadi (d. 1613), Mirza Jalal Asir (d. 1630/31), Shaukat Bukhari (d. 1695/99) and Mir Tahir Vahid (d. 1708) come instantly to mind. If native, untravelled Iranians too wrote in the Indian Style, this was a matter for further anxiety unless a non-Indian, Iranian origin could be found for the style. P. 3; ".A Stranger in the City: The Poetics of Sabk-e Hindi," *Annual of Urdu Studies*,

⁷ Muzaffar Alam in Sheldon Pollock, 2003 p 178

Persian, which seemed to be his preferred language. He returned to Urdu wholeheartedly only around 1850 when he became more closely attached to the royal court. Ghalib's love for Persian and his insistence on being a "native by intuition" and a fully nativized speaker of Persian (*ahle- zaban*, that is, one who "owns" the language, or "comes from" the language) is scattered throughout his literary engagements with contemporary Indian poets. Certainly his Persian poetry, compared to his Urdu is more flowing, direct and relatively easier to understand. It is full of powerful themes and ideas.

Much of Ghalib's Urdu poetry of his early youth was marked with a distinct tilt towards Persian language idioms and imagery. It reveals a love for, and mastery of arcane Persian words and idioms which is hard to match to any other poet before or after him. Yet, his love for abstract thought and his metaphorical reach to far away themes and ideas is a peculiarly Indian characteristic. This particular style of abstraction known as *khiyalbandi* was developed by some Indian Persian writers in the 17th century.⁸ *Khiyal bandi* reached its zenith in the poetry of the Indian Persian poet and mystic Mirza Abdul Qadir Bedil (1644-1720). Ghalib (as by his own admission) especially in his youth was inordinately influenced by Bedil and some other *khiyal band* poets. Ghalib must have realized that native Urdu words were not effective in dealing with abstract, subtle and rare themes of *khiyalbandi*, many of which are based on fine distinctions in the way ideas are enunciated. Whatever learned or philosophical-Sufistic prose there had been in Urdu until the

⁸Literally, *khiyalbandi* means capturing a *khiyal* or thought and putting it neatly and elegantly into verse. In Persian and Urdu *bastan* (Persian) or *bandhna* (Urdu), that is, 'to tie', 'to bind' is the metaphor for using a word or trope in poetry. This has been extremely elegantly stated by Ghani Kashmiri the great Indo Persian poet of the early 17th century:

ab buvad ma'ni-e raushanghani
khub agar bastah shaved gauharast
A brilliant theme, oh Ghani, is bright water
If it's bound well in a poem, it's a pearl

early 19th century depended heavily on Arabic and Persian lexicons to put its themes and meanings across to the reader. Persian-Arabic thus had a ready vocabulary in Urdu which Ghalib used for his purposes. Thus superficially, his Urdu poetry, and certainly early Urdu poetry, sounds like Persian conscripted to appear under the guise of Urdu. But the spirit of that poetry is so utterly Indian that it cannot be classified as anything but Indian.

The seepage of Indian themes in Ghalib's Urdu poetry is evident in two broad, congruent areas: first and most obvious is his approach to that big question of Creation, Creator and mankind. The second is the cultural aesthetic and world view that he possesses from being an Indian Muslim albeit of Turkish descent. I will first discuss with a few quotes from Ghalib's early Urdu poetry the cultural aesthetic as evident in the characteristics of the beloved.

In the following *she'r*, Ghalib speaks of a dark-complexioned beloved who is nonetheless as *zalim* (cruel and coquettish) and even more tantalizing as the traditional light skinned beauty.⁹ Although *zalim* is originally an Arabic word, and used frequently in Persian, *zalim* doesn't have the praise-admiration sense in Persian; this sense is an invention of the Urdu speakers. Another point to note here is that the darker complexion is presented as more enticing, more truly "beautiful":¹⁰

⁹*Zalim* can be a word of praise and admiration in Urdu in the appropriate context, as in the present verse of Ghalib's.

¹⁰ Urdu poets of the pre-modern age viewed fair skin with some disdain even suspicion. The notion that a "fair" skin is a precondition for being considered beautiful entered Urdu poetry late in the 19th century. Ghalib's senior contemporary Shaikh Imam Bakhsh Nasikh (1773-1838) wrote:

husn ko chahi'ye andaz o adanaz o namak
kya hua gar hui goron kitarH khal safed
Beauty needs style, and elegance, and coquetry and piquant saltiness
So what if someone had a hide, white like that of the white man?

رچ گیا جوشِ صفا سے زلف کا اعضا میں عکس

ہے نزاکت جلوہ اے ظالم سیہ فامی تری

The intensity of your whiteness absorbed the color from your black tresses;

Oh cruel beloved, the blackness of your complexion,

Has a radiance which also reflects your delicateness¹¹

The *mazmun* of the dark-skinned beloved is not unknown in Urdu poetry, especially in the poetry of the 16th to the 18th centuries. But it has been reformulated here with typical Ghalibian flair and a unique *ta'lil*. (*Ta'lil* means to provide a 'poetic' and unlikely reason or justification for an otherwise unremarkable fact.) The white to black bodied woman's blackness has been given an extremely delightful *ta'lil*: She is extremely delicate. She is also quite dark. Her tresses are, naturally dark and dense. So her fair body, extremely delicate, reflects and absorbs the blackness of the tresses. The infinitive *rachna* means for 'something to become so fully absorbed as to give its own colour to the object on which it has been applied'. Obviously, this process takes pretty long. This again supports the *da'wah*: the black tresses have always been with the fair body. So the delicate body, fair and light as light, has absorbed the blackness of the tresses.

In ancient Arabia, the salt that they used was dark and the Arabic word for salt is *malh*; a dark coloured, good looking person was described as *malih*'salty'. This sense of 'salt,' and the word, was borrowed in Persian, then in Urdu. Urdu has both words *namkin* and *malih* for a good looking, dark complexioned person. Hence Nasikh requires *namak* "salt" as a necessity for beauty. Note that I use the pejorative "hide" because the poet has used the word *khal* which has the same effect.

¹¹Kalidas Gupta Raza, *Divan-e Ghalib Kamil*, P181; all translations from Urdu are mine.

Observe the following intricacies: the poet does not explicitly say that the beloved is dark-complexioned; instead, he suggests that the *josh* or the fervor of her delicate whiteness caused it to absorb the dark colour of her lovely tresses. *Josh* generally means “passion”, etc. But it also means “excess, the state of denseness caused by a crowd”. Hence *josh* also means excessiveness, multitude, and extravagant abundance. *Josh* contains the implicit image of “dyeing” which involves hot, bubbling colour, suggesting the verb *josh dena*=to boil, to excite. Notice also that Ghalib speaks of *aks*. Here it means reflection. Thus there is the hint of illusion. She may not have actually become dark but she appears to be so. Usually one associates *jalvah* or radiance with light. The radiance or glow of a dark complexion is alluded to in the second line. The radiance of *siyahfami*, says Ghalib, has a special aura of *nazakat* (delicateness).

Here is another example of a dark skinned beloved from Ghalib’s earliest (1816) *Divan*:¹² This she’r builds on a cultural practice that is very Indian but couched in esoteric Sufic Persianisms.

کثرتِ جوشِ سویدا سے نہیں تیل کی جگہ

خال کب مشاطہ دے سکتی ہے کاکل کے تلے

Kasrat-e josh-e suvaida se nahin til ki jagah

Khāl kab mashshatah de sakti hai kakul ke tale

The intensity of darkness has left no scope for the beauty mark

How can the bride adorer apply the black dot beneath her curly hair?

A little black spot usually with *kajal* is applied above the temple just below the hairline to ward off the evil eye. But the

¹²Kalidas Gupta Raza, *Divan-e Ghalib Kamil*, p 200

beautiful dancer is so dark that the mark or *til* won't show. While the previous she'r spoke of *josh-e safa* (excessive whiteness) absorbing dark color from the beloved's *zulf*, this she'r presents a *kasrat-e josh-e suvaida* (excessive blackness) of the beloved's hair and/or skin that will make it impossible for a beauty mark to show.

The she'r has a charming ambiguity which has left open several possibilities of interpretation. Gyan Chand Jain in his commentary on Ghalib's mustarad Divan, prefers to read *suvaida* as a black dot on the heart which is supposed to be the concentration point for God's true radiance (if, that is, the seeker can reach a certain level of Knowledge). He interprets the she'r as: Innumerable hearts are snared in the beloved's hair. The *suvaidas* have left no room for a beauty mark.¹³Jain's explanation suffers from oversimplification.

One can read *suvaida* as the black dot in the heart, but the meaning becomes different: The beloved is so pure of heart that her *suvaida*, normally a nearly invisible spot in the heart, has overtaken her whole body and that's why she is black complexioned. This meaning doesn't cancel Jain's interpretation, but it shows that a Sufistic subject or concept has been used by the poet to produce a near erotic verse.

The entire ghazal has an extremely Indian (or indigenous) mood that is enhanced by the radif *ke tale*. The word *tale* (beneath, below) is derived from the Sanskrit *tal*.

The *matla'* (opening couplet) of this ghazal has a delicate Indic *mazmun* of the beloved bathing with dew (or rose water) in the garden:¹⁴

وہ نہا کر آبِ گل سے سایہ گل کے تلے
ہال کس گرمی سے سکھلاتا ہے سنبل کے تلے

¹³Jain; *Tafseer-e Ghalib*, P 556

¹⁴Raza; P 200

*Voh nahakar aab-e gul se sayah-e gulke tale
Bal kis garmi se sukhlata hai sumbul ke tale*

After bathing in rose water beneath the roses

With what intense energy does she dry her hair in the shade of the *sunbul*!

A woman, bathing in the open, in a garden under the shade of roses, and drying the hair with intense energy fervency, and ardor, among the flower bushes and shrubs, are truly Indic images and ideas. In fact, the theme of the beloved bathing in the open—in the river, or on the river bank—is a not a theme found in Persian, but has been extremely popular with Urdu poets from the 17th century. Obviously, both our climate and our mores permit bathing in the open. Here are two examples from Mir (1722-1810) and one from Musahafi (1750-1824). Mir's ghazal is from his second Divan (circa 1780) and Mushafi's verse is from his first Divan (circa 1785):

Here is Mir:

شب نہاتا تھا جو وہ رشکِ قمر پانی میں
گتھی مہتاب سے اٹھتی تھی لہر پانی میں

Shab nahata tha jo voh rashk-e qamar pani men

Guthi mahtab se uṭhti thi lahar pani men

Last night that envy of the moon was bathing in open water

She caused the waves to rise intertwined with the moonlight in the water

Mir:

ساتھ اس لطف کے دیتا تھا دکھائی وہ بدن
جیسے جھمکے ہے پڑا گوہر تر پانی میں

*sath is lutf ke deta tha dikha'I voh badan
jaise jhamke hai para gauhar- tar pani men*

With such elegance was her body descried

It was if a pearl of high luster was glistening
under water

Musahafi:

جمنا میں کل نہا کر جب اس نے بال باندھے
ہم نے بھی اپنے جی میں کیا کیا خیال باندھے

jamna men kal naha kar jab us ne baal baandhe

ham ne bhi ji men apne kya kya khiyal bandhe

Yesterday, after bathing in the Jamna she tied up her hair

I just can't say what thoughts I twined and intertwined in my
head

Ghalib had a strong tradition on his back when he talked of his beloved bathing herself in the dew, or in rose-water in the open garden. Note that Ghalib has used the masculine gender (*sukhlata*) here, which I have translated as feminine, not just because of the convention of English poetry, but also because the beloved whose bathing is the subject of this verse is clearly feminine. Similarly, in Mir, the pronouns and verbs are all masculine but we clearly understand that it's a woman he's talking about. In Musahafi, the gender is omitted, but the sense of a woman is very strong. This convention—of hiding the gender of the beloved, or of implying or stating that s/he is masculine—is not Iranian, as most of us have been led to believe, especially since Altaf Husain Hali (1837-1914) wrote his extremely influential book—the first Urdu book on literary theory—*Muqaddama-e Sh'er o Sha'iri* in 1893. Persian has no genders, so it is unfair to assert that just because there is occasional mention in its ghazals of beautiful boys as cup bearers or a young, handsome youth as beloved, Iranian ghazal always has a male beloved. In fact, the convention of talking of the beloved as male is a mode more or less inaugurated and certainly strengthened and established by the Urdu poets of

early 18th century. But for a couple of poets like Mubarak Abru (1683/5-1733) and Shakir Naji (1690?-1744-47?) who openly indulged their boy love in their poetry, it is not possible to name any Urdu poet from the late 17th century Delhi who really *meant* the beloved to be a boy. In fact, the concept of the beloved in Urdu ghazal very soon took an abstract character—it was the *idea* of a beloved, and the *idea* of a lover, rather than an actual person. This could have been an influence of Sanskrit, from where those early Urdu poets of Delhi were also supposed to have derived their love for *sleṣa* which took the form of *iham* (wordplay, double entendre) in the ghazal of early 18th century Urdu poets. These subjects—the source for the love of *iham*, and beloved and love and lover as *ideas* rather than persons—have not been investigated, mainly because modern literary theory in Urdu chose to take a literalist view of all things pre-modern.

Going back to the she'r, observe the delightful intermixing of tropes, Persian and Indic. *Sunbul* is a fragrant clustered flower made up of smaller blooms that have curly petals; it has been used in Persian poetry as a trope for beautiful curly hair and was appropriated in Urdu. Obviously, Ghalib's *voh* implies the word *mahbub* which has an indeterminate gender but mostly signified as masculine in Urdu, in keeping with tradition, as we just saw. While this does not imply that *voh* is a male lover, the situation created in the she'r is piquant. This is the Perso-Indic crossover I am referring to here. An Indian *mahbub* bathes in the rose garden and dries her hair among the Persian hyacinths.

Moving on from the beloved to the lover, Ghalib has a beautiful she'r on the theme of burning in love with a stunning image taken from Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights: ¹⁵

ہے تماشا گاہِ سوزِ تازہ ہر یکِ عضوِ تن
جوں چراغانِ دیوالیِ صفِ بہ صفِ جلتا ہوں میں

¹⁵ Raza, p 154-155

*Hai tamashagah-e soz-e naz har yak 'uzw-e tan
Jun chiraghan-e divali saf ba saf jalta hun main*

Every limb of my body presents the spectacle of a new fire
caused by her coquetry

Like the lamps of Divali I burn row upon row

Diwali is the Hindu festival of joy and celebration, marked by a profusion of lamps being lit and fireworks being played to welcome the return Lord Rama from exile. Diwali lamps are lit in rows and are kept burning by replenishing the oil. Comparing the body as *chiraghan* with Diwali lamps is an original idea and a marvel of metaphorical thinking. One of Ghalib's commentators, Zamin Kantoori, has suggested that the construction *chiraghan-e divali*, is odd, because Ghalib has used a Persian *izafat* with an Indic word.¹⁶ I think the usage is notable for two reasons, one, because Ghalib here sets a precedent—or at least an authoritative instance—of such an *izafat* which is still frowned upon by the “purists”, and two, he preferred to use a native image instead of a Perso-Arabic one.

I began this paper with a brief mention of Sabk-e-Hindi, a style of Persian poetry whose poets wrote in the “Indian” style. Sabk-e-Hindi poets favored abstractions, especially a mode known as *khiyalbandi*, which I briefly referred to above. The *khiyal* was elusive and allusive, ambiguous and accessible through metaphor. Intertextuality was an important, though inarticulate premise in *khiyalbandi*: unless the audience was acquainted with previous instances of poets using a particular theme, the “newness” of the present *khiyal* couldn't be appreciated. Persian poetry in Sabk-e-Hindi was predominantly in the *khiyal band* mode. Urdu, as successor to Persian as a literary language inherited this mode as well. Though not often recognized, nearly all the Urdu poets who wrote in this mode were clearly trying to emulate or go beyond

¹⁶Zamin Kantoori, *Sharh-e Divan-e Ghalib*, P

the Persian poets who, it must be remembered were more Indian than Persian.

As Shamsur Rahman Faruqi has shown, Ghalib was not a lone practitioner of khiyalbandi, nor was he as individualistic and distinct from his peers as Hali, in his *Yadgar-e Ghalib* (1897), had persuaded us to believe. In Urdu, Shah Nasir (1755?-1838), followed by Imam Bakhsh Nasikh, Mushafi, Zauq (1788-1854), Atash (1777-1847) and Asghar Ali Khan Nasim (1794-1864) were exponents of the style. Certainly, the greatest exponent of khiyalbandi in Urdu was Ghalib. Ghalib's closeness to Persian as a language of poetry and also his great admiration of Mirza Bedil were undoubtedly among the reasons for his penchant for khiyalbandi. But Bedil was not the only influence or resource for Ghalib's world view and engagement with philosophical questions that are basic to ghazal poetry, namely: What is the meaning of creation? What is man's relation with God and place in creation? What is love?

Sabk-e-Hindi poets sought answers to these knotty questions partly through Sufism and partly through their creative imagination. Indian Sufism has from the beginning, been open to exploring the path offered by the indigenous philosophies such as the Vedanta and Buddhism. In fact some literary critics have gone to the extent of conflating Sabk-e-Hindi with Sufistic ghazalness (*taghazzul-e tasavvufi*).¹⁷ Sufi poets often used exclusively local themes, allusions, idioms and proverbs and they mostly composed in local languages. They wrote on or used Hindu themes and religious experience as freely as they would use Persian themes, images, and Muslim religious experience. For example, a poetic genre of Braj

¹⁷ Salahuddin Saljuqi in his admirable *Naqd-e Bedil* goes to the extent of saying that Sabk-i-hindi did not in itself originate in India, but has descended [in this world] from the firmament of Sufism. But India has been the land where the inspirations issuing forth from the firmament of Sufism have flown in a measure greater than in other lands, and Sufism has specially flourished and developed there. It is because of this that this style can be observed in every poet, to the extent of how deep he is in Sufism.

Bjasha and Awadhi known as *Premakhyana* was a masnavi style poem that used Hindu folk-religious themes to explain the soul's yearning for God. Khiyalbandi as a process of thinking was undoubtedly influenced by what its proponents received from their local environment.

I will close the discussion with a few examples of philosophical she'rs that show the subtlety of the Indic cultural sensibility and its influence on Ghalib. One of the best-known she'rs in this regard is from his early, *mustarad* divan:

ہے کہاں تمنا کا دو سر اقدم یارب
ہم نے دشت امکان کو اک نقش پاپلیا

Where, oh Lord, is the second step of the ambition?

The wilderness of possibility, I found, was just a single footprint

Gyan Chand Jain has written that this she'r reminds him of the story in Hindu mythology of Vamana avatar.¹⁸ The avatar, in the guise of a Brahman went to a certain king and asked him for a small piece of land, actually three steps worth, to make a small dwelling. The king agreed. Vamana's first step covered the earth, the second the *patal* (regions below the earth) and there was nothing left for the third step. Similarly, says Jain, the whole world and its possibilities are equal to just one step in the expanse of Ghalib's desires; there is no room for a second step.¹⁹

Jain is being cautious in his reference to the connection between Ghalib's thought and the Vamana Avatar. Ghalib's she'r does broach a non-Muslim idea. According to Islamic thought, there is nothing in the universe similar to God *laisa kamislihishaiyun*. God is the *awwal* (First), *akhr* (last), *zahir* (apparent), *batin* (unapparent), *waris* (the survivor and inheritor

¹⁸ King Bali through meditation (tapasya) had become so powerful that he had even driven the gods from their abode. To teach him a lesson in humility, Lord Vishnu came to earth in the form of a Vaman (dwarf).

¹⁹ Jain, p 27

of all). He encompasses everything. In such a situation, there can be no question of someone—human or angel—finding the whole universe of possibility to be just a single footprint. The footprint of God is in and upon everything. There is nothing beyond or after God. Ghalib, a seventeen year old saturated on Bedil and having learnt Vedanta almost by osmosis, could bring in the Hindu idea effortlessly. It's not just Vamana Avatar who is in play here. One must also remember Shiva whose offspring Ganesha and Muruga can circumambulate the universe: Muruga does it physically but Ganesha goes round his parents, saying that the whole of the whole universe was right there! Ghalib could have had something of this legend in mind as well. Or, he is just asserting the strength and the power of the human mind. If, in the 19th century, scientists in the West were unlocking the secrets of the universe one by one and were asserting in effect that all there is can be reduced into a mathematical formula, is it not possible that Ghalib was imaginatively leaping those very heights, transcending his religious identity and assuming cultural identities far above and beyond the streets of Akbarabad where as a child, he flew kites and took part in the fun and frolic of carefree youth?

Let's now look at another verse:

خدا یعنی پدر سے مہرباں تر
پھرے ہم درہ درنا قابل سے

God, that is, one kinder than a father

I roamed from door to door because of un-acceptance

God, the Father, is a Christian concept. In Islam God is unique. There is nothing like God. God cannot be compared to humans. In Hinduism, the concept of God is anthropomorphic. God is both father and mother, or conversely, both mother and father are God. In the she'r under consideration, we can derive more than one meaning from *naqabili*: The protagonist did not accept God's existence or God's word and that is why he couldn't find God. Or, he did not accept God's help which is why he roamed

hither and thither. It is also implied that the protagonist is complaining that “I rejected Him but why did He reject me?” Clearly, Ghalib is influenced by Vedantic thought, the nurturing, creative principle of God, as *Srijanhar*.

What I have presented above are random examples drawn from my current work on Ghalib’s mustarad divan. An organized study of Ghalib’s poetry will yield numerous she’rs in which the influence of Vedanta and the Indian world view can be easily observed. As I have noted in this essay, in spite of its heavy borrowing from Persian, the thought processes, the worldview, the vision, reflected in the Persian poetry produced in India is practically incomprehensible and not particularly enjoyable to the Iranian mind. The reason for this is that the thought process in Sabk-e-Hindi is Indian, the world view is Indian. And this is regardless of whether the poet was Muslim, Hindu, Christian, or Sikh or Parsi.

Literary historian and critic Shibli Nu’mani inordinately privileged Iran over India in his five volume history of Persian poetry. He actually disdained and scorned even some of the great poets who were typical of the Sabk-e-Hindi mode, such as: Sa’ib, Bedil, Nasir Ali Sirhindi, and many others. Shibli himself wrote Persian poetry in a mode and manner which was much akin to the Persian poets of the 16th century. His idiom was perfectly Iranian, his emotions were simple, and his love thoughts though full of passion, were devoid of complexity. He wrote in the well-known Iranian style of *vaqu’agoi*, that is, writing about the events and transactions of love as they transpire between lover and beloved. His beloved is clearly female, his lover clearly male. In spite of all this, Shibli’s poetry is unknown and unacknowledged in Iran, though his five- volume history of Persian poetry (which studiously avoids Indian Persian poets and includes only a very few of the Iranian poets of Sabk-e-Hindi) has been translated into Persian in Iran and is still in print.

Shibli’s case brings out the tragedy of several extremely erudite postcolonial critics and thinkers who failed to recognize

culture as the main force and the most powerful source of literary production. Shibli presumed that language, idiom, phraseology, simplicity of thought and emotion as evinced in the ghazal by the great Iranian poets like Sa'di, Hafiz, and Rumi was all that there was to poetry in Persian. Indeed, he felt so uncomfortable with abstract and complex thought that though his book on Rumi, *Savanih Umri-e Maulana Rum* (1901), the first ever book on Rumi in any language, that he offers very little discussion on Rumi's Sufistic and Neo-Platonic thought, while it was the thought which made Rumi's great *Masnavi* what it is—the greatest Sufistic poem in the world.

As Muhammad Hasan Askari has shown, there is an organic relationship between literature and culture. Imagination can cross all boundaries, but it grows from the mind, and the mind or consciousness is conditioned by culture. Shibli, for all his vast and eclectic learning, didn't grasp the fact that culture always supervenes over and supersedes religion. Culture may be a product of religion in the last analysis, but in a clash between culture and religion, the latter will always take the back seat. It is no surprise, that Urdu is the one modern Indian language which has been the language of poetry for people of every religious persuasion in India. A pre-modern Urdu ghazal written by a late nineteenth century Parsi poet, Bahramji **Peshotanji** Dastur is indistinguishable from a ghazal written by the early nineteenth century Englishman Alexander Heatherly Azad, and a mid-nineteenth century Frenchman George Pueche Shor. They must have had their religious sensibilities. In fact Azad and Shor wrote poems and verses about Jesus Christ. **But if we remove those, overt indicators**, there's nothing that can "betray" their religion.

Ghalib is in a similar position. He wrote a considerable amount of religious poetry, more in Persian than in Urdu. The best-known in Urdu are the two qasidas in honor of Hazrat Ali.²⁰ But he also wrote a Persian masnavi (*Chiragh-e Dair*) in

²⁰ The two qasidas are:

which he eulogized Banaras and called it the Ka'bah of Hindustan (*not* just the Ka'bah of the Hindus). If we put aside his explicitly religious poetry, he comes through as a “thinking poet”—to use Coleridge’s epithet for John Donne— who could question the order of things, who could see beyond petty boundaries and challenge the management of God’s universe in a virtually teasing, playful way:

sipih ra tu ba taraj-e ma gumashtai
na har che duzd ze ma burd dar khazana-e tust

You have appointed the sky to loot and plunder us

Was it not already in your treasury, all that the robber took from us?

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دہر جز جلوتہ کیٹا کی معشوق نہیں
ہم کہاں ہوتے اگر حسن نہ ہوتا خود نہیں
And,
سازیک ذرہ نہیں فیض چمن سے بیگار
سایہ لالہ بیدار سویدائے بہار

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