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Whirlwind of the Heart The Ghazal: Tīr, Dil, Jigar

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I grew up with Urdu poetry learning to recite verses from ghazals as soon as I could talk. Words held only visual meanings for me but that changed as I grew older and began to enter the world of poetry. Now I teach poetry whenever I can gather a group of students to take my class. I enjoy explaining why “longing” is an emotion filled with “rasa” (relish) that should be experienced.... Sanskrit poetics emphasizes that the content of poetry is emotion and so does the classical ghazal: why love’s arrow stuck in the heart creates a wound that should not heal, why pain is a cleanser. But love is also the source of creation, the reason for existence. Love is both universal and personal; it transcends time and space; it carves light from darkness.

The dil or heart is also a mirror of the self, and in the ghazal, the analogy of the mirror-heart (āīnā-e dil) is carried to great lengths. The heart’s depth cannot be fathomed; but the heart can also grow narrow or constricted. Why and how is the heart perceived as narrow? Perhaps because the pain of love is greater than the space in the heart, and the heart is filled with emotions. In the classical ghazal, another organ—the jigar, or liver—is equal to the heart in being a locus of love. The heart and liver are often in sync; they speak to each other and are equally affected by love. The liver, it was believed produced blood while the heart expended it. But while the liver is perceived as the locus of life, the heart is the locus of Divine Radiance.



Another key feature of ghazal poetry is the encounter between zāhir, the external world, and bātin, the internal world. Connected to this is the concept of ishq or love. Is love spiritual or worldly— ishq ḥaqīqī or ishq majāzī? But my teenage self didn’t care about external and internal— zahir and batin. For me, love was a wound that festered, emotional reality

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was the ultimate reality, growing up, I relished every bit of it.

Altaf Husain Hālī and Shibli Nomānī, two important Urdu critics of the early twentieth century, were critical of the role of emotions or *jazbāt* at the core of the *ghazal*. Under the influence of British colonial literary practice and Protestant values, Hālī and Nomani advocated, instead, for the role of ethics as a more important component of poetry. Another path-breaking early modern critic, Muhammad Hasan Askari, was also critical of the importance given to emotions in Urdu poetry¹. He emphasized the importance of *qalb*, the heart-mind, as the core of poetry, and argued that *Islāh-e qalb* or improvement of the *qalb* should be the goal of the *ghazal*. *Qalb*, the heart-mind, should not be confused with *nafs* or breath, self, soul, essence.

Askari's thought merged the *ghazal* entirely with *tasavvuf* or mysticism. Earlier Sufi poets such as Hafez and Rumi had taken the *ghazal* to profound spiritual heights, demonstrating that '*ishq-e majāzī* or worldly love could be a template for '*ishq-e ḥaqīqī* or spiritual love. In the *ghazal*, love of the earthly kind can be a step or stage toward the opening of the heart to love of God.

کوئی میرے دل سے پوچھے تیرے تیر نیم کش کو
یہ خلش کہاں سے ہوتی جو جگر کے پار ہوتا

Koi mere dil se pūchche tere tīr-e nīm kash ko

Ye khalish kahāñ se hotī jo jigar ke pār hotā

Would someone ask my heart about your half-drawn arrow

Could such gnawing pain be there if it had gone through the liver?

While the *ghazal* can glide from *majāzī* to *ḥaqīqī* love through poetic devices such as tropes and metaphors, I believe that the *ghazal*, in both its classical and modern forms, transcends any kind of binding themes. Within the realm of the *ghazal*, themes can be infinitely refined and polished, subverted and reinvented. Thus, I was shocked to discover that Askari considers this famous verse of Ghalib to be weak because it only addresses the external world of love, '*ishq-e majāzī*, and not the internal or spiritual realm or '*ishq-e ḥaqīqī*. He claims that if the love represented in this *ghazal* was spiritual or *ḥaqīqī*, then its *khalish*

¹ I read Askari in my pursuit of Urdu literary criticism and published, *Urdu Literary Culture, Vernacular Modernity in the Writing of Muhammad Hasan Askari*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

(gnawing pain or compulsive thought) would continue to escalate, even if the beloved's arrow had pierced through the heart to enter the liver. He quotes a verse from Ghalib's great contemporary, the master poet Zauq, to prove his point.²

خَدَنگِ یار مرے دل سے کس طرح نکلے

کہ اس کے ساتھ ہے اے ذوق میری جان لگی

Khudang-e yār mere dil se kis tarah nikle

Keh us ke sāth hai ai Zauq merī jān lagī

How would the Beloved's arrow leave my heart?

O Zauq, my life is attached to it

Zauq's verse is undoubtedly effective, almost electrifying. Yet, I find myself arguing with Askari's assessment. I don't think Ghalib's verse is any less accomplished, even if it does not allow a spiritual interpretation. After all, there is so much going on in Ghalib's couplet. It begins with a piquant dialogue between the poet-speaker and the reader-listener: Would someone ask the heart about the anguish or *khalish* that it is experiencing due to the arrow stuck in the liver? The Urdu word *khalish* has many meanings, including pain; one of them is curiosity or prying intensity. Ghalib's verse enacts a playful and subtle slippage between arrow, liver and heart, where the arrow itself speaks through the liver, and addresses its question to the heart.

There is no easy way to translate *jigar*, a powerful and poetic *ghazal* trope, into English. 'Liver' in English, sounds simply gross. However, within the *ghazal*'s complex repertoire of bodily metaphor, *dil*, the heart, is a wayward, passionate, wounded, pain-filled, aching piece of the lover's anatomy, is closely associated with *jigar*, the liver, which is constant, staid, filled with life-giving, life-sustaining blood. When the *ghazal*'s beloved throws her *nigāh*, her piercing gaze, it falls like an arrow to enter the heart, piercing its way down from the heart to the liver in one stroke, making both parts of the lover's body consent to her power.

To take pleasure in the world of the *ghazal*, one must learn to

² Ibrahīm Khan Zauq (1790–1854) a fine poet was Ghalib's rival because he held a high post in the Mughal court. He was the *ustad* or preceptor of the last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar. Zauq was a big success at poetry gatherings because his poetry was suited to the taste of the audience; it was brilliant and witty. Ghalib was appointed as preceptor upon Zauq's death in 1854.

appreciate the role of the liver alongside the heart. But the liver-heart connection also carries other serious physiological resonances. When one's heart is medicated, one's liver function is constantly monitored. The liver sympathizes with the heart's struggle, but tries to keep it in check from self-destruction.

The constricted heart

On an unseasonably cold November night in 2022, a pain, a dull burn, gripped my chest in what felt like a constriction, an uneasy tightness or pressure, a sort of squeeze or clutch around my sternum. Then it spread like thick fog, intense but not sharp. There was a feeling of heaviness in the center of my chest. Then it crawled to a spot between my shoulder blades right behind my neck. My jaw began to ache. Every tooth in my right jaw felt loose. Was the pain in my jaw or in my chest? No, there was a path of a dull, grinding ache, traveling between my jaw and chest. It worsened if I lay down.

I sat through the night massaging my heart not sure what exactly was wrong. A little voice said: could this be a heart attack? But I crushed the voice. In the morning, I felt better only because the dull squeezing pain was gone. The clutch had loosened its grip. The knot was undone. I felt lightheaded, drained of energy, but determined to carry on with the day's work. Looking back, I can discern desperation in my actions. I wanted to brush aside the night's pain like a bad dream.

The first appointment was with my dentist. He found nothing wrong with my teeth. The next was with my internist. She diagnosed my pain as a gall bladder problem but an ultrasound of my gall bladder, pancreas, liver, and kidneys showed that they were normal. Even the EKG was "normal." Why those tests were ordered showed that my primary care physician was as dismissive of my heart problem as I was. Nonetheless, she was concerned enough to order more tests. It took another round of tests to determine that it was, indeed, a matter of the heart.

My heart, it turned out, was structurally strong—after all it had survived a heart attack with only a little damage. Tests showed that "the ejection fraction" of my heart was nearly normal, the pumping capacity of my heart was good. The cardiologist listened to me intently as I recounted the past few months of my life. I hesitantly shared my history of unwonted anxiety. I talked about how my chest hurt when walking uphill with Dilkash, my dog. I had ignored such signals thinking that shortness of breath was an indicator of my limited physical stamina. The cardiologist put me on an impressive list of medicines for lowering

cholesterol, blood pressure, and anxiety. I was relieved that she did not call for an invasive angiogram with its possibilities of finding blockages that would need to be relieved with stents and blood thinners. It seemed like a happy ending to my heart adventure.

But my story didn't end there. Each time I walked briskly, I would experience pain in my chest. Lightheaded and unsteady on my feet, I teetered between belief and disbelief at my condition. I found it hard to believe that I had been diagnosed with "coronary heart disease," or that I had become, as we referred to such sufferers back home, a "heart patient." Once I knew what angina felt like, I seemed to experience it at the most delicate slight, at the smallest hurt. Simply talking about my heart-attack produced a tightening in my chest; a constriction that sparked a response in my jaw, that made me aware of my heart and sternum. The constrictions came and went, like a fist that tightly shut, then released.

I was told I needed an angiogram.



Constriction is a multivalent word. It holds within its depths a slew of emotions. Constriction is like a tight knot of feelings inside your chest's cavity, or a narrowing, squeezing sensation in your arteries that signals a warning—a red flag that you must see—stop—or suffer.

Did I believe that the heart, and not the mind, is the center of emotions? Perhaps not. What makes the heart race, what makes it sink? Desire and dread. In the mystic analogy that Askari points to in his essays, the heart and the mind can together be a single unit: *qalb*. I liked to experience desire and dread.

Stricture can be enjoyable if despondency doesn't raise its head. The space of hope and desire is vast—a terrace where a hundred breezes blow.



گریاس سر نہ کھینچے تنگی عجب فضا ہے

وسعت گرہ تمنایک بام و صد ہوا ہے

Gar yās sar na khīñche tangī ajab fīzā hai

Vus 'at gah-e tamannā yak bām-o sad havā hai

If despondency shouldn't arise, stricture has a wonderful ambience.

The vastness of desire is like a hundred breezes that blow across a single terrace.

Ghalib has a wonderful play on constriction or tangī in this masterful verse, one that he chose not to publish. In his poetry, Ghalib favours the word tangī because of its multivalence. Here, it implies both scarcity and narrowness. The phrase Ajab fīzā that follows it adds a sense of mystery, playing with both meanings of tangī.

In a *ghazal*, the second line of a *she'r*, or couplet, responds to the first, and here, the poet uses the form to present a sophisticated argument. Desire is boundless even if the protagonist is confined or restrained in a narrow space or circumstance. The contrastive agreement between yak (one) and ṣad (hundred) and between tangī (narrowness) and vus'at (spaciousness) creates a wonderful ambience, aḥab fīzā. Yak bām and ṣad havā are joined with a vāo, but it is not a simple vāo-e 'aṭf. Vao, a vital letter of the Perso-Urdu alphabet serves multiple functions. It is most often used as a conjunction “and” but it can also be used as a comparative “tashbihi” In Ghalib’s verse, it is, in fact, vao-e tashbīhī. That is, it creates two situations: yak bām (one terrace) is equivalent to a hundred breezes. And yak bām is the same as a hundred breezes. The nuance is delicate, but that is Ghalib for you.

A new idea is broached in this line by the suggestion that disappointment can curb or sour the imaginings of desire. Yās is a situation when one gives up hoping, certain that the desired objective will never be achieved. Tamannā on the other hand has possibilities of realization. The word havā becomes most interesting in the context of tamannā. If we read it to mean ‘desire,’ then the narrator seems to tell us that a hundred or myriad desires can be generated or made active by just observing from a terrace.

I’ve been carried away by Ghalib’s clever deployment of tangī, but before I move on, I must share another of his verses on constriction:

تنگی دل کا گلہ کیا یہ وہ کافر دل ہے
کہ اگر تنگ نہ ہوتا تو پریشاں ہوتا

Tangī-e dil kā gilah kyā yeh voh kāfir dil hai

Keh agar tang nah hotā to parīshāñ hotā

Its no use complaining of this sinner heart’s narrowness

If it wasn’t (so) constricted, it would be restless

Ghalib offers a scintillating play on tangī and parīshānī in this couplet. The heart is deemed to be restless. Thankfully, the heart's constriction sets a limit on its restlessness.



Reading Ghalib's Dīvān in hospital

The nurse had asked me to pack an overnight bag. "Bring a book to read," she said on the phone. Her words struck me as charming, oddly comforting. I pondered over her words, captivated. Did she not believe that a cell phone was enough entertainment to while away time? Or even an iPad, even if I didn't own one. A book? I live surrounded by books. Which book could be the one book to bring along to a hospital where my wounded heart would, itself, become the subject of investigation?

I shoved my elegant, slender copy of Ghalib's Urdu Dīvān into my shoulder bag and carried it with me to the hospital.

We arrived at the hospital. It was twinkling with lights like a beacon dispelling the darkness of winter morning. The lobby sparkled. A steady stream of people flowed through the doors. Nurses and hospital staff reporting for duty. My name was called. We moved along up the stairs to the second floor and into a cozy cubicle.

I wasn't alone; I had been allowed two companions and my husband and a close friend, a doctor, accompanied me. But with me, I brought a secret third.



Tracking Ghalib's Dīvān

Not many lovers of Ghalib's poetry are aware of the extent of his compositions in Persian. His barely edited Persian Dīvān contains ten thousand couplets (she'rs), and is five times the size of his Urdu Dīvān which holds fewer than two thousand verses. During his lifetime, Ghalib longed for his Persian ghazals to be recognized and canonized within the long line of the classical Persian tradition. He fought numerous literary battles, some slanderous, to enforce his claim as the master of both literary and colloquial Persian in poetry and prose. Yet, despite his efforts, his enduring fame as one of the world's greatest poets, continues to rest on verses contained in his Urdu Dīvān. First published in 1841, Ghalib's Urdu Dīvān introduced his uniquely cerebral poetry to a wider audience. It's fortunate that the Dīvān survived the violence that

followed the Uprising of 1857. The uprising was brutally crushed, ushering in a traumatic transition from the rule of the East India Company to the reign of Queen Victoria. Delhi was laid waste, its elite executed, and India's last Mughal emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar, along with his immediate household, was deported to Burma. Ghalib and his wife survived those terrible days, living under the protection of the Maharaja of Patiala's guards. They remained, sequestered inside their Ballimaran house in one of the arteries of old Delhi's Chandni Chowk. Today, only the ruins of Ghalib's rented house remains, with its *bārahdarī*, a covered verandah with twelve arched doorways, now serving as a museum of sorts to the poet's memory.

After 1857, Delhi became a different world altogether.



The Dīvāns of Ghalib

I began my book project on Ghalib in 2010 and was struggling with the complexity and vastness of the subject. There is a lot of secondary material on Ghalib, I have a bibliography that is over 400 pages. But I needed to scrutinize original sources in Urdu and Persian. I had been searching for an original copy of Ghalib's 1841 Dīvān for years. It is Ghalib's first published Divan. In December 2014, while on a research trip in India, I decided to travel to Rampur in western Uttar Pradesh, hoping to find one in Rampur's Raza Library with its impressive collection of Ghalib's materials. My husband Richard and I traveled by road from Delhi to Rampur, a trip filled with much anticipation. The Nawab of Rampur had been a patron of Ghalib and from my extensive research, I knew the poet had visited the city.

On February 5, 1857, Nawab Yusuf Ali Khan, dispatched a cordial note to Ghalib, with a generous sum of 250 rupees as an offering, requesting the poet to be his *ustād* or teacher in matters of poetry. Ghalib agreed to the offer, and in May 1857, had a special *musavvidah/nuskhah* of his Urdu Dīvān prepared for his new patron. Calligraphed by Fakhruddin Khan Bahadur, the Dīvān was decorated with delicate art work and gold leaf, and was screened for errors in copying by the poet, himself. An additional plain version of the Dīvān was also prepared at the same time. The Nawab conferred an official stipend of 100 rupees a month on Ghalib in 1859, and the following year, Ghalib accepted the Nawab's invitation to visit Rampur.

Due to the tumult of the times, Ghalib did not disclose his travel

plans to others. The poet travelled alone to Rampur, via Meerut and Moradabad, and was received at the royal palace where he stayed for four days, after which his stipend was doubled to 200 rupees. He was provided with an independent haveli at Rājdvāḍah, with meals sent each day from the palace. Now that the Nawab was Ghalib's shāgird, or student, Ghalib took the liberty of advising him to change his taḡhallus, or poetic name, from Yusuf to Nāzim. The Nawab gracefully accepted his suggestion. Despite the Nawab's hospitality, Ghalib remained in Rampur for less than two months. His daily schedule of working on the Nawab's poetry is not described anywhere, but we know that Ghalib made good use of his time in Rampur, working on further edits to his latest Urdu Divan.

After Yusuf Ali Khan's death in 1865, his successor, Kalbe Ali Khan took over the rule of Rampur. The new Nawab was not a poet and Ghalib felt unsure of his future. However, the new Nawab continued Rampur's patronage and invited the poet to return. Hoping to stay longer this time, Ghalib accepted the invitation and was provided with a mansion called Jarnailī kothī, close to the fort. In a letter Ghalib describes the arrangement:

Several kinds of broth, pilau, mutanjan, kebabs (pasandah), an assortment of breads, pickles and preserves were provided as daily fare. A waterman, light attendant, sweeper was appointed by the state. I hired a barber and washerman myself.

Once again, Ghalib did not stay as long as he had intended, perhaps because his beloved grandsons, Bāqar Ali Khan and Husain Ali, who had accompanied him, grew restless and desired to return to Delhi. Ghalib sought the Nawab's permission for them to leave first, and followed them home to Delhi on September 28, 1865.



When I arrived in Rampur, I was told that I might find a first edition of the Dīvān in the Saulat library, a much smaller library than the Raza, but the library had been temporarily closed for renovation. Filled with disappointment at my wasted journey, I returned to Delhi. But a short time later, by some extraordinary miracle, I stumbled upon the 1841 Dīvān in New Delhi's Jamia Millia library. I was affiliated with Jamia University for my research trip and the university library was a good resource. One day, browsing the library's manuscript collection, the attendant offered to show me a rare manuscript of Ghalib's Dīvān.

Selecting a key from the big bunch he carried, he opened a steel almirah and took out a small book with a blue cover that he handed to me. I will never forget the day I held Ghalib's slender Dīvān, with its simple blue cloth cover, in my hands. Opening it, I noted the original publisher's signature on the front page. Leafing through the book's translucent pages, I marveled at the candor of Ghalib's Dībāchah, the Preface, written in the colorful, baroque, Persian of the times, and admired the poet's farsightedness in the singularity of the book's production. Holding that Dīvān in my hands is a precious memory that I continue to relive, and savour.

My relationship with Ghalib's various Dīvāns continued after this. In 2015, I was asked to authenticate the manuscript of Ghalib's 1820 dīvān. The Nuskhah was originally the property of Nawab Faujdar Ali Khan of Bhopal, the maternal uncle of the Begum of Bhopal, but had gone missing from Bhopal's library since Partition in 1947. Bound in leather and calligraphed in pearly nasta'liq, this Dīvān has corrections and additions in the margin in Ghalib's own hand. I remember my hands trembling when I first held that precious Dīvān.³

A memorable pleasure came from encountering the unique pages of Ghalib's earliest dīvān, the Dīvān of 1816, which had been inscribed in the young poet's own hand. The manuscript is remarkable with its handmade paper, shikastah calligraphy, artistic layout, and the poignancy of Ghalib's handwritten notes scribbled in the margins and in the back. The poet dedicated his first dīvān to the Shi'a imām Hazrat Ali and his sons Hazrat Hasan and Hazrat Husain, and also to the great Sufi Persian-Indian poet Mirza Abdul Qadir Bedil:

"O Ali, the Chosen one, prayers (praises) and peace be upon him and his sons.

O Hasan, In the Name of Allah, the Most Beneficent, the Most Merciful/O Husain

Abul-Ma'ali Mirza Abdul Qadir Bedil, May God be pleased with him."

Mehr Afshan Farooqi grew up in Allahabad, India. A multiple gold medalist from Allahabad University, Farooqi is currently Professor of Urdu and South Asian Literature at the University of Virginia. Her research publications address complex issues of Urdu literary culture particularly in the context of modernity. She is interested in bilingualism and how it impacts creativity.

³ I am grateful Shahab Sattar owner of the Dīvān for delivering it directly to me in Charlottesville and allowing me to keep it for a couple of weeks.

Farooqi is also a well-known translator, anthologist and columnist. She has recently published, *Ghalib: A Wilderness at my Doorstep, A Critical Biography* (Penguin/Allen Lane/ January 2021). Mehr continued her work on Ghalib and published a second book: *Ghalib: Flowers in a Mirror, A Critical Commentary* (Penguin/Allen Lane/January 2024). She is currently working on a memoir, *Whirlwind of the Heart*. Farooqi writes a featured column on Urdu literature past and present in the *Dawn*.