

THE GENIUS OF GHALIB

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Since the beginning of the 20th century the poetry of Ghalib has been steadily gaining in popularity and prestige and the momentum is not yet exhausted. It is a phenomenon that requires to be explained in the light of the history of culture in general and the history of Persian and Urdu poetry in particular. Ghalib is a bilingual poet and in consequence, any attempt to deal with his poetry in the two languages separately would be one-sided, empty and artificial. The genius of the two languages, especially in the style and diction of Ghalib, is so akin that in this respect the artist is not like the musician playing on two different instruments to express different moods of the Spirit, because in the case of Ghalib these instruments are not of different timbre and tone, but organs playing the same music with inessential external details. The difference between Ghalib's Persian and his Urdu is negligible from the point of view of determining his outlook on life, although, from the point of view of pure Art, his genius has expressed itself more perfectly and exquisitely in the former, so much so that in comparing the two himself, he disowned his Urdu poetry as not the true revelation of his genius.

فارسی بین تا بہ بینی نقشہائے رنگ رنگ
بگزر از مجموعہ اردو کہ بے رنگ من است

The purpose of this article is to determine Ghalib's Weltanschauung, his angle of vision and his outlook on life. For

this purpose it is absolutely essential that we first pass in brief survey his spiritual and intellectual inheritance, because in this world of causal chains and progressive evolution, phenomena are not thoroughly comprehended by studying what they are, but how they have come to be.

Before him Persian poetry had passed through various phases, advancing in some directions and retrogressing in others. With the stagnation of life forces, new matter for thought and feeling, new experiences and experiments on life were not forthcoming. The Persians were lovers of art racially and climatically, and the development of poetry with them had started with original life forces. Islam infused into them its yea-saying to life and democratic freshness. Persian poetry partly modelling itself on the simple natural poetry of the Arabs, had expressed Reality and Beauty. But being temperamentally more metaphysical and subtle than the Arabs, the Persians diverted Islam from its simple moral dynamics into a sort of transcendental statics. With growing decadence and the lack of elan vital the impoverished forces of life engaged themselves either in culling new abstractions out of words and phrases that were once living or in weaving a cobweb of evasive and bloodless feelings. The later poets wrote love poetry, not because they felt the pangs and pulsations of original experience, but because they had inherited rich phraseology which was capable of infinitely varied combinations and permutations, with the result that it became a travesty of what it was and lost all touch with life. The theme of love and metaphysical mysticism

became the fashion for nearly all poets whether they were real or pseudo-artists, as Shaykh 'Ali Hazin said:

تصوف برائے شعر گفتن خوب است

Ghalib entered into full inheritance of all the motives mentioned above and set before himself the object of not opening new vistas of life but to dig more deeply into the treasure grounds already made available by the efforts of his predecessors and to soar more loftily into the heavens that had already been revealed. He strove to assimilate this inheritance and it must be confessed at the outset that he imbibed the decadent along with the living material. In the traditional Persian poetry there is hardly anything that he discarded. Pantheistic mysticism, love poetry at its highest and its lowest, real optimism and artificial pessimism, truthful as well as hypocritical encomiums on kings, rulers and men of power and pelf, both native and foreign, and even theological controversies of his day that interested him the least, all these things claimed to be shaped by his genius and to every one of them he gave a bit of it.

One might say that consistency among all the products of a single artist is a virtue that is foreign to artistic creation. If life in its infinite Will to Live, Will to Create and Will to Power creates elements and organisms that thrive both by harmony and by conflict, why should not the same privilege be granted to an artist who is not preaching a creed but whose function is to feel and

express as many aspects of life as impress him and appeal to him to give them a habitation and a name?

You may require of a prophet to have one definite view of existence and that his expression should conform to his thought, and his deed be consistent with his words. Similarly one may require of a philosopher or a scientist to be at least intellectually consistent and to have a system which is plausibly free from internal contradiction. The only consistency that is required of an artistic creation is the unity of impression of a single piece of art. But as all the variegated creations of a single artist have at least that much unity, in so far as they all emerge out of a personality that is fundamentally one, so the entire production of a single artist must have some colours that dominate over the larger portion of the canvas and give us a clue to his outlook on life. The same Milton wrote *L'Allegro* as well as *Il Penseroso*, *Paradise Lost* as well as *Paradise Regained* but no critic would be entirely unjustified in his attempt to trace Milton's view of life in general. Ghalib has paid homage to the traditional, the conventional and the real, and has on different occasions expressed contradictory moods and conflicting views but a thorough study of him does give one a generic impression and reveal certain threads that give a special tone and colour to whatever pattern of variegated hues he may be weaving on the warp of his genius. Now we will attempt to single out certain salient characteristics in his outlook on life.

1. REVOLT AGAINST THE CONVENTIONAL

Ghalib shared this trait with all the great minds of all ages. Although in matter as well as manner, to a very great extent, he followed the traditions of Persian poetry, yet either actual divergence or at least the intense desire to deviate from the beaten tracks of thought are noticeable in his art as well as life at every step. His belief was that the conventional which means dead and unoriginal, is unworthy of a great mind. He considered it would degrade him either to think the common thought or to observe the common religion or to live a common life or to die a common death. He once put it humorously when he survived an epidemic, that although he was destined to die during that year, he held himself back because it was derogatory to his genius to perish in a general epidemic which happened to coincide with the predestined time of his death. He was loth to believe in anything simply on authority. He once indignantly remarked that people hold up as a criterion of truth everything that belongs to the past "as if there were no asses in the times gone by." His contemporaries found it hard to understand him because he would not walk in their ruts and it is known to every reader of Ghalib how he fell foul of the Persian scholars of his time, because of his attack on Qatil who was accepted on all hands as an infallible lexicographer of the Persian tongue. In the sphere of religion, too, it is not easy to label him with any denominational epithet. He does not believe in following blindly even the universally accepted, and in many places he enunciates it as a principle for men of insight.

با من میاویز اے پدر، فرزند آذر را نگر
ہرکس کہ شد صاحب نظر دین بزرگان خوش نکرد

Don't fall foul of me, O Father; look at (Abraham) the son of Azar; whoever becomes a man of insight does not like the creed of his ancestors.

He says elsewhere that heresy or heterodoxy is a divine gift that is not bestowed indiscriminately on the unworthy and is not attainable by effort:

دولت بغلط نرسد از سعی پشیمان
ش
کافر نتوانی شد ناچار مسلمان شو

O mere man, thou shalt not be able to attain that privilege; therefore despair of it and remain an 'orthodox' Musalman.

In an Urdu Ghazal he repeats the same desire of independence most emphatically:

لازم نہیں کہ خضر کی ہم پیروی کریں
مانا کہ اک بزرگ ہمیں ہمسفر ملے

It is not necessary for us to follow Khidhr (the invisible guide of Muslim tradition); at best I can take him as a fellow traveller on the road of life.

And elsewhere he puts the same theme diversely referring in the dialogue between God and Moses:

کیا فرض ہے کہ سب کو ملے ایک سا جواب
اؤ نہ ہم بھی سیر کریں کوہ طور کی

It is not necessary that God gives the same reply to everybody (that He is incapable of being seen); let us also attempt a visit to the Mount Taurus, undaunted by the failure of Moses.

Referring again to the traditional Stone-hewer Lover of Persia, Ghalib reproaches him for having followed a very common way committing suicide in despair, and deprecates the value of his martyrdom because he was not able to rise above custom and convention.

تیشے بغیر مر نہ سکا کوہکن اسد
سرگشتہ خمار رسوم و قیود تھا

One could quote numerous verses from his Urdu and Persian collections to substantiate this special trend of his mind, and one can easily see that this desire for originality and hatred of the common-place and the conventional has left its mark everywhere on his poetry as well as his prose. Even his epistolary art is a landmark in the history of letter writing in Urdu which was thus

once for all delivered from its time honoured classical shackles. When he was following the classical models by deliberately and consciously setting before his eyes certain masters and masterpieces, his real endeavour was not to imitate but to create.

2. HIS PHILOSOPHY

We will now turn to what one would call Ghalib's philosophy but which would be better expressed by the German expression Gedanken Welt, Universe of Thought. No poet is a technical philosopher or a system builder. In the strict sense of these words, he is neither a philosopher nor a prophet, though he weaves into the warp and woof of his art much of the valuable elements of both and transforms abstract truth and practical insight into Beauty. For the sake of clear apprehension, we will divide his thought-world into a kind of metaphysics on the one hand and a wealth of certain deep and everlasting stray thoughts on the other.

His metaphysics like the best philosophy among the Musalmans is mystical which is a joint product of subtilized Islamic Theism, Hellenistic Rationalism and Aryan-Neoplatonic Monism. His view of Reality is preeminently monistic or pantheistic. Reality is fundamentally and essentially One. Human knowledge and human values are piece-meal, discursive and relative. The distinction of God and the Universe, subject and object, good and bad, high and low, is only phenomenal or unreally real. This thought of the ultimate Unity of Existence

which is the greatest discovery of human intellect and human feeling, is the most fascinating intuition and faith in which art, science and religion coincide and get reconciled. This fascinating creed of Unity was endorsed and preached by the real as well as the pseudo-artists and mystics throughout the Islamic world. With the pseudo-artist it becomes only a dignified dogma, a bloodless logical abstraction, a shibboleth and a catchword. By weaving it mechanically ad nauseum with only unappealing verbal variations, one becomes sick of it. But in the hand of a great artist whose art is suggestive of the Ineffable mystery and the half revealed fundamental Beauty of Existence this lofty doctrine appears to be an eternal Spring where every flower is a new revelation of one inexhaustible Being and where the Universe changes itself into every drop of dew. This doctrine makes the universe living in every aspect and justifies the artist in his approach to Reality as the communion of Life with Life and of Soul with Soul. This intuition is not the creation of any one seer or artist; it is the product of a progressive revelation but all art and intellect is to be ultimately judged by reference to this fugitive spirit of the Unity of Life. Ghalib's poetry in this respect is sometimes the mere expression of a creed that is versified but at other times it has the exalted gaze of Wonder and the glow of an edifying Faith. As a specimen of merely rhymed metaphysics, we will take a few examples from his Urdu and Persian Divans.

ہے غیب غیب جسکو سمجھتے ہیں یہ شہود

ہیں خواب میں ہنوز جو جاگے ہیں خواب میں

ہے مشتمل نمودِ صود پر وجود بحر

یاں کیا دھرا ہے قطرہ و موج و حباب

Reality is utterly beyond Appearance; our waking in it is like waking in a dream. The ocean, as perceived, consists of appearance of Forms; the drop, the wave and the bubble have no independent, substantial reality.

The monistic analogy of the sea and its waves is traditional; here Ghalib has versified it without giving it any original touch. Similarly in a Persian quatrain he expresses it simply and directly:

اے کردہ بآرائش گفتار بسیچ

در زلف سخن کشودہ را خم و بیچ

عالم کہ تو چیز دیگرے می دانی

ذاتیست بسیط منسبت دیگر بیچ

O Thou who maketh an effort so adorn thy speech and createth beautiful curls in the locks of thy expression; the Universe that thou regardeth dualistically is One indivisible Being and nothing besides it exists.

At another place he expresses it with a simile which is more original than that of the sea and its waves:

اصل شہود و شاید و مشہود ایک ہے

حیراں ہوں پھر مشاہدہ ہے کس حساب میں

The Logos or the Word is originally One but like a swiftly revolving luminous point it creates the illusion of a continuous circle (the appearance of a round Universe).

Contenting ourselves with these examples of the mere utterance of a formula, we now proceed to cite some of his verses where he enters the Realm of Art in the spirit of wonder or honest doubt.

The reality of the knower, the known and the knowledge or the perceiver, the perceived and the perception, is one i.e. if the subject and the object are identical, I wonder how the relation of perception can arise which presupposes the duality of the knower and the known.

One of his Urdu Ghazals is entirely an interrogation of wonder at the unintelligible relation of undifferentiated primeval Unity to the multiplicity and diversity of the actual world of infinitely varied things, and beauties.

جب کہ تجھ بن نہیں کوئی موجود

پھر یہ ہنگامہ، امے خدا کیا ہے؟

سبزہ و گل کہاں سے آئے ہیں؟

ابر کیا چیز ہے؟ ہوا کیا ہے؟

یہ پری چہرہ لوگ کیسے ہیں؟

عشوہ و غمزہ و ادا کیا ہے؟

Dost thou not to mind recall, Mine early days of love ?

By the dread of whipping glance, As quiet I was as dove.

The painted dolls of present age At seats of learning taught,

Have not infidel's charm, or mould Of idols, Azar wrought.

The earth, despite its stretches vast, Hath no nook for rest:

How passing strange that this world Is neither cage nor rest !

For Thine bounteous rain await The thirsty ducts of vine:

Taverns of Persia stand

Devoid of Magian wine.

My fellow bards ascribe to spring My sudden burst of song:

How can they know the ardent strains, Poured by passion
strong?

From the blood and bones of man Thine world hast come to
life: What more can be a martyr's meed Than lasting fret and
strife?

Through Thine Grace, O Mighty Lord,

My life is sailing safe:

Against my friends I have no plaint,

Nor world can make me chafe.

A. A. Shah

English rendering of a ghazal in Bāl-i Jibril, pp. 23-24.