



GHAZALS AND GHALIB'S RELIGION

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ABSTRACT

Mirza Asadullah Baig Khan is one of the most celebrated Ghazal writers of Urdu literature. Among Urdu literature lovers, he is well known by his pen name Ghalib. In the Urdu literary canon, his versatility, creativity and modernity in thoughts and techniques assure him a permanent place. Ghalib also occupies a towering place for his prose as evidenced by the significance of his letters in Urdu literature. As predicted by Ghalib, his tremendous influence on Urdu literature is experienced increasingly in the contemporary literary world.

The misfortune of witnessing the deaths of all his seven children and his tumultuous relationship with his wife could have led him to take solace in wine and women. Pain and sufferings are resonating themes in many of his Ghazals. Probably, Islam, which literally means "total compliance to God" has helped him deal with his misfortunes and maintain his sanity. Not a personality to perennially ruminate about his sufferings or complain about his problems, Ghalib's Ghazals also bring out the beauty of divine love. His wit and love for wine and women are also exquisitely expressed in his Ghazals.

Ghazals written by creative poets can be interpreted in several ways. Though considered as a poet who rebelled against prevailing tenets and beliefs, he was in fact, trying to emphasize the true meaning of religion. It appears that the adversities he faced in life influenced his approach to religion. At the surface level some of his verses appear to be frivolous in nature regarding religion, God and Clerics. However, the deeper meaning reveals his respect for Islam, God, sincere Clerics and religious tolerance. Some critics and readers interpret the outer meaning and condemn his works as audacious. On the other hand, several readers comprehend his intention and support him. The present paper attempts to interpret select verses of Ghalib to support the above-mentioned views. The paper also expounds that Ghalib's personal life has a definite impact on his religious views.

Keywords: *Ghalib, Islam and Ghalib, Religion and Ghalib*



Religions are structured to assist man rise above both natural and man-made disasters he faces in life. The essence of any true religion is to help man rise above pettiness and dwell harmoniously with his fellow creatures. The chief purpose of any religion, to exist harmoniously without harming God's creation, stands unfulfilled today. Clashes surfaced due to huge gaps in man's needs, wants and greed. Religion is slowly being replaced by materialistic goals constantly fuelled by money and power hungry individuals. Increasingly, we find religion being the centre of conflicts rather than religion resolving conflicts. The present times are sullied with mass murders of the innocent in the name of religion. In the garb of holding up religious values, man is becoming a threat to the society and himself. His actions eventually may lead to his annihilation and extinction. In these troubled times, it is difficult for the innocent and the oppressed to find solace. Today, throughout the world the true and the faithful are going through testing times. Either in the East or in the West, it is the common man that is suffering the consequences of terrorism under the veil of religion perpetrated by misguided persons. The true followers of Islam believe in one and only God, Allah, the formless Almighty and surrender to him unconditionally. Evidently, literature of any time mirrors the society it exists in. Some writings are reflections of how the society is and some, representations of how the society should be. Though, Islam considers fiction equal to falsification which is against the religion, narrating stories through literature was permitted by Islam and some great story works translated from Persian, *Alf Laylah wa laylah (The Thousand and One Nights)* and *Kalilah wa Dimnah* are treasured in the present as well. Stories were also narrated to impart morals and values. Poetry on the other hand, developed a technique unique to Islamic literature to circumvent the diktats of the religion. Religious constraints actually helped develop remarkable creativity in poets so as to mask the thin line between human love (*ishq-e-majazi*) and divine love (*ishq-e-haqiqi*) in their poetry. The reason for the progress of poetry in Islamic literature may also be attributed to this technique of veiled inferences [1]. Poetry takes

several shapes in the form of *ghazals, hamd, nazm, masnavis, marsiya, naat, qasida, qawwali, shayari, rubai, tazkira* etc. The present paper focuses on religious overtones in Ghalib's ghazals. Allama Iqbal's quote best describes the significance of Islam which is simple to follow yet mysterious to comprehend.

Iqbal:

Ghareb-o-sada-o-rangeen hai dastan-e-haram

Nahayat iski hussain ibtada hai ismaeel

Translation:

The tale of the Holy Shrine unfolds, simple yet intriguing

The tale begins with Hussain and ends with Ismaeel

Islam religion was also very tolerant towards the Urdu poets. In the olden days, religion could look beyond the satire and comprehend the pain of the poet. One of Ghulam Hamdani Mushafi's couplets is a very good example of the religion's tolerance towards satire. In this couplet he points out that rewards go to the person who sacrifices but injustice is done to the person who is being sacrificed.

Ye ajeeb rasm dekhi ke baroz e eid e Qurban
wohi zibha bhi karay hai wohi le sawab ulta

Translation:

Strange traditions are followed as seen on the feast of sacrifice. He alone reaps the benefits who performs the sacrifice.

It implies that the person who lays down his life in not reaping any benefits. This couplet obviously refers to the incident when Ibrahim was asked to sacrifice something precious to him and he attempts to sacrifice his son, Ishmaeel. Allah replaces Ishmaeel with a ram at the precise time. Since then, after millions of sacrifices, it cannot be said that any ram or sheep benefited for being sacrificed. This couplet also mirrors the society which was tolerant and broad-minded which is impossible to expect in the present. In truth, many Urdu poets used satire to highlight the social evils. While doing so they stepped bravely into forbidden territory of religion and in those days,



the society was extremely tolerant as they could perceive the true intentions of the Ghazal writers.

In truth Ghazal is a very unique form of poetry in Urdu poetic tradition. The word 'Ghazal' has several meanings like 'communicating with women,' 'the shriek of a dying deer,' 'love,' 'beauty,' and 'unique style' etc. The tradition of Ghazals is originally from Arabia but it spread its beauty throughout the eastern countries. Two consecutive lines in a ghazal are called as a *misra* or couplet and generally contain 21 words. The beauty of a ghazal lies in encompassing a lot of philosophy and thought in minimum of words.

Eg:

Phir kuch is dil tho bekharari hain
Seena joya-e-zakhm-e-khari hain

Translation:

Restlessness reins the heart again
The heart rakes up the wounds once again.

In the above example, Mirza Asadulla Baig Khan whose '*nom de plume*' or '*takhallus*' is Ghalib conveys the meaning that the heart is forever languishing in unrequited love by using minimum words. These few words convey both the futility of Ghalib's love and insensitivity of the woman he loved. The vulnerability of the poet's heart and his tranquil submission to pain come out to the surface and tugs at the heart strings of the readers. The beauty of Ghazals is that many inferences can be drawn from them. The above couplet can be ascribed to human love (*ishq-e-majazi*) and divine love (*ishq-e-haqiqi*) at the same time.

Given below are the various dimensions that bring out the beauty of a ghazal and emphasize the knowledge of the person who writes or recites them:

- i. Conventional recitation of the ghazal
- ii. Pausing at the appropriate places and proper intonation
- iii. Knowledge of difficult words is necessary to savor the full beauty of a couplet/*sher*
- iv. Ability to recite a ghazal extempore – as an extempore couplet receives many compliments
- v. A *sher* should be easily converted into prose.

The best couplet of a ghazal, known as *baitul* ghazal, is famously repeated. Most poets use their pen name or *takhallus* in '*maqta*' or the last couplet. Mirza Asadulla Baig Khan uses the *takhallus*, 'Ghalib' which means 'victorious, all-conquering, superior, most excellent' etc.

The ghazal is misunderstood as used by poets only to express unrequited or illicit love. Ghalib (Dec. 27, 1797 – 15 Feb. 1869) used the ghazal form to express various themes that range from love to philosophy and to mysteries of life. His creative poetry resulted in carving a permanent niche in the Urdu literary canon. [3]

Ghalib's verses are mostly created in the traditional form, concealing the identity and gender of the person addressed in the ghazal. Ghalib's ghazals have been translated in many languages. His themes are love, philosophy and mysticism.

Ghalib was a spiritualist who believed that the quest for God in oneself would elevate a man from the narrow confines of religion. His poetic views reflect the love and mysticism of Sufi philosophy [4].

Ghalib was religious but never agreed with the literalist interpretation of the Islamic scriptures that laid claim to paradise. Probably he believes that perceptive men can transcend material aspects and succeed in reaching God. In one of his letters to a friend, he laments that if the literal interpretation of Quran is considered, in paradise, pure wine is always at hand. If that is the case, he wonders about the loss of bonding with friends during the late night walks and the merriment in the *maikhadas*. If the climate is always pleasant in Paradise where can one find the beauty of early monsoon clouds? When there is no question of autumn how can one experience the beauty of spring. If the beautiful *hooris* are always there, where is the satisfaction of fulfillment of true love? Beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder. What if the perception of beauty of a person differs from the beauty of the *hooris*? Where is the sadness of separation and joy of union? Where is the innocent girl who shies away from romantic overtures [5]? In short it appears that the joy of achievement on one's own or serendipity of nature enjoys a miniscule role in the literal interpretation of



Quran.

He probably argues that literal translation does not merit the religious script. He could mean that the desires which consumed one when alive become non-existent in the presence of the almighty. Probably Ghalib opines that heaven is that state where pure divine love for God surpasses all material cravings. According to Ghalib, perhaps heaven is a place where people are absorbed in divine love and treasure divine proximity. This interpretation recalls an anecdote of Ramakrishna Paramahansa, a prophet who practiced all major religions so vigorously that within a short period he was blessed by the visions of Mother Kali, Prophet Muhammed and Jesus [6]. Ramakrishna's disciple, Vivekananda went through a lot of hardships when his father passed away. He was in immediate need of job and money to take care of the material needs of his family. He urged his guru, Ramakrishna Paramahansa to seek material gains from Mother Kali. Ramakrishna agreed, but found it difficult to recollect the worldly needs of Vivekananda when he was in the majestic presence of the goddess. The story goes that he gave up and told Vivekananda to pray and seek material gains. Vivekananda prayed intensely but when the mother appeared before him, he became so ecstatic in her presence that he forgot about his worldly needs [7]. This anecdote helps in understanding that divine love surpasses material needs.

Ghalib uses Sufism and satire to emphasize the universal existence of the creator. Ghalib is a staunch believer of Islam and it is revealed by his poetic approach. Ghalib's themes seem to be surrounded by *Imaniyat* (related to God) and *risalath* (worldly – philosophical, sufiyana and satire). Ghalib's many *hamds* reveal his absolute submission to Allah. Consciously or unconsciously his ghazals covered the themes of Sufism (mystical dimension of Islam) like existence of God, absolute surrender to the Almighty and Necessity of existence – Creation of Universe.

Ghalib on the Almighty:

Jab ke tujh bin nahin koyi maujood
phir ye hangama ye khuda kya hai

Translation:

If nothing exists without your presence
Then O God? What is this gaiety?

Sabza-O-Gul Kahan Se Aaye Hain
Abr kya cheez hai hawa kya hai

Translation:

Who is the creator of this beautiful nature?
What is this cloud and what is this breeze?

Jab jalwa rubarub hain Jo misgah uthaye
Himmat kahan ke deedh ka ehsan uthaye

Translation:

When the Almighty is present in front of a person, he dare not lift his eyes at the dazzling brilliance.

The above couplet is a fitting answer to people who doubt the presence of God. The couplet enlightens that no human being or living creature can dare to look at the amazing radiance of the Creator. Ghalib uses rhetorical technique to emphasize the supremacy of God.

Asl-e-shahood-o-shahid-o-mashhood ek hai
Hairaan hun phir mushaahida hai kis hisaab mein

Translation:

If the witness, the witnessed and witnessing is one in essence. I am perplexed about the true purpose of witnessing or observation

Ghalib's childlike wonder and awe of God and his creation come out through these couplets. The couplet mentioned above reveals his belief in the oneness of the Almighty with the Universe and again his perplexity regarding the purpose of existence.

Again the same person could mock religious deeds with great alacrity. The couplet given below is an example of what he thinks of practicing religious activities for the sake of benefits.

Jantha hun savaab-e-taat-o-zahad
Par tabiyat idhar nahin ati

Translation:

I am aware of the rewards for religious deed
But somehow I am not inclined towards them

This contrasting nature gives us to understand that Ghalib believed in the Almighty but he did not believe in practicing the religious deeds for the sake of pleasure in afterlife. And he was brave enough to admit his feelings without mincing words.



Fortunately, he lived in better times when the community did not take over God's role and task him by judging and punishing.

On analysis of some couplets related to religion, it can be said that many poets of Islamic religion follow the religion's views that there is only one God and is omniscient.

Moreover, Ghalib employs satire for the true comprehension of religion. Satire, as a literary device occupies a prominent place in many languages. Satire or 'militant irony' is used by poets in such a way that they seem to embrace the very social causes that they would like to condemn. The satirical technique employed by the medieval Arabic poetry was known as '*hijr*'. Satire also has its roots in Persian literature as seen in the works of Ubayd Zakani, and Iranian literature as observed in the works of Bibi Khatoon Astarabadi [8]. One of Ghalib's couplets which uses satire to drive a point:

Zakir Sharab Peene De Masjid Mein Beth
Ker,
Ya Wo Jagah Bata Jahan Khuda Nahi.

Translation:

O Pious Man! Allow me to sit and drink in
the mosque
Or show me a place where God doesn't exist

In the above couplet, Ghalib's views about the omnipresent nature of the God come out clearly. He challenges narrow-minded people who take great pride in their devoutness with the concept that God does not dwell only in a mosque but is ubiquitous.

Another poet, Ahmed Faraz strengthens Ghalib's opinion by saying that God exists even in the heart of an infidel but he is unaware of the fact.

Kafir K Dil Se Ayah Unhe Dekh Ker Faraz,
Khuda Mojood Hai Wahan Per Usay Pata
Nahi.....

Translation:

O elevated one! I have been in the heart of
the infidel
God exists there but the infidel is unaware of
the fact

Personal setbacks and adversities could also be a reason for the sharp, stinging and satirical quality of the poetry. A normal person's faith in God would have been completely shaken by the death of all their children. Though at times he seems to be wandering away from faith, on the whole, Ghalib

appears to be surrendering to the will of Allah. Also incompatible marriage and unrequited love added to his woes. Probably his faith helped him hover over his predicaments and keep his sanity intact. His wit and creativity are best seen in some of his ghazals on love and philosophy. Some of his famous couplets with translation are given below:

On life

Jail jeevan aur bandh gam, vasthav mein
donon ek hai
Mauth se pehle aadmi gam se nazath paye
kyun?

Translation:

In reality, life in prison and repression of pain
are similar
Why would man seek relief from pain before
death?

On love

Mohabbat mein nahin hai farq jine aur marne
kaa
Usi ko dekh kar jitee hain jis kafir pe dam
nikhle

Translation:

There is no difference between life and death
in love
Life is spent in looking at the person who
captures our heart

On desires

hazaron khwahishen aisi k har khwaish pe dam
nikle
bahut nikle mere arman lekin phir bhi kam
nikle

Translation:

Thousands of desires such that each desire is
worthy of laying down one's life
Many were answered yet they constitute only
a small part

On false clerics

kahan maikhane ka darwaza 'ghalib' aur kahan
waiz
par itna jante hain kal wo jata tha k ham nikle

Translation:

What did the pious cleric got to do with the
entrance of a bar, O Ghalib!
But I can assure you that I saw him leaving as I
was entering.

On unrequited love/God

ham haiN mushtaaq aur woh bezaar
ya ilaahee ! yeh maajra kya hai ?

Translation:

I am very much interested and he/she is
equally displeased with me
Oh God! What is the mystery of this situation



that I find myself in?

The above couplets elucidate his views on God, religion and philosophy. He was a learned person in all religions and displayed his knowledge in Islam, Christian and Hindu religions in his verses. He believed that God exists within oneself and in one of his verses he opined that if God can be reached by rituals than love, it is possible for everybody to reach God just by converting to Hinduism and taking a dip in the holy Ganges. In other words Ghalib himself does not believe in religious rituals.

Ghalib's ghazals not only portrayed his beliefs but also his wit and creativity. The greatness in his ghazal renditions can be understood by the several interpretations of the ghazals of which one example is given below:

Bageecha-e-itfal hai duniya meray aage
Hota hai shab-o-roz tamasha meray aage
Ek khel hai aurang-e-Suleman meray nazdeek
Ek baat hai aijaz-e-Masiha meray aage

Translation:

I consider the world as a child's play
The drama unfolds night and day in my presence. The flying throne of Suleman is nothing but a play to me. The miracles of Christ are just words to me

The above couplet could be a description of the greatness of man. Among all God's creations, only Man has the ability to rise above everything and achieve greatness. Ghalib probably implies that Man's achievement is nothing but a reflection of the Almighty's grace. Another interpretation is also possible where we can account the above couplet to God. It can be interpreted as God's voice revealing his greatness to man. The Almighty could be disputing the amazing achievements accomplished by man and revealing God's true greatness. At another level, it could also be considered the voice of Time, before which any worldly triumph does not make sense as time alone has the power to degenerate as well as heal. All marvelous achievements of men stand nullified before the passing time.

Ghalib's couplets also speak of pain and his inability to conquer the fear of hardships. Given below are a few examples:

Kyon gardish e mudam se ghabra na jaye dil
Insaan hun, pyala o saaghar nahi hun main

Translation:

Why shouldn't the heart be terrified of adversities?
I am a human being, not a cup or goblet made of glass

Dard ho dil mei to dawa kijiye,
Dil hi jab dard ho to kya kijiye,

Translation:

Antidote exists for an ache in the heart
What should a person do when heart itself becomes a pain?

He continues to plead with Allah that there should be a limit for the punishment meted out to him as he sinned but his faith is intact.

Had chahiye saza mein uqubat k waste
akhir gunahgar hun, kafir nahi hun main

Translation:

There should be a limit to the punishment meted out. After all, I am a sinner not a faithless person

Dil hi to hai nah sung-o-khasht, dard se bhar ai kyon!

Roiange hum hazar bar, koi hamein sataai kiyon!

Dair nahin, haram nahin, der nahin aastan nahin

Baithe hain rah guzar pe, gair hamein uthai kiyon!

Translation:

This is my heart, not a stone or a brick, why shouldn't it be filled with pain?

Why do people stop me from crying a thousand times and letting out my feelings?

I am not in a temple, nor a mosque, nor at the door nor the porch

I am sitting on the road venting out my emotions, why do people try to console me?

In olden days, people who were considered mad were chained or kept in an isolated room or left to roam in the desert. Ghalib's couplets pun on these practices:

Deewangi se vabhal-e-dosh
Sehra mein deewar bhi nahin

He seems to be accusing the desert that though it is vast in size, it does not have a wall so that he can hit his head against the wall to rid his madness.

Khana zade-zulfein zanbeer se bhagenge kyun
Koi girafthare-wafa zinda se ghabrawenge kya

Translation:

The person who is shackled by the beloved's



tresses does not run away from iron shackles
The person who is chained by his loyalty does
not fear the prison

The poet laments that he is imprisoned by the beauty of his beloved and his loyalty towards her. When he is already imprisoned and mad with love, he questions, how can he get rid of his madness when put in a prison. He compares the real and the abstract shackles in this couplet like iron shackles and flowing curls of his beloved and the prison with his self-drawn cage of loyalty.

CONCLUSION

On the surface it appears, from Ghalib's verses, that he rebelled against the reigning religious practices. However, he was in fact attempting to draw attention to the true meaning of religion. Also, the extensive sufferings he went through in life impacted his approach towards religion. The unwarranted and untimely deaths of all his seven children, frictions with his wife, his love for another woman which went unreciprocated and later her death and his poverty led him to question the futility of religious deeds and the concept of Paradise. Fortunately, the adversities in his life did not dull his pen. He probably comprehended the concept of Almighty and found solace only after his absolute submission of life to Allah. Ghalib belongs to that classification of poets who transcend the man-made religion and reach the Almighty through selfless love and devotion. His love for God was based on Sufi Philosophy, an unconditional submission, unquestioning faith and undemanding love. This superior love for God along with his prowess in poetry allowed him to get back on life's track.

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