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Ghalib

Innovative
Meanings
and the
Ingenuous Mind

Gopi Chand Narang

Translated from Urdu by Surinder Deol

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Jameeluddeen Aali
The famous author of *Ghazlein, Dohe, Geet*
An enlightened mind and a descendant of Loharu family
A guardian of Ghalib's literary and cultural legacy

aaiina kiyon n duun k tamaasha kahein jise
aisa kahaan se laauun k tum sa kahein jise

Maybe I should give you a mirror
so that you can watch your own spectacle.
Where can I find another
whom people will consider as magnificent?
—Ghalib

*ch daanad fahm-e kotah baal jaulaan-gaah-e shauqam ra
k oo raah-e digar raft ast o man jaaye digar daaram*

The short-sighted can't appreciate
the limits of my passion.
He has gone the other way
and I have chosen a different path.

—Naziri

Among the disciples of Maulana Fazl-e Haq, a great scholar and luminary, there was someone who went to Mirza Ghalib and inquired about the meaning of one of the couplets written by Nasir Ali Sirhindi. He interpreted the couplet.

The person came back to Maulana and told him, 'You always praise the poetic ability of Mirza Ghalib. Today he interpreted a couplet wrongly'. Then he read the couplet and summarized the meaning provided by Ghalib.

Maulana asked, 'What's wrong with this interpretation?'
'There is nothing wrong, but this is not the interpretation that Nasir Ali intended.'

Maulana replied, 'If Nasir Ali didn't mean what Ghalib understood, then he made a big mistake'.

—Hali

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Preface

Speech Is Honoured a Hundred Times When It Appears on Your Miraculous Lips¹



G^{HALIB'S} POETRY CAN BE COMPARED to a proverbial bowl of the legendary king Jamshed that reflected a whole universe when gazed at intently. His couplets hide an astonishing world of layer upon layer of complex meaning. The biggest question about Ghalib's poetry is to discover the mysterious element that flares up like a flame and continues to lighten up vistas of meaning so that an ordinary reader is left breathless. The reader wants to assimilate the meaning while experiencing a creative occurrence that is hard to decipher in words. What is the secret of this poetic artistry and beautification that seems to be so flawless? What is the truth and inquisitive power in this poetry that strengthens our confidence in human ingenuity and inventiveness? It gives us the power to disengage ourselves from day-to-day mundane routines and heightens our awareness of life's beauty and its myriad pleasures. The more we think about these textured mosaics like magical thoughts, the more new doors of discovery open for us. It is true that there is something here for a reader of every taste, temperament, and orientation. There is a magnetic quality that draws the edges of our heart to itself, a phenomenon described in the following couplet by Mir Taqi Mir (1723–1810):

*ek do hon to sehr-e chashm kahuun
kaarkhaana hai vaan to jadu ka*

If it were one or two I would call it magic of the eyes;
there is a whole world of wizardry here.

Ghalib's critics have closely analysed every nook and cranny of this universe of magic, but in the world of beauty there are charms, there are

enchantments, there are attractions, and then there are coquettish moves that can be felt but cannot be named. It is not commonly understood that Ghalib's literary critique is a 'journey to the unknown'. What Ghalib said about his beloved, the one who pirated his mental poise with her bewitching charm and beauty, applies to his poetic artistry as well:

*balaa-e jaan hai Ghalib us ki har baat
ibaaarat kya ishaarat kya ada kya*

Ghalib, everything about her
is heart pulling.
The way she speaks.
The way she looks.
And the way she casts spell.

The speech, the looks, and the magical spell with the use of imagistic innovative language are all part of the 'unknown journey', meaning there are expositions of beauty that cannot be put into simple words. These can be felt at a deeper level, but they cannot be named.

Ghalib, in a letter addressed to Chowdhary Abdul Ghafoor, wrote something interesting about his enigmatic style. His thought was embodied in a Persian composition:

*agar ch shaa'iraan-e naghz guftaar
z yak jaam and dar bazm-e sukhan mast
vale ba baada-e ba'ze hariifaaan
khumaar-e chashm-e saaqi niiz paivast
mashau munkir k dar asha'r-e iin qaom
varaa-e shaari cheeze digar hast*

There is no dearth of poets
but not all poets are the same.
There are some who are drunk
with the commonplace wine.
There are those who mix in their drink
saqi's beautiful glances.
But let us admit that there are those
who have something unique.
Their work can't be described with a label
like poetry because it is limiting.
What is beyond poetry is indescribable—
deep beauty for which no words exist.

What is that thing which Ghalib calls 'something unique' (*cheeze digar*)? In the case of Ghalib's literary critique this 'something unique or beyond

poetry’ is all that matters. This is the same thing which we called earlier ‘a journey of the unknown’.

There is a *hikaayat* about an old woman who was searching for something at a road crossing where there was light.

A passerby asked, ‘What are you searching, old Ma?’

She said that she lost her keys and that’s what she was looking for. The interlocutor followed up,

‘Where did you lose your keys, Ma?’

‘Of course, I lost them at home,’ the woman answered.

‘But then why are you looking for them here?’

‘Because there is light here and I might find them.’ ([Ramanujan and Yamaguchi 1992: n.p.](#))

This is the central issue of Ghalib’s critique. Ordinarily, we look for Ghalib where there is light. And everything is clearly seen in the open, where everything is easily understood. In Ghalib’s poetry everything happened or everything can be seen in the light—that is not the case.

If we have to tread on Ghalib’s path, Hali is the basic source, though he is apologetic that his book *Yadgar-e Ghalib* is not well-suited for intellectual pursuits. It was the result of his desire to idolize someone, a tendency that can make anyone blind and deaf ([p. 275](#)). He was disappointed that Mirza failed to gain recognition for his poetry in his lifetime, which he richly deserved ([p. 378](#)). The mood of the times had changed and therefore, *Divan-e Ghalib*, was not one of those creations that the people needed ([p. 375](#)). Although critical studies of Ghalib’s poetry have advanced considerably during the last century, it is a fact that *Yadgar-e Ghalib* is still the work that opens up pathways for future studies on Ghalib.

While laying the foundation of literary criticism in Urdu and the Ghalibiana critical discourse, Hali used *Yadgar* to highlight two main aspects of Ghalib’s poetry, that is, *turfagi-e khayaal* or ingenuity of thought, and *jiddat-o nudrat-e mazaamiin* or innovative freshness of subjects—these aspects have been universally accepted, which studies on Ghalib have repeatedly reaffirmed.² While discussing Ghalib’s verse, Hali has also discussed some general features such as inspirational flourish, how he composed and expressed his thoughts, his delicate handling of subjects, and the captivating use of similes and metaphors. While we commend and agree with Hali’s description of specific aspects of Ghalib’s poetics, our effort here is to find out whether behind these imaginative devices there is a mysterious poetic logic that tells us something more about his hidden or subconscious motivations that helped him to achieve his unique creative process. Hali says that a particular idea is new and unusual, but he does not

tell us *how* it became new and unusual. How did Ghalib create that magical effect of openness, or the spin which made the meaning of ordinary day-to-day words to appear as a sparkle, as a flash of lightening?

While making a reference to Ghalib's unusual creative abilities, Hali drops a few hints about some unconscious linkages or relationships, but he does not make any attempt to unravel the mystery of why Ghalib's mind is productive only in a certain enigmatic, dialectical way. Is there something hidden, something peculiar in the way his mind is structured, or an unconscious yearning that could be outside the conscious control of the poet?

The creative act itself is like a bag full of secrets. Literary criticism cannot claim to reach all its depths. We can only form an opinion on the basis of the reading of the text. Undoubtedly, there is something in Ghalib's inventive and imaginative poetry that is part of his mysterious creative process which he uses with a clear intent, and it has a deep connection with his dialectical discourse, the roots of which are hidden in the depths of his unconscious mind.

Here is the problem. *Turfagi-e khayaal* and *jiddat-o nudrat* can be found in other poets of Sabke Hindi masters as well. How do we differentiate Ghalib from these poets? These are actually common features of the Mughal Age. Hali and his contemporaries did not find any reason to probe this question. But modern criticism is justified in asking the following questions: How did the magically dense aspects of Ghalib's poetry, which are multilayered and multidimensional, and appeal to us, come into being? Where did innovative metaphors, similes, expression of inexpressible delicate feelings, adornments and beautifications, and uncommon inquisitive mode, which are all parts of his nonlinear multidimensional distinctive thought processes, come from? Is there a hidden scheme, a mysterious structure, and a different poetics? If the answer is in the affirmative, then what is its nature or secret? Our effort is not to bypass Hali. While we accept and appreciate his basic exposition of Ghalib's work, we want to raise some fundamental questions and find answers about Ghalib's mysteriously different poetics hoping that we might be able to lay our hands on something that lies at the depths of his creative process, that is, *cheeze digar*.

Hali talks about the poetic revolution, which appeared in India in the form of Persian ghazal, but surprisingly he does not mention Bedil's name,

though Bedil had influenced Ghalib the most. The paradox is that though Bedil's poetics served as a guide to Ghalib and remained the source of his main inspiration, Bedil was not accepted as part of the literary canon until then. He was in the background. Even Shibli in his monumental five-volume history of Persian literature ignored Bedil. Whether it is Hali, Shibli, or Azad, whenever they refer to Bedil, it is definitely not to praise him, though these three writers in their distinctive spheres were providing historical perspective and appreciation of the origin and evolution of the Sabke Hindi poetic tradition. On the canvas of narrative history, we can paint Ghalib's deep engagement and lifelong obsession with Bedil's creative poetic work, which was very deeply imprinted on his subconscious mind. When we talk about conscious or unconscious complexities of Ghalib's personality and his enigmatic creative artistry, we find some paradoxical 'unkind elements' that criss-cross his writing and then gradually they become somewhat resolved if we keep in view the not-so-obvious archetypal roots of Bedil and Sabke Hindi's dense and inventive poetic practises. If we do this, then some of these questions are not so difficult to answer and some of the mysteries tend to unravel step by step.

In this study, we shall attempt to look carefully at Bedil and Sabke Hindi's influence on how Ghalib produces or creates layer upon layer of dialectical and enigmatic meaning and weaves mystery of innovative beauty. We also include in this inquiry the broader influence of currents of thought in Indian civilization and Indian philosophical traditions, notwithstanding some aspects of Indo-Islamic heritage. What is there in Ghalib's mental structure that even ordinary thoughts come out multidimensionally with a spin as if dialectically textured? This much is clear in the deconstructive readings by Hali of selected couplets ([Chapter 1](#)) that show how Ghalib is different in illuminating meaning hidden in his verse and how the innovativeness of his approach is without a parallel.

We often come across Ghalib at places where any conversation in the commonplace or ordinary language is difficult, or where the decanter of wine tends to melt with the heat of enigmatic creativity (*aabgiina tundi-sehba se pighla jaae hai*). Ordinary language is a victim of fixity and it suffers the limitations of linear differential binary thinking. Ghalib, in the expression of his feelings and sensibilities, attempts to be free from this and breaks all these differential barriers. For him life or existence is contradictory. In the manuscript *Nuskha-e Hamidia* (1821), which

comprises verses written before the age of twenty-five, we find poetic work that is the product of a state, which in the mystic idiom can be called 'a state of no mind'. Sometimes, ordinary language is hardly able to deal with unfathomable realities of day-to-day life; it cannot deal with the thoughts that have to do with intuitive flights and deep reflection on the contradictory nature of life or existence. The paradoxical strangeness of this language lies in the fact that it is a language of meaning beyond meaning, or it is the language of soundless silence, or 'one hand clapping' as Zen masters allude to. Very often, we meet Ghalib in the valley of his creative endeavour, where the sky is clear of all clouds and the self becomes simply a pollution-free pure reflection in the inner body's lake. This is the place where ordinary interpretations do not work. The wings of ordinary discourse begin to burn here. We are struck with some questions. Is Ghalib's poetry an attempt to restore the language of silence to its rightful place? Has today's human being forgotten the atrocities committed by fascist regimes or the deafening demands of widespread sectarianism and terrorism that have made us mute and insensitive to the language of inner silence? It seems that humanity has lost the language of its purity, primal innocence, and compassion. Ghalib's poetry can thus be seen as an attempt to restate the language of inner silence, the language of humanness, or the language of our primal innocence.

Regarding the dialectical spin which is the key to Ghalib's unique creativeness, we can find its hints in Sabke Hindi and we can even see its tracings in the works of Bedil. But from where has this seed come? Where are its unconscious archetypal roots? We have devoted two chapters in this book in our attempt to find some valid answers. The thinking and philosophy behind negative dialectics finds its origin in the ancient Upanishads. But this is transcendental thinking that later flourished in mystical teachings of medieval Sufis and saints. Its pure, unpolluted form, transcendental or non-transcendental, however, free from all binary thinking is found only in the Buddhist philosophy. These influences have reached far away and have found a place in the Japanese and Chinese traditions as well. Its biggest fountainhead in Buddhist thinking is the philosophy of 'shunyata', which is neither religious, nor transcendental, nor dogmatic, nor any known path to enlightenment. This is simply a way of dialectical thinking of examining and cleansing every received truth, teaching, dogma, doctrine, viewpoint, tenet, principle, precept, maxim, creed, or ideology. Or

it looks at them by turning them around, or putting them on their head. Reality is not linear or limited only to what we see. The obvious or commonplace makes us blind. The existence in fact is paradoxical, in which everything arises as a reflection of its non-being, everything we see or know is of dependent origination, lacking any true essence, that is, it is *shunya* (devoid of any substance).

Shunyata is therefore a tool for cleaning up the mind of illusionary, one-dimensional thinking so that the mind gets rid of the pollution of preconceived notions and we open ourselves to inner freshness, where we experience immanence, freedom, and self-awareness, which is our highest quality as human beings. In other words, as a pattern of thinking, it is like burnishing or polishing a mirror that is synonymous with burnishing or polishing of the inner mirror that gets tarnished with the mundane or gets rusted with the given notions. When it is fully clean, the mirror of being starts to shine and then it truly reflects primal multidimensional reality. But traditionally, this method is transcendental; Ghalib's thinking, however, is non-transcendental because its foundation is existential. Ghalib's objective is not to discover spiritual deliverance or mystical *ma'refat* or *jnana*; his main concern is the human condition and he is focused on the existential awareness of humans together with the joy and celebration of life. Shunyata is non-transcendental; it is simply a method or tool like a whetstone. The whetstone can sharpen a knife, but cannot cut anything. After rejecting all given or pre-perceived truth, belief after belief, and showing that everything is paradoxical, and both existence and non-existence is a single organic whole, shunyata as a method of detached thinking dissolves and falls away.

As we mentioned, Ghalib's concerns are not transcendental; they are down-to-earth poetic. Ghalib's focus is human beings, their wishes and yearnings, life's paradoxes, and different ways employed by them to make sense of reality. This means that when we come to Ghalib's verse, we find that non-transcendental manifests itself through the mould of negative dialectical play. It gets absorbed into different poetic forms and opens up the possibilities of myriad meaning. Please note that we have not called it shunyata per se, but a peculiar poetics that is non-transcendental, dialectical, and dynamic. The source of different ways and patterns of Ghalib's dialectical thinking is certainly the dynamic of shunyata. It is a tool for removing the rust of mundane conventional thinking and opening a pathway of freedom and life's awareness. Negative dialectics is fully

embedded in Ghalib's enigmatic inventiveness, so much so that it casts away all that is routine and commonplace in a way that it not only beautifies but also shines light on different shades of meanings. This is a magical act. We can find traces of this in the realm of Sabke Hindi, meaning Mughal Persian poetry, spanning back several centuries.

Ghalib's creative process is such that even when he touches simple words or ordinary expressions, they end up becoming a 'magical treasure trove of meaning' (*ganjiina-e ma'ni ka tilism*). His verse appears at so many levels, in so many forms and shapes, branching out in so many directions that it is not possible to draw any definite boundaries around it. The meanings are so subtle that we are often looking at a fast rotating linkage of thought for which no one description can be precise and clear-cut. The verse is no more verse; it becomes a part of life's paradoxical and mysterious melody. It takes us into a realm of freedom and openness. Ghalib's life and poetics are a true reflection of our yearning for freedom. This is an ideal for which he is ready to pay any price. The mundane ways of thinking, viewpoints, customs, and rituals are like chains that impede freedom. Only when we rise above our repressive routine thoughts and beliefs that we have a true taste of existential freedom; a poetic creative state in which joy and suffering, happiness and sadness, fame and ill fame, hot and cold winds of time—everything is levelled.

In this book, we are focused on Ghalib's Urdu writings, though wherever needed we have also referred to his Persian work. But the Urdu poetry is the very centre of our attention. We have devoted four chapters to this. We start with *Nuskha-e Bhopal Awwal* (we call it Rendition One) that was the writing which Ghalib calligraphed in his own hand in 1816 (when he was only nineteen years of age). This was also the time when Ghalib faced, for the first time, life's harsher realities and bitter criticism by contemporary poets who were used to writing in conventional styles which were popular at that time. The pain of rejection that he suffered in his early age stayed with him for the rest of his life. We have attempted to find how the creative yearnings of these years influenced the dialectical creativity of his more mature work in later years, how we find its footprints in the poetic work that is considered unique for its aesthetic quality and freshness of thought. We have tried to demonstrate, based on evidence, how this transformation and perfection occurred around the age of nineteen and not twenty-five, as was commonly believed. This was, in fact, the transformation, the seeds of

which were present right at the beginning. [Chapters 7](#) and [8](#) are devoted to this. [Chapter 9](#) deals with *Nuskha-e Hamidia*, comprising of poetic work completed by the age of twenty-five. [Chapter 10](#) takes us to the compiled Divan of selected verse, which also includes important manuscripts known as *Nuskha-e Shirani* and *Nuskha-e Gul-e Ra'na* which were compiled between 1826 and 1829, but the Divan was fully completed in 1831 and was published only in 1841. This is the same Divan, with few additions, that was reprinted five times during Ghalib's life; and it is on this Divan that Ghalib's fame rests. We have paid special attention to the chronology of all writings because that is the key to understanding the evolution of Ghalib's creative capabilities and dialectical mode of thought. In this way, we complete the exploration that we start in [Chapter 1](#) with Hali's assessment and then Bijnouri's characterization of Ghalib's links with India's thought, archetypal Buddhist shunyata, the poetics of Sabke Hindi, the influence of Bedil, and the unconscious Indian philosophical roots which are mysteriously embedded in the ingenious poetics and semantics of Ghalib.

We start this journey with Hali, and after deconstructing his text we formulate our questions about Ghalib's creative uniqueness. We also discuss Bijnouri and Sheikh Muhammad Ikram. About Bedil and Sabke Hindi, we get some useful tips from Waris Kirmani, Russian scholar Natalia Prigarina, and Abdul Ghani, and a-not- very-well-known scholar, Vagesh Shukla. For *Nuskha-e Hamidia*, the two early manuscripts, and Ghalib's scholarly published larger Divan, we cannot thank enough Maulana Imtiaz Ali Khan Arshi and Kalidas Gupta Raza. Their works are respectively titled *Nuskha-e Arshi* and *Nuskha-e Raza*. The truth is that if Ghalib scholars had not worked on the chronological order of text and raised the level of discourse to pristine heights, we would have found it difficult to find our first step. We have benefitted from the findings of the experts, but in every respect we have presented our own distinctive viewpoint, because the case we present here is different and our study points to a somewhat new direction. Wherever we have found light, we have embraced it and used it to reinforce our formulations and conclusions. We are indeed indebted to all the scholars and experts.

Ghalib had written in a Persian couplet:

ta z divaanam k sarmast-e sukhan khwahad shudan
iin mai az qaht-e kharidaari kuhan khwahad shudan

The vintage wine of my verse
will gain in its maturity
because of the famine of customers.
But the ones who taste it in the future
will surely get the benefit of aging
and will thus receive rare flavour and pleasure.

The interpretation of Ghalib's text has been changing with time. Bijnouri's Ghalib is not the same that was read by Hali; and Hali's Ghalib is not the one that was read by Nazm Tabatabai, Bekhud Dehlvi, Suha Mujaddidi, Hasrat Mohani, Niaz Fatehpuri, or Sheikh Muhammad Ikram. The Ghalib of Khurshidul Islam, Prigarina, or Waris Kirmani is also not the same Ghalib that belongs to Kaleemuddeen Ahmad, Ehtishaam Husain, Al-e Ahmed Saroor, Zoe Ansari, or Baqar Mehdi. In other words, each person reads his own Ghalib. It is true that the commentary of one does not agree with the commentary of the other. Votaries of classicism and romanticism had found their Ghalib. Progressives and modernists also found tracings in his writings that appeared close to their viewpoints. There is no limit to how someone could interpret Ghalib. His poetry does not fit into any one category of thought. That is why Ghalib called himself the 'nightingale of a garden which is yet to come into existence'. He is the last of the classicists and the first of the modernists. His thought is like a kaleidoscopic rainbow of colours. As times change, new meanings emerge. We can see that the way in which Ghalib's view of modern man appealed to the temperament of later generations, the same way Ghalib's dialectical open thinking and pluralism appeals to the contemporary mind. Ghalib opposes close-mindedness, sectarianism, oppression, and dogmatism. This is in tune with the postmodern thinking. Ghalib is not only embedded in Mughal aesthetics; the way he represents our philosophy and traditions of self-awareness is without any parallel. Notwithstanding his pride in his Turkish Central Asian descent, the roots of his creative consciousness and dialectical thinking are stuck deep in his own soil, the Indian soil.

In one of the most memorable Persian *ruba'is*, he emphasizes the point of his native origin. He compares the totality of his thought to Somnath temple in Gujarat that was destroyed by the invading armies of Mahmud of Ghazni. But the temple was rebuilt. It was again destroyed by the army of Alauddin Khilji. Several further demolitions and reconstructions happened, but the temple came back to stand on its ground. There is something indestructible

in the Somnath (the temple) of his poetry, and it goes on breathing despite repeated efforts to denigrate it. He wrote:

*masanj shaukat-e Urfi k buud shiiraazi
mashau asiir-e Zulaali k buud Khwaansaari
b somnaat-e khayaalam dar aai ta biini
ravaan faroz baruu duush-haae zunnaari*

Don't sing praises of Urfi
because he was Shiraazi
or that of Zulaali
because he was Khwansaari.
Come to my Somnath,
the treasure temple of my thoughts.
What new kind of world is flourishing?
And on my thread-borne³ shoulders
one may see a shine
of angelic light emitting thoughts.

After the Holocaust and its reaction in the form of Zionism, we have seen several ugly forms in today's world of racial and religious discrimination, communal discord, fascism, and colonialism that, in the name of its own dignified doctrines, justify killings and bloodshed of millions of innocent human beings. The fact that this is happening in the twenty-first century is a matter of shame. God has been split into many parts. One god does not understand the language of the other gods. There are idols of different shapes and sizes. What is freedom for some is not freedom for others. The biggest challenge of the twenty-first century is the protection of human freedom, freedom for all. Against this background, Ghalib's dialectical discourse, its compassion, its openness, its plurality, its multidirectional yearning for upholding the dignity of human beings assumes even greater importance.

Ghalib rejects all forms of ritualism and all kinds of dogma in which 'keys to what is true' are held by a choicest few. When Ghalib talked of the downfall of the pillars of the faith and the dissolution of its constituent elements, his voice was far ahead of its time. Using the grammar of his new style of poetry and through an altogether new creative signifier, Ghalib not only hit age-old stilted thought structures but also demolished in particular the routinely accepted views about man, god, nature, joy and grief, good and evil, hell and heaven, sin and virtue. This was a revolutionary paradigm shift. His contemporaries could not properly assess what he had really

accomplished. In a world that was still burdened with royalty and theocracy, Ghalib chose a radical path of freedom, plurality, and openness. Compare this against prevailing narrowness, sectarianism, intolerance, and blind faith. He asserted that truth is not the monopoly of a particular way of thinking or a dogma. The path of truth is open to us all.

Ghalib's poetical construct supports unqualified freedom of the human spirit. His dialectical discourse is an indication of the fact that human existence is paradoxical and multidimensional. And no one has a monopoly over truth. Quantum physics has dealt a blow to many beliefs of the past. There is a new language of paradoxical grammar and language of silence ('thoughts beyond words'). In Urdu language, there is no finer example of this than Ghalib's dialectical thinking and his self-illuminating poetry. With the dawn of each new age, the blooming garden of Ghalib's poetry will continue to lend itself to new meaning. In the poet's own words:

adaa-e khaas se Ghalib hua hai nukta sara
salaa-e aam hai yaraan-e nukta daan ke liye

Ghalib, I've sung many songs
in my distinctive style.
The rest is for the thoughtful readers
to turn over and think in their heads.

GOPI CHAND NARANG
Charlotte, North Carolina
June 2017

¹ *Nutq ko sau naaz hain tere lab-e i'jaaz par.* This *misra'* (line) was written by Sir Muhammad Iqbal (1877–1938), also known as Allama Iqbal, paying tribute to the poetical genius of Ghalib in one of his poems.

² Hali uses some Urdu Persian critical terms which do not seem to have exact English equivalents, in particular, Ghalib's *turfagi-e khayaal* and *jiddat-o nudrat-e mazaamiin*. What have been used here are approximate equivalents.

³ The sacred thread that is worn by Hindus as a symbol of purity.

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For several years, [*Nuskha-e Arshi* \(1958\)](#) was considered to be the main source of Ghalib's poetical work. But after three decades of sustained hard work, Kalidas Gupta Raza presented a more thorough and chronologically inclusive text called [*Nuskha-e Raza* in 1995](#). This *Nuskha* includes all the early manuscripts discovered after the poet's death, such as *Nuskha-e Hamidiya* (1821), *Nuskha-e Awwal b Khatt-e Ghalib* (1816), *Nuskha-e Shirani* (1826), *Gul-e Ra'na* (1828), rare letters, and newspapers and periodicals of those times. The importance of Raza's work can be realized from the fact that while the published *Divan-e Ghalib* contains 1,802 couplets, his critically collected work presents a total of 4,179 couplets. It is on this thoroughly comprehensive critical text that our own study is based.

I am deeply grateful to Surinder Deol (formerly with the World Bank, Washington, DC) for his valiant and passionate effort to undertake the English translation of my original Urdu text *Ghalib: Ma'ni Aafriini, Jadliyaati Waz'a, Shunyata aur Sh'eriyaat* published by the Sahitya Akademi in 2013. To translate a scholarly text into another language is not an easy task. There are challenges in every step of the way in just finding

the right expression in another language to convey the spirit of the original. Surinder is a great lover of Ghalib's verse, and his book [*The Treasure: A Modern Rendition of Ghalib's Lyrical Love Poetry* \(2014\)](#) had the unique distinction of being the first book to contain American free verse translation of *Divan-e Ghalib*. When he agreed to take up this challenging task, I felt confident that this translation would not only have authenticity of the original text but it would also appeal to English readers as a work that they would feel comfortable in identifying themselves with. Since Surinder's book had translation of the couplets found in the commonly available Divan, and my textual base is *Nuskha-e Raza*, they have been presented here with necessary revision and alterations. For many other Urdu couplets which are not in the common Divan, and for selections of Bedil and Ghalib and Mughal Persian poets, we worked collaboratively to produce English versions that accurately capture the poet's intent in a free-flowing lyrical language as far as possible. In addition, the reader will find the original text based on *Nuskha-e Raza* in transliteration that is easily readable.

My wife Manorma has been of constant support during these past years, when my attention was completely focused on the completion of this work. So were Arun, Tarun, Neha, and Monica; the young ones Shreya and Rohin in Charlotte; and Avani in Toronto. They brought joy and illumination when I desperately needed it. My scholar friends at Jamia Millia Islamia and University of Delhi, Professor Mohammad Zakir and Professor Sharif Husain Qasmi, read the text a couple of times. Their suggestions were of great help. Mohd Musa Raza was generous with his time and provided much-needed help. My heartfelt thanks to all of them.

I have spent countless years in doing my research on Ghalib's enigmatic poetics and my findings, especially about the roots of his poetry in ancient Indian traditions and archetypal traces of Buddhist philosophy, were presented in my Urdu text. This provided a new innovative lens to look at Ghalib's poetry. It is my hope that this work in English will greatly help in bringing these insights to a much larger audience. As South Asians, we take pride in calling Ghalib as our greatest poet. But I think the time has come to recognize the fact that Ghalib is a major world poet and critical studies of his work in languages besides Urdu have become a necessity and not just our aspiration.

1

Hali's *Yadgar-e Ghalib*



*tuutiyaan ra n buvad herza jigar-guun minqaar
khurda khuun-e jigar az rashk-e sukhan guftan-e ma*

Eloquent parrots
have not unnecessarily dipped
their beaks in the red blood
of their hearts.

They are envious
about how wonderfully
I have mapped my wounds
in my couplets.

—Ghalib

After Amir Khusrau and Faizi there is no other great and multifaceted poet like the Mirza who has arisen from the soil of India. And because the times have changed, there is no hope for the future as well that highly talented people who have such command over sophisticated classical style of poetry and masterly prose will ever arise from this soil again.

—Hali

THE MOST RELIABLE AND BASIC CRITIQUE of Ghalib's poetry is that of Hali in [*Yadgar-e Ghalib* \(1897\)](#), although Hali was aware of the fact that [*Aab-e Hayaan* \(1881\)](#) came first. Had *Yadgar* not been written at the time when it was written, no one could say how much longer it might have taken for a regular critical discourse of Ghalib's work to commence. Hali wrote from his first-hand knowledge of Ghalib's life, personality, temperament, habits, his friends, and critics. He also analysed Ghalib's poetry with profound care and, towards the end of his book, he presented a comprehensive selection of

Ghalib's Persian and Urdu poetry. In addition, Hali presented a fair assessment of the distinctive elements of his prose and letter writing in such a manner that proved that no one could write better than Ghalib. Even if we show disagreement with Hali's assessment we shall find that ultimately most of the seeds of all the problems and controversies sprout from his discourse. We cannot deny the fact that even all the new points of criticism eventually emerge from Hali's writings. Now let us start our discussion with Ghalib's early *rekhta* (as Urdu poetry was called at that time).

Hali, while talking about Ghalib's early work and its disapproval by others, stated that,

People were very much used to listening the straightforward and easy to comprehend poetry of poets such as Mir, Sauda, Mir Hasan, Jur'at, and Insha because they used in their work the language of day-to-day conversation. While seeing the simple language being used in the routine current idiom was pleasing to many people, there was a general belief that an effective poetic couplet was the one which came from the poet's heart and then it instantaneously entered the heart of the listener. But you don't find this in Mirza's early poetry. For somewhat highly individualistic and unusual ideas, he employed the use of atypical language and difficult phrases and syntax. There were many couplets where if you took out one word, the couplet would spontaneously turn itself into Persian. There were some forms of expression in Mirza's creative toolkit that had never been seen before, either in Urdu or in Persian. (1897: 102-3)

Hali talks about unfamiliarity of language and the liberal colouring of Persian phrases, and also admits the strangeness of ideas. It can be said that Hali and his contemporaries were more concerned with the surface structure of the language and simple expression which they ordinarily liked. Ghalib, at that stage, was generally criticized for his density of ideas and innovative style. Hali quotes the following couplet as an example:

qumri kaf-e khaakastar o bulbul qafas-e rang
ae naala nishaan-e jigar-e sokhta kya hai

What is ringdove? A fistful of dust.
What is nightingale? A cage of colours.
O my lament, what is the mark
of an afflicted heart?

Hali further writes,

I myself asked Mirza to explain the meaning of this couplet. He said that if you read *juz* [except] in place of *ae* [a form of address] the meaning will be clear to you. The meaning of the couplet is that the ringdove, which is dust coloured and the bulbul which often appears caged in the beauty of its own colours, provide a proof of their affliction in love only through their lamentations. Ringdove laments for the moon and the bulbul looks at the flowers and laments. Mirza's use of the word *ae* was his own invention. About this, one person commented that if Mirza had used *juz* in place of *ae* and

had written the second line as *juz naala nishaan tere siva ishq ka kya hai* then the meaning would have been clear. Hali says the person was right but Mirza was wary of ordinary expressions and never liked to tread the beaten path. He never wanted this couplet to become too simple to interpret. He liked innovativeness at any cost in his poetic expression, more than anything else. (1897: 103)

While Hali seems to agree with this person's view, he also adds that Ghalib did not like run-of-the-mill expressions and he preferred creative inventiveness and also being different than others. It is correct that by changing the second line the meaning would have become clearer but it would have also destroyed the unusual inventiveness of the couplet. Hali seems to support the freshness of expression and ideas, though internally he is also against too much complexity and unconventionality of thoughts. The subject of a couplet undoubtedly arises from the flight of mental imagination and linkages between words but its essence depends on its depth and its long lasting semantic and artistic quality. This characteristic of Ghalib runs very close to the concept of 'defamiliarization', a point of view presented by the well-known Russian formalist, Viktor Shklovsky (1893–1984).¹

First of all, the ideas themselves and the modes of their expression (meaning and the word) are not so distinct, as understood during Hali's time. Yet, this matter of signification is such a puzzle that in spite of the semiology of French structuralist Ferdinand de Saussure² (1857–1913) about the sign and its meaning (signifier/signified), especially the fact that terms get their differential meaning in reciprocal determination with other terms inside language, and even after the work of Jacques Derrida³ (1930–2004), best known for developing semiotic analysis known as deconstruction, about *différance*, there is no solution to this puzzle as meaning is differential and always deferred. There is no proof that ingenuity or the complexity of an idea is different from the newness of its expression. The fact is that language is not only the medium, it is also the condition of the idea. If language shapes an idea, its newness or the newness of its expression are not that different or distinctive as is commonly believed. This means that if the thought is complex, new, or delicate then the language that has signified it will not be simple or commonplace. Although it might appear simple, in reality it would not be easy or simple.

Hali rightly emphasizes Ghalib's originality and his unusual creative outpouring which undoubtedly bears some relationship with his unusual competence. For example, 'He [Ghalib] might not be doing it intentionally

with a purpose but to tread the beaten track or commonplace and be part of the crowd was against his nature' ([Hali 1897: 104](#)). This means that there is an unconscious pull or drive which is beyond the poet's control. But Hali is not ready to discuss this further and unravel this mystery. He goes around it and comes to a place where conventional and simplistic way of looking at things finds better acceptance. 'Mirza's temperament was such that he was sceptical of doing the routine things. He expressed his dislike of commonplace and run-of-the-mill poetry. He always avoided the conventional and the obvious and looked down disdainfully on the worn out trite expressions which were so prevalent in his day' ([Hali 1897: 104](#)).

Hali narrates a particular incident when someone from Benares or Lucknow visited Ghalib and asked whether a particular couplet was written by him. The couplet was actually written by Mir Amani Asad, a disciple of Sauda.

*Asad is jafa par buton se vafa ki
mere sher shaabaash rahmat khuda ki.* ([Hali 1897: 105](#))

On listening to this couplet, Ghalib was upset and said, 'If this couplet belongs to another Asad, may he be blessed by God! And if this belongs to me [his nom de plume was also Asad] then let the curse of God fall upon me' ([Hali 1897: 105](#)). Such typical, routine, habitual, commonplace, and average thoughts and worn out linkages between words as expressed in this couplet were against Ghalib's inventive intellectual disposition.

It is true that in poetics, the habitual, obvious, and common structure of language is not an important element. The above couplet represents a linguistic mould that is routine and ordinary. This means that Ghalib's subconscious mind had some extraordinary element that made him reject the obvious and the ordinary and set him on an inventive and creative path. In other words, he had an inner urge to give a twist to the received or the conventional so that the thought itself turned around. Hali mentions other examples that show that Ghalib was not only different in his poetry but also in his appearance, in his dress, in his dealings with the most ordinary things of life so much so that even his concepts of living and dying were different from the routine.

Hali narrates a funny story. About seven or eight years before his actual death, Ghalib postulated the day and month of his death that correlated with the Muslim calendar year 1277. Coincidentally, there was an epidemic in

the city in which many people died but Ghalib miraculously survived. About this he wrote in a letter, 'What I reckoned about 1277 was not wrong. I should have died in that year. But to die in an epidemic, I thought, was below my dignity' ([Hali 1897: 105](#)). Although this episode reads like a joke, it says something about his mental disposition. But what exactly is this disposition or creative drive? And how does this play a role in the creative act itself? Hali does not spend any time unravelling these poetic riddles and paradoxes. He simply says,

Mirza's initial verse that he thought was the pinnacle achievement of his heart and mind did not gain much public approval. Because he had used a great deal of his imagination, the work had attained an unusual flair of innovativeness. When he was possessed by the force of creativity he sculpted such jewels of poesy that were beyond anyone's reckoning. ([Hali 1897: 107](#))

Poetry is not always about sculpting the jewels but behind Ghalib's heart and mind there was this flight of imagination, which was essentially subconscious, and that is somehow not part of Hali's calculus. He simply adds, 'We shall have to come up with a different standard to judge the quality of Mirza's fine couplets, which I hope people with good judgement will accept' ([Hali 1897: 107](#)). On this point, Hali showed a way that has the feel of a milestone and can be further pursued.

In his ghazals we find more of unusual topics that were different from the work of other poets and even the normal topics were presented in such a distinctive manner, and this had such exquisite flavorings, which you couldn't find in the work of his contemporaries.... This way we find that while the verse of Mir and Sauda and other poets of that time had similar mind-numbing topics and ideas, Mirza's Divan opens before us a different macrocosm of thought and meaning; just like a traveler feels differently when he moves from a desert to an ocean, or someone who lives in the plains experiences a different state of mind on reaching a hilly place. Similarly, we find that Mirza's Divan provides us with a different atmosphere, different moods, feelings, ambience, and a milieu. (1987: 108)

Hali demonstrates, with the help of selected couplets, the significance of this different and unusual feeling. In his discussion about the couplets, Hali highlights, and does it very appropriately, Ghalib's 'ingenuity of thought' and 'innovativeness of topics'. These elements were prominent in his early verse. There is something in Ghalib's subconscious mind that helps him twist an ordinary thought into an extraordinary one, or enables him to move away from a common denominator. There is no easy way to resolve this dilemma except that we have to start with looking at the text that Hali closely looked. His selection of couplets, in fact, helps us in building a thesis based on these two terms ('ingenuity of thought' and 'innovativeness

of topics') that were commonly used during Hali's time and in the Ghalib critique later as well. We can build upon Hali's selection of Ghalib's couplets, as will be seen later, and there is no doubt that this selection is representative of the principal themes, diversity of ideas, modes of expression, delicate beautifications, metaphors and similes, sharpness of observations, quick wittedness, new meanings for things old and routine—all the aspects that make Ghalib's poetic grammar highly distinctive. Critics who followed Hali have benefited from his observations. But it would be our endeavour to go beyond this analysis and get to the bottom of Ghalib's oceanic depths, the very wellsprings of his enigmatic creativity—not only what we find out there but also how it came into being. It is not for nothing that Ghalib said, 'I am a direct disciple of God and it is the Providence's blessings that with the sharpness of the jewel of my creativity I chisel and bring out thoughts from the deep darkness into the bright, shining daylight' ([Hali 1897: 108](#)). Let us now examine, one by one, the couplets that Hali selected.

1. *bas k dushvaar hai har kaam ka aasaan hona*⁴
aadmi ko bhi muyassar nahien insaan hona

It is difficult
for every little thing
to be easy.
It is difficult for a man
to be just a man.

Hali writes,

On the surface it looks like an ordinary observation, but if we look deeper it is a novel idea. The contention or thesis is that in real life even most ordinary things are quite difficult. And the argument is that even among the ordinary human beings it is difficult to find a man who is truly a man. This is not a logical argument; it is a poetic construction. (1897:108)

If the easy work is easy, then there is nothing new in the idea and it has no poetic innovativeness. The new thing here is that the *easy thing is not easy*. There is a dialectical twist here and this twist is responsible for revealing the depth and giving the couplet an enigmatic touch. Underneath this dialectical twist, there is a parallelism between 'man versus man' (*aadmi* versus *insaan*) and 'easy versus difficult' (*dushvaar* versus *aasaan*). The question arises: can we build a poetic argument marked by such a high level

of creative thinking without the help of a dialectical twist? Let us go deeper into this question as we examine other couplets cited by Hali.

2. *havas ko hai nishaat-e kaar kya kya*
n ho marna to jiine ka maza kya

Craving drives us
to gain much
before we die.
But if there was no death,
life wouldn't be
as much fun.

Hali looks upon this couplet through the lens of human nature and he considers this to be a new idea. All the liveliness in the world is based on the belief that our time is limited. But is there not the same dialectical turn here too which we have hinted above? Who does not want to live forever? Who wants to die? But the poet is saying that the pleasure of living depends on the fact that we die. Nazm Tabatabai says that humans cannot find release from desire and lust (sexual craving). Suha Mujaddidi says that lust or craving that is derived from the fulfilment of our manifold desires is eventually driven by the idea of death or dying. Both Tabatabai and Mujaddidi laid more emphasis on lust or craving than the hopes of having all desires fulfilled. But we find that Ghalib is doing his usual creative twist here: first he links lust or craving with the hopes of fulfilling a host of desires and then he establishes a dialectical relationship between life and death. For example, he says that it is death that makes life so pleasurable. On the contrary, if there was no death, life would be much less interesting. Once again we find that Ghalib's poetry gains its distinctive ingenious quality when we start paying attention to its 'deep structure' which is much less interesting on the surface. Let us see some more.

3. *na tha kuchh to khuda tha kuchh n hota to khuda hota*
duboya mujh ko hone ne n hota main to kya hota

When there was nothing
there was God.
Even if there was nothing,
there would be God.
My being has really sunk me.
If I was not here,
what would have become of me?

Hali says that Ghalib has preferred 'non-existence over existence' and life to him is nothing more than the hope for the fulfilment of a certain desire. This comment does not bear much resemblance to the thought in this couplet. Reality is neither existence nor non-existence. We create our reality based on our life's experiences, our hopes, and aspirations. As Ghalib points out in one of his couplets, 'Don't be deceived by the visible reality, Asad. The world is shaped by the games our imagination plays with us.' Is it not therefore true that the world is the result of a creative tension that exists between God and Man? In this couplet as well we find the same dialectical twist that we have seen before. In the first line we find two negative assertions. When there was nothing, there was God. This is a statement about the past when Man had not yet come into being. The second part follows logically from the first. If nothing else existed, God would still be there. It is logically true but the negative dialectic here brings about the twist. The second line presents another dialectical assertion. My being actually sealed my fate, made me miserable. If I had not been born as a Man, I would have existed as part of nothingness, that is, God or absolute consciousness. So the state of my being was actually my misfortune. It is quite clear that the subject of discussion is not 'existence versus non-existence' but an idea that is also found in the sayings of Sufis and other saints that the real exists only in Man's awareness of God and looking beyond; the material cravings of Man are deceptions and thus not real, or the concept of Maya, propounded by Vedanta and innumerable Sufis and saints, which say that the world is neither existent nor non-existent but appears to exist, as in case of any illusion or a mirage. But the real, the absolute consciousness, exists, which is the divine force. The concept of non-existent itself is therefore turned on its head as nothing other than God exists. There are other examples that reinforce this thought.

Sauda says,

is qadar saada o purkaar kahien dekha hai
be numuud itna numuudaar kahien dekha hai

Have you seen something so simple,
yet so dynamic?
Not visible, yet pervasive and present
everywhere.

In Mir, we find,

*tha voh to rashk-e huur-e bahishti hamien mein Mir
samjhe n ham to fahm ka apni qusuur tha*

He was within us,
coveted like a fairy from the paradise.
But if I didn't know about it,
it was the fault of my comprehension.

Finally Dard,

*jag mein aa kar idhar udhar dekha
tu hi aaya nazar jidhar dekha*

Coming to the world,
I looked here and there,
everywhere,
But then I saw You,
wherever I looked.

The negative in Ghalib's couplet is not negative in the conventional sense but more as a dynamic principle whose mutual friction creates a spark, like the explosion caused by gunpowder. It destroys the conventional beliefs and principles in seconds, and through various twists and turns it brings them back to life in new forms and shapes that lighten up a breadth of new meaning and its beautification. The question is whether there is any relationship between Ghalib's creativity and this kind of dialectical turn.

In view of the aforementioned discussion, are we right in forming an opinion that there are several aspects of Ghalib's style of meaning creation? 'Beautiful love birds have such beauty that there aren't as many ways to describe it' (*bisyaar shevah hast butaan ra k naam niist*). Creative act is a bag full of secrets. Criticism cannot claim to reach all its depth. It can only make subjective opinion in view of the available text. Does that mean that the creative and aesthetic ability that we have talked about is perhaps the most distinctive characteristic or element of Ghalib's creative competence? And is it not true that the poetic logic that Ghalib consciously uses has some relationship with his dialectical thinking or negative dynamics whose sources lie dormant in the depths of his unconscious?

As of now, this is like a question or a hypothesis unless we further test its veracity. Let us proceed and look at other examples offered by Hali.

4. *taufiiq b andaaza-e himmat hai azal se
aankhon mein hai voh qatra k gauhar n hua tha*

Since the beginning of time,
ability is seen
to accompany courage.
A drop can become a pearl,
but that is nothing
like becoming a tear
in the lover's eye.

Hali considers this to be 'a new and an unusual idea', there cannot be two opinions about it. But we need to know how Ghalib actually creates something new and unusual. In other words, how a new topic leads to a new idea and how then the new idea shapes up to be so magical, and how it brightens the meaning, and how it eventually gets tagged as 'ingenious'. Tears mixed with blood or a drop becoming a pearl are conventional poetic similes and metaphors. But Ghalib uses these basic elements to create a new web of meaning, a whole new semantic field. Teardrop is essentially water, that is certain. But a simple twist creates a new meaning. Hali says that the first line is a hypothesis and the second line is an argument to support the thesis. The argument goes like this: if the drop had decided to become a pearl (which was possible), it would have missed the opportunity to be a tear on the beloved's cheeks. But why did the drop make that decision? And what courage or motivation did it receive? From which source did that strength come so that it was able to make that decision? Ghalib is not only 'telling us' what the drop did but he is actually making us 'feel' it. This miracle of innovativeness was made possible with the help of a negative dynamic. We can see that the hypothesis and the argument were actually turned upside down. The teardrop decided not to become a pearl because it acted with the courage that it had received from providence. There is yet another meaning. The drop did not become a pearl because its conscience did not allow it to sacrifice its own identity and it stayed what nature made it to be, a priceless tear. It gained the transcendental force because of its courage and its ability to stay true to itself. Divine blessing played a role but so did dialectical thinking and a negative dynamic.

5. *laag ho to is ko ham samjhein lagaao*
 jab n ho kuchh bhi to dhoka khaaein kya

Playful contention (*laag*)
could be taken for affection.
A matter of interpretation.
But if there is nothing there (*lagaao*),

what could I say?

Hali praises newness of the idea. Even when there is enmity, there is some form of relationship. But when there is neither friendship nor enmity, there is no room for deception. Laag in fact is not what many of the interpreters thought it to be. It is difficult to translate its nuances; it is some sort of intentional indifference or outward denial or teasing or playfulness, or all of this and some more. What is interesting is that Ghalib who is so good in playing with Persian words is using two colloquial words here like laag and lagaa, which are drawn from the same root—from homegrown, common language. Is it also not interesting that the real value of the couplet is thus determined by giving a twist or creating a tension between these two ordinary words and by adding into this the dialectical play that turns something ordinary into extraordinary? As stated, in common parlance, laag may be taken for unfriendliness but Ghalib uses this word to mean a first stage of ambivalent friendliness, something that might evolve into something different. When there is nothing, there is no room for deception. It is the distinctive quality of Ghalib that he picks up even ordinary usages and then transforms them into something magical beyond the ordinary analytical or logical. This is the hallmark of Ghalib's artistry. We should also notice the closeness between the two words (laag and lagaa). They sound quite similar, though their meanings are somewhat different, yet not that much different. Hali thinks it is wonderful to find such similarity between two words but it is more wonderful when the visible similarity is informed by the dialectical twist that creates a completely new tension. The second line that says '*jab n ho kuchh bhi ...*' is also not simple because the dynamic of negative dialectic has changed the meaning of *kuchh*; the two negatives turn it into a positive, meaning that there is something that the speaker is talking.

6. *girni thi ham p barq-e tājalli n tuur par*
 dete hain baadah zarf-e qadah khvaar dekh kar

The lightning
should have struck me,
and not the Mount Sinai.
The wine is given
only proportional
to what one can hold.

Hali is right about the virginal quality of this couplet but he does not say how it acquired that quality. What happened on Mount Sinai is part of a sacred tradition. It has elements of both what has been traditionally accepted and what is actually known. So the 'tradition versus known' issue itself is not a very captivating thought. What makes it unique is not the acceptance but the rejection of the idea. The first line is a claim, or a proposition, in which the emphasis is on the word *ham*. The poet takes the focus away from Moses and draws attention to man. The argument is as follows: drink is offered to a person who has the capacity to absorb it. What happens if we offer the quantity of drink that is beyond the absorptive capacity of the person? Clearly, loss of senses will be the result. So logically you should not expect to get something that you cannot handle, that is beyond your capacity. But what is most striking about this couplet is the connection that Ghalib makes between drinking (sinful by faith) and the lightening on Sinai, a sacred event. Is this not play of equation and contradiction the main driving device of Ghalib's creative mind?

7. *hariif-e matlab-e mushkil nahien fasuun-e niyaaz*
dua qabuul ho yaarab k umr-e Khizr daraaz

Prayer did not resolve
my predicament.
May God let Khizr
live a long life!

Hali finds some witticism in this couplet. You pray for something that you do not have and actually want to obtain. Khizr has already received the gift of an eternal life. He does not need a prayer for this. Praying for something that is already present is Ghalib's use of his creative dynamic for a self-created playful situation.

8. *aata hai daagh-e hasrat-e dil ka shumaar yaad*
mujh se mere gun-h ka hisaab ae khuda n maang

Remembering the wounds
that I suffered in the pursuit
of my heart's desires,
ask me not, O God,
the count of my sins.

To address the Almighty like a justice seeker and making Him answerable for man's woes is Ghalib's hobby. Addressing God has been the favourite

sport of both Persian and Urdu poets. It is well known that if the poetic logic is good then the couplet will also be unique and more tasteful. The key words here are *gun-h ka hisaab* (counting of sins). The sins in this context are *so-called* sins since man has so many unfulfilled desires. The sins are so many that they are virtually countless in the same way as desires are countless. So in this situation what do you think the poor man could do? The fact of the matter is that he cannot do much, especially when he wanted to fulfil many more desires, that is, commit even more sins. The blame this way passes on to the authority who is asking for the accounting of sins. This is the usual twist we have seen before. Look at the situation being described in the following couplet by Momin.

*y uzre imtihaan-e jazb-e dil kaisa nikal aaya
main ilzaam us ko deta tha qusuur apna nikal aaya*

Knowing the flood of emotions
inside my heart that I wasn't able to mediate,
I knew the fault was mine
though I was quick to blame her.

There are many such examples, both in Sabke Hindi and Urdu ghazals, but with Ghalib this is a part of his dialectical artistry which is the very heart of his poetry. This is a mental orientation, maybe a way of thinking that is part of his self-induced, unconscious creative act.

9. *mujh ko diyaar-e ghair mein maara vatan se duur
rakh li mere khuda ne meri bekasi ki sharm*

I died in a distant land,
far away from home.
How kind!
God saved me from destitution.

This couplet belongs to *Nuskha-e Rampur* (1833). Ghalib had returned a few years ago from Kolkata. He had lost his pension case. No one wants to die in a distant land. This is routinely true and it has no poetic freshness. Rather, it is the old cliché. It fits in the framework of defamiliarization that we presented before. To die in a distant land, not receiving the love and care of the loved ones during the last moments, is shameful. But Ghalib deconstructs it and makes it acceptable. Even in Ghalib's life wounds inflicted by the likes of Nawab Ahmad Baksh Khan and Nawab Shamsuddeen Khan, blows delivered in a way that they were unfathomable

by one's own and strangers, as the blade of the knife had reached the periphery of bones and its unconscious shadow was lurking over Ghalib's existence, the couplet sums up a very sad situation. Dying in a distant land in the backdrop of such hardships was not 'shameful'. Death at home in great destitution would have been more shameful. It is another striking example of Ghalib's dialectical transformation.

10. *hai ghaib ghaib jis ko samajhte hain ham shuhuud*
hain khvaab mein hunuuz jo jaage hain khvaab mein

The mystery of mysteries
that we witness is a dream
for those who have been awakened
in the world of their dreams.

It is a great quality of Ghalib's poetry that it even transforms what is generally hard to transform. The couplet would either be mystical or it would contain Sufiana thought. There is a proposition in the first line and the supporting argument in the second. This position is in line with the Vedantic as well as Sufi philosophy. The mystery of all mysteries is grasped by those who watch it in a dream state because in a dream state they are 'awake' (free from logical, rational ways of thinking). This is about the games that our consciousness plays with us. What is outside is also inside. What is in the waking state is also present in the sleep state. In fact, as we gradually move from our normal waking state to the sleep state (which is a dream state), our consciousness sharpens and we can see what is not visible in the normal waking state because in the sleep realm our inner self becomes our guide in place of a critical mind that can only think logically.

11. *nazar lage n kahien us ke dast o baazu ko*
y log kyon mere zakhm-e jigar ko dekhte hain

I don't want any harm done
to her hand and her arm.
Some people are looking
at my heart's deep wounds
and are trying to make a connection.

Someone you love can hurt you emotionally. But, metaphorically as per ghazal's poetic conventions, love can also hurt physically. Normally, for a person who is hurt, asking for some sympathy and care is in order. But the protagonist of the couplet here does not want anybody to know about his

wounds as love is a sacred trust and he does not want to reveal it to others as they might grow envious of the severity of his affliction. Ghalib has turned the pain of affliction around as suffering in love is the pinnacle of love and subject of public envy.

12. *ranj se khuugar hua insaan to mit jaata hai ranj*
mushklein itni parien mujh par k aasaan ho gaayein

Getting used to sorrow
alleviates the pain of sorrow.
Hardships don't bother me now.
They are so many
that they have become
easy to live by.

There is a proposition and an argument in the couplet and the beauty of the couplet depends on its negative dialectic. As mentioned before, Ghalib's greatness is not only in describing a particular situation. It lies in his poetic construction or reconstruction of the situation. He says that problems and difficulties increased to an extent that they became easy. Logically it makes no sense but it is a poetic thought and again it is representative of Ghalib's ability to say something different, something that makes no sense at all in the normal course of human interaction. But it makes perfect sense when viewed through the prism of his creative imagination and poetic logic.

13. *milna tera agar nahien aasaan to sahl hai*
dushvaar to yahi hai k dushvaar bhi nahien

Meeting you is not easy,
yet it is easy.
Otherwise, I would have given up
trying to see you.
The challenge is that
there is no challenge.

When you read this couplet what strikes you is its simplicity. But notice what is said in the first line is reversed in the second. Words like *aasaan* and *sahl* are similar words but Ghalib simplifies their meaning. He also treats *dushvaar* as not being difficult, which is against its literal meaning. The beauty of this couplet is its negative polar opposites. If meeting you is not difficult then it is easy. The difficulty is that it is not difficult. The question to ask is: how does difficult become easy? And why does difficult is no longer difficult? All these are dialectical spins. Poetry kills the

ordinary language and in Ghalib's poetry there is always not only killing but mass slaughter of commonplace language.

14. *vafaadaari bashart-e ustvaari asl iimaan hai*
mare but khaane mein to ka'be mein gaaro brahman ko

Fidelity if it is stable
is the very essence of belief.
It doesn't matter
if you bury the Brahman
in Kaba though he dies
in the house of idols.

Hali has placed this couplet under the category of faithfulness or fidelity but in our view its focus is on faith. Because the poet is critical of tradition, it creates a new subject matter. But we need to find out how this has been shaped. He says that worship is not the basis of faith but it is 'stable faithfulness'. On this basis, if the Brahman who has spent all his life worshipping his God in a temple among idols (sinful by implication) and he dies there, then he deserves the highest honour to be buried in Kaba. Why? Because there is stability in his faith. He is no different than a Muslim who is required to be stable in his faith. One may resist this conclusion, which is contradictory to faith, but the underlying dialectical twist which opens the subject and questions sectarian determination in a lighter vein is the beauty of the couplet.

15. *taa'at mein ta rahe n mai o angbiin ki laag*
dozakh mein daal do koi le kar bahisht ko

People pray to gain
heaven's promised comforts
of wine and honey.
Why not take the heaven
and throw it into the hell?

The theme of this couplet is also religious and it attacks the conventional logic of 'good deeds lead to good rewards in afterlife'. Hali links this to the Sufi philosophy. The couplet provides a glimpse of Ghalib's early life in Agra, when while growing up he must have imagined life to be a mix of wine and honey. But the later part of his life proved to him that life is filled with paucity of things you really love and people are told by traditionalists to pray to gain comforts of wine and honey in the afterlife. Ghalib shows his impatience with this logic and says, 'Why not take the heaven and throw

it into the hell'. We can surmise that Ghalib might have been thinking unconsciously of an anecdote associated with the first Sufi woman poet, Rabia Basri, in which she is described holding fire in one hand and water in the other. Someone asked her the meaning of this. She replied that I want to set fire to the heaven with my fire and throw the water on the hell to put an end to the fires burning there. Once heaven and hell are both extinguished, this story concluded, then the humankind, devoid of greed for rewards, can dedicate itself selflessly to God's worship.

16. *dekhna taqriir ki lazzat k jo us ne kaha*
main ne y jaana k goya y bhi mere dil mein hai

Because of the terrific nature
of how she put into words,
I felt that whatever she said
was already in my heart.

There is a logic of cause and effect in this couplet in the following sense: *she said this and then I found out that*. There is no negative suggestion here. But in a subtle way the negative dynamic is at work here too. The magic and charm of her speech is such that whatever she says she feels as if it were already in my heart.

17. *aur bazaar se le aae agar tuut gaya*
jaam-e jam se y mera jaam-e sifaal achha hai

If my bowl of clay broke,
I can get another one.
It is better than the bowl of
King Jamshed.

Hali calls it an interesting idea. But as we see, once again the main idea is shaped by a negative dialectical twist. King Jamshed's bowl is, of course, very precious but the poet finds one flaw. An ordinary bowl can be replaced with another if it broke but what could you do if Jamshed's bowl broke. That is irreplaceable. The poetic logic here is at work to prove that a bowl of clay is better than Jamshed's legendary precious one!

18. *raha aabaad aalam ahl-e himmat ke n hone se*
bhare hain jis qadar jaam-o sabo maikhaana khaali hai

The world is filled with people,
but where are the courageous ones?
Goblets and decaners are filled with wine,

but why do taverns look empty?

Hali considers this couplet imbued with Sufi thinking. In the second line, there is an example that all the bars and pubs are filled with ample supply of alcoholic drinks but there are no takers, no drinkers. This is a complex metaphor drawing attention to the paucity of people who are ready to take the next step in their spiritual journey. Similarly, the world is filled with people but there is a lack of people with courage, again hinting to a special (may be existential) quality. There is a statement of negation in the first line; in the second line the negative (the absence of courageous people in the drink house) is reinforcement of the first negative.

19. *na kardah gunaahon ki bhi hasrat ki mile daad*
yaarab agar in kardah gunaahon ki saza hai

I should get credit
for the sins not committed.
O God, it is a question of fairness.
Because I am punished
for sins committed.

Reward and punishment for actions in this life is Ghalib's favourite theme. The second line presents the commonly held view, that is, if you sin in this life, you will be punished. There is nothing new here but the first line has a negative twist that makes this couplet unusual. This is a very uncommon idea. The negative logic questions the fairness of God; if there is punishment for the committed sins, then how about the unfulfilled desires to commit more sins because it is not the man but the providence who is responsible for this as He did not provide the scope or opportunities to fulfil the desires. So God should not be in this business in the first place. But if He wants to be in this sort of accounting, then He has to follow the rules of fairness.

20. *munhasir marne p ho jis ki ummiid*
na-ummiidi us ki dekha chaahiye

Think of the one who has put
all his hopes on dying.
His disappointment is worth noticing.

There is a dialectic tension between hope and hopelessness. This relationship is implicit in thinking about life and death. This couplet is based on the common dialectic between these two events. It appears simple

on the surface but its meaning has a circular twist. Hopelessness leads to death. That is what is commonly believed. But Ghalib says otherwise. Our life is so much centred on the idea of death and dying. We hope that we would die one day but it is a hope for the unknown because no one knows when death would come. Hence, the hopelessness of the one who is living on the hope to die one day not knowing when death will come is heart wrenching. The couplet reflects on the enigmatic nature of suffering, which is the predicament of humankind.

At this point, we can say that Ghalib's thinking, in some subtle way, was influenced by indigenous philosophical tradition of reflecting on the paradoxical nature of existence: as a poet like Mir Taqi Mir creates the image of self-consuming deep devotional love quite similar to the age old 'bhakti' tradition. Some people may object to this on the ground that this view diminishes the known influences of Arab-Iranian traditions. But that is obvious and it cannot be overstressed. Here, we are not talking about what is pronounced; we are talking about deep-seated civilizational influences that span centuries, going back to the very cultural roots which are not as visible as they are invisible.

Can we not say that mind and consciousness of many poets, whether it is Mir, Ghalib, Anees, or Atish, were as well subjected and moulded by the soil in which they were born? Or can we not say that indigenous influences also do matter? Or are we in a situation where we must accept the fact that only some influences matter and others do not? Since creativity is *subjective* and is an individual act, the influences could be different from poet to poet. It is interesting to note that the Iranian Persian tradition already considered our poets temperamentally different and called them by a separate label, that is, Sabke Hindi—a somewhat derogatory term as they wrote in a different style of higher density which was not up to the simple taste of the Iranians. But since for the Indian poets Persian was not the mother tongue, they were not in a position to defend their inventive creative difference. They hardly ever talked about it, much less defend their distinctive characteristics and style. Rather they looked up to the Iranians to be part of the mainstream. The later Indian historians who could have looked more carefully at their own poets also suffered from a sense of *otherness*, not belonging to the language in which they were writing since Persian was not their native speech.

Creativity is not something that occurs at the surface, its ground is deep in the psyche where many elements interact to shape it. We know that there are certain pronounced Persian and Turkish influences hidden in Ghalib's psyche. But how did they interact with indigenous elements, such as the centuries-old cultural and philosophical heritage of the soil. It is an open question and needs to be considered in depth as we proceed in our study.

Hali made his point and we have taken note that two characteristic elements of Ghalib's poetic work are (a) his ingenuity of thought, and (b) the innovativeness of topics. But the question arises whether these elements are unique to Ghalib. We find that the same terms were used for other poets of the age as well. Then we have to ask what else differentiates Ghalib's creativity from others. Also, at the same time, we have to probe the more interesting question of not only what is unique about Ghalib but what made him so. Is there any peculiar bend of mind behind his creative genius which is not yet fully identified and analysed. What factors, conscious or unconscious, are at work here? We need to explore these questions in some depth.

In Hali's assessment, Urdu poetry during the nineteenth century faced the same kind of challenges that Persian poetry had faced in the earlier centuries. He writes: 'The revolution that we saw in Persian poetry happened in Urdu ghazal after some time. Gone were the days of simplistic poetic assertions and poetry that was like bones without any flesh.... Those who had the originality and the ability to create new flavours and attractions prevailed' (1897: 121–2). Hali compares Saadi, Hafiz, Khusrau, with Nazeeri, Zahuri, Urfi, Talib, and Aseer and says that the revolution that took four hundred years to fructify, in Urdu ghazal it showed up within one hundred and fifty years. Please note that Hali in this context makes no reference to Bedil because up to that time he was not considered to be 'great' and a part of the literary canon. Not only that he was not widely accepted, he was actually criticized for his enigmatic and dense style by a major Iranian poet named Hazein who lived in India. We shall talk about this controversy later. Even Shibli, the Indian scholar, kept Bedil out of his five-volume magnum opus history of Persian poetry, *Sherul Ajam* (1906–13) which extensively covered almost all the other Mughal poets of India. Hali refers to Bedil but he does it strictly as a historical necessity in the context of Persian poetry in India and not to praise him.

We should remember that Indian influence on the Persian poetry had started long ago and Bedil, among the Indian poets, was an important part of it. From his early years, Ghalib was attracted by Persian. He got a true taste of the language through his Parsi tutor, Abdus Samad, and he spent most of his life trying to prove his excellence in Persian language, though his natural speech was Urdu. The complex interplay of conscious and unconscious influences create many psychological knots and existential challenges. It also creates many predicaments. Ghalib's time and life is an example of this. In Ghalib's personality and in his creative evolution there are so many inhospitable elements that criss-cross throughout his life that these knots cannot be easily opened. To examine and understand them will take time. Ghalib's admiration for Bedil was unconditional; Bedil served as his distant mentor and he looked up to him with great humility while reminding his contemporaries that writing like Bedil was an impossible task. Later on, because of criticism he tried to distance himself from Bedil but he was never completely free from his influence. This was like an unconscious imprint on his psyche which lasted all of his creative life.

It was only during the second decade of the twentieth century that literary climate started to change. This change did not happen overnight. Literary canon, as a matter of fact, changes at a peculiar pace. But we know one thing: as the mark of Ghalib's poetic greatness gradually became apparent, Bedil and other Indian poets of Sabke Hindi tradition also came to the forefront. They were accepted universally and thereby we saw the beginning of a school of thought devoted solely to the exploration of Bedil's poetry. In the process, more was known about Sabke Hindi creativity and its other distinctive features. In the 1920s, the discovery of Ghalib's early rejected poetry and *Nuskha-e Hamidia*'s publication opened up new avenues for looking closely at some novel but not yet known aspects of his work. Critical studies of his work commenced soon thereafter. Later, the *Nuskha-e Bhopal*, the earliest manuscript written in Ghalib's own calligraphic hand, which contained his work that he had completed before attaining the age of nineteen, was also discovered. Some more manuscripts also surfaced and all the missing dots in the evolution of Ghalib's poetry were thus connected. Generally, it was believed that Ghalib had rejected all his early Bedilian verse thinking it was not worthy of publication. But this was not the case, as we will discuss later. One good aspect of this was that not only were we able to recognize the genius of Ghalib's early work, it

helped us rehabilitate the greatness of Bedil as well. Bedil, who had been pushed to the margins of literary history, came to occupy centre stage in the Sabke Hindi Persian literary canon.

In the following chapters, we shall attempt to examine Bedil and Sabke Hindi, the evolution of Ghalib's poetry, and how enigmatically his creativity absorbed the imprint of indigenous philosophical tradition through Bedil. We shall also go deeper into *Nuskha-e Bhopal Awwal* (Rendition One) and *Nushka-e Hamidia* (Rendition Two). But before that we shall talk about Abdur Rehman Bijnouri in the next chapter, who rose on the horizon of Ghalib's literary critique like a blazing star and then disappeared⁵ soon after writing a paradoxical sentence summing up Ghalib's standing in India's broader literary and philosophical history that shocked both who agreed with him and those who disagreed with him. Nevertheless, that one sentence is more known than anything else in the reception of Ghalib's poetry and now an essential part of the history of Ghalib studies. In conclusion, a quote from Hali is in order: 'In his own life Mirza's poetry and his speech, that was characterized by quick witty comments or repartees, were covered up by layers upon layers of curtains—curtains which have not been removed up to this time. It would be a miracle if those could be removed with our efforts or of those who would come after us' (1897: n.p.).



Ghalib writes about Munshi Nabi Baksh 'Haqeer' in one of his Persian letters:

God showed mercy on my helplessness and loneliness and sent to me such a man who brought with him an amazingly soothing ointment for my wounds and comfort for my pain, and he brightened the dark night of my existence. With his talk he lighted such a flame in my heart in whose light I saw the merit of my verse that due to prevailing darkness was not seen by my bare eyes. I wonder from where this intellect par excellence, meaning Munshi Nabi Baksh, received his acute poetic sensibility and superb taste for poetic appreciation? Although I write verse and I know how to compose verse, until the day I met this highly perceptive respected elder I didn't fully comprehend what is real poetic sensibility and what can be called true poetic appreciation. (Via Munshi Har Gopal Tufta [[Hali 1897: 81–2](#)])

¹ The term 'defamiliarization' was first coined in 1917 by Viktor Shklovsky in his essay 'Art as Device'. Essentially, he is stating that poetic language is fundamentally different than the language

that we use every day. This difference is the key to the creation of art and the prevention of ‘over-automatization’, which causes an individual to ‘function as though by formula’.

² According to de Saussure, ‘In language there are only differences. Even more important: a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language there are only differences without positive terms’ (1959: 121–2).

³ Derrida sees these differences as elemental oppositions working in all languages, systems of distinct signs, and codes, where terms do not have absolute meanings but instead draw meaning from reciprocal determination with other terms.

⁴ Hali wrote the first line as *bas k mushkil hai har ik kaam ka aasaan hona* (1897: 108).

⁵ He died prematurely during an influenza epidemic in 1918.

2

Bijnouri, Divan-e Ghalib, and Sacred Vedas



India has two books of divine revelation: The sacred Vedas and Divan-e Ghalib.

—Bijnouri

ABDUR REHMAN BIJNOURI is an integral part of Ghalib discourse. There is no doubt that he is the greatest admirer of Ghalib's verse who has ever lived. He appeared on the horizon of Ghalib studies like a bright shooting star, and with his unparalleled self-confidence and boundless force of his unmitigated devotion to the cause he left a luminous streak of light whose brightness has not dimmed with time. *He burnt brightly but he burnt up instantly*. In the 33 years of his life, he achieved such literary distinction and fame that is unmatched to this day. Everybody was astonished at his intense intellectual ability and his capacity to critically discern the finer points of the work he was commenting upon. We know an anecdote, courtesy of Haroon Khan Sherwani, that talks about the famous English novelist E.M. Forster and his visit to India in 1912. One day, he went for a walk to Chandni Chowk in the company of his friend Sir Raas Masud and expressed a desire to get a copy of Divan-e Ghalib. But when he looked at the number of available editions, he turned around and told his friend, 'Look at the quality of paper on which Divan of the poet, whom you call one of your greatest, is printed. In Europe, people would not use this even as a toilet paper' ([Husain 1999: 6](#)). When this news spread, Maulvi Abdul Haq, secretary of Anjuman-e Taraqqi-e Urdu, the central promotional body of Urdu, announced a plan in 1914 about the publication of a good quality and artful edition of Divan-e Ghalib under the auspices of the Anjuman, and for this project he approached and requested well-known intellectuals like

Tabatabai, Shibli Nomani, Allama Iqbal, Abdul Haleem Sharar, Vahshat Kalkattavi, Hasrat Mohani, and Maulana Hali to contribute scholarly articles. It is also a matter of some interest that Maulana Mohammad Ali, who was making a vigorous effort to establish the credentials of Ghalib, while making a plea for a new biography of Ghalib wrote: ‘Maulana Hali’s *Yadgar* is exemplary in its own way, but the truth is that it is neither worthy of Ghalib nor of Hali himself’ ([Husain 1999: 7](#)).

Around this time, the distinguished writers whom Maulvi Abdul Haq had requested for contributions did not show any commitment except Abdul Haleem Sharar and Vahshat Kalkattavi. Sharar made a promise which he never fulfilled. By the end of 1914, both Hali and Shibli had passed away. When Abdur Rehman Bijnouri was appointed the secretary of Department of Education in the state of Bhopal, the Anjuman, knowing about Bijnouri’s interest and competence, requested him to contribute an erudite introductory piece (*muqaddima*) and, more importantly, to aid in the preparation of a high-quality edition of Divan-e Ghalib. Bijnouri, who was known for his boldness and audacity, took this work very seriously and within a few months he wrote his substantial introduction, *muqaddama*, and sent it to Maulvi Abdul Haq ([Farman 2000: 101](#)).

It is a dramatic coincidence that around this time when Maulana Abdus Salaam Nadvi came to Bhopal to look for references for his own work in progress named *Sherul Hind*, he accidentally discovered one of Ghalib’s previously unknown manuscript of verse calligraphed in Ghalib’s own hand in the State Hamidia Library. The manuscript contained a large quantity of his early age rejected verse ([Husain 1999: 9](#)). As soon as Bijnouri came to know of this precious find, he made a quick effort to secure possession of this rare manuscript, and with his usual enthusiasm and unbounded confidence announced that this would become part of the coffee-table edition that Maulvi Abdul Haq was working on. Bhopal was a princely state. Local politics played a role and, within a short time, flames of opposition were directed at Bijnouri. He wrote in a letter: ‘Since the day that precious manuscript of Divan-e Ghalib has gotten into my custody, city’s literary community is in great commotion. Half of Bhopal has turned against me in sheer jealousy’.

It is a matter of great regret that while the fire of opposition had not yet been fully extinguished and the publication work had hardly begun that a great calamity hit Bhopal in the form of an influenza epidemic. Bijnouri

came under its clutches and within a matter of days he passed away on 7 November 1918. As one can guess, nothing good comes out of a situation like this. Under the influence of the state's powerful constituencies, this work was taken back from the Anjuman. Mohammad Anwarul Haq, who succeeded Bijnouri as the state's Secretary of Education, was given the task of editing this newly discovered manuscript of Divan-e Ghalib ([Husain 1999: 10](#); see also [Tonki 2004: 39](#)).

Later on, we find another dramatic twist in this story. The Anjuman took a firm stand and announced that it was its moral responsibility to publish the muqaddama that Bijnouri had sent to Maulvi Abdul Haq before his death. Later, when the learned Maulvi Sahib started a quarterly literary magazine called *Urdu* in January 1921, Bijnouri's muqaddama was prominently published in the very first issue. And in the same year Maulvi Sahib also published this material as a book titled *Mahasin-e Kalaam-e Ghalib*. On the other hand, in the same year, Mufti Anwarul Haq also published the updated edition of Divan-e Ghalib which was assigned to him by the state, and it included the newly discovered manuscript by the name of *Nuskha-e Hamidia* ([Haq 1921](#)). Because Bijnouri's muqaddama was first published by the Anjuman, Bhopal's power brokers also included this piece in *Nuskha-e Hamidia*. This created a wrong impression as if Bijnouri had written for the *Nuskha*, although the work had actually preceded this publication ([Begum 1984: 19](#)). Bijnouri, as we know, had died three years ago in 1918. The fact is that he had not written for the *Nuskha* and had sent his muqaddama to the Anjuman perhaps even before the discovery of the manuscript. The news that was circulated was mere speculation. The manuscript itself mysteriously disappeared and no one knows about its fate. This is a sad comment on the way we guard our precious heritage!

Coming back to the substantive issue before us, we can hold Bijnouri's book in one hand and its opening sentence in the other but it is the opening sentence that would carry the weight of his whole book—'India has two books of divine revelation: the sacred Vedas and Divan-e Ghalib' ([Bijnouri 1952: 5](#)).

In the whole history of Ghalib studies, no sentence has achieved so much fame as Bijnouri's opening line. But the fame also came coupled with some non-serious comments, including some fun and ridicule, such as 'immature thoughts of a youthful overzealous admirer' ([Gorakhpuri 1957: 167](#)). From time to time, some voices were heard in its support, though in subdued

tones. Let us look at Majnun Gorakhpuri's assessment: even Ghalib himself treated his verse as divine revelation. In one of his Urdu couplets, he compared the scratching sound of his writing pen as the blessing of providence or angels. In another couplet, he expressed his sense of pride in the following words:

*paata huun us se daad kuchh apne kalaam ki
ruuh ulqudus agarche mera hamzabaan nahien*

I do get some praise from him
for my poetry, though Gabriel and I
do not share the same language.

More than this, there is a ruba'i in Persian which proves that Ghalib considered his poetic art as divine *benediction*, and he imagined the collection of his verse as a *revelatory book*. We can dismiss this as a poet's self-indulgence. But this truth was an authentication of the fact that no seer could ever succeed without a message that proved the sanctity of his mission. We can call it self-aggrandizement but it is an essential hallmark of every divine messenger. This sense of self-realization is a healthy attribute and we can find it in every seer and avatar. Ghalib is truly the seer or avatar of Urdu poetry. He gave so much to Urdu poetry that no poet before him could match ([Gorakhpuri 1957: 168](#)).

Majnun Gorakhpuri commented on Ghalib's revelatory claim and self-admiration but he ignored the full import of Bijnouri's characterization. We can see that the issue is not what Ghalib claimed for himself but the attempt to bracket his work with the sacred Vedas, because in the Indian tradition the place assigned to the Vedas cannot be claimed by any other humanly scribed book. Although Bijnouri's claim was paradoxical, it had in it some magical incredulity that made it famous overnight. Some people readily accepted this as a proverbial saying (not just a statement written by one person), although scholars like Sheikh Mohammad Ikram mentioned that Bijnouri's claim was 'heart-warming' that could be stretched to be called a catchphrase of someone who had too much to drink. 'Bijnouri was a man of sensitive temperament and he had fine literary taste but his writing is not the best example of critical analysis. It is like the cry of a drunken man, whether it makes sense or not. But it sure warms the heart of the readers' ([Ikram n.d.: 9](#)).

We feel that it is not easy to dismiss Bijnouri's assertion as the cry of a drunken man. Behind this claim stands not only a sensitive soul but a powerful mind and a deep thinker. Very few people know that Bijnouri had a maternal connection with a leading family of Hyderabad. Syed Mohiuddin Qadri Zore writes with his knowledge of the local situation when he says, 'Dr. Bijnouri holds his place among the top-notch writers and human beings whose heart was filled with oceanic love for his country and its greatness. He was drunk with India and Indian-ness. In several places of his articles, letters, and poems he expressed love for India and the greatness of its philosophy and civilization' ([Zore 2003: 133](#)).

Zore admired Bijnouri's assertion but he did not discuss it in detail as if this was not of great importance. Abu Mohammad Sahar made a serious scholarly effort to unravel the mystery in his article and he conceded, 'In Urdu literary criticism if any assertion can be called revelatory that is Bijnouri's famous statement' ([Sahar 1994: 31](#)).

Sahar further adds:

There is no declaration, contention or proclamation in Urdu criticism that forces our mind to think deeply as the short sentence that Bijnouri wrote. It is also true that our critical ability is inadequate in order for us to reach the depths of this assertion.... It is quite obvious that in order to suggest the revelatory nature of *Divan-e Ghalib*, Bijnouri adopted a rather boisterous and mind-bending process. (1994: 31-2)

It is true that in one of his couplets Ghalib makes the revelatory claim quite obvious:

aate hain ghaib se y mazaamiin khayaal mein
Ghalib sareer-e khaamah navaa-e surosh hai

I get these thoughts
from an unknown source,
though I have a hunch.
Ghalib, I can hear angels
write it down on a paper
with a scratching sound.

We should also remember that Bijnouri in his book *Mahasin-e-Kalaam-e-Ghalib*, before making his revelatory claim, copied a Persian ruba'i that Ghalib included at the end of his Persian Divan ([Kulliyat-e Ghalib, 1853](#)). (Majnun Gorakhpuri, as we have seen, alluded to this.) Here is the ruba'i, quoted in [Bijnouri \(1952: 5\)](#):

gar sh'er-o sukhan b dahar aain buudey

divaane mara shohrat-e parviin buudey
Ghalib agar iinfann-e sukhan diin buudi
aan diin ra ezdi kitaab iin buudey¹

What Ghalib is saying is simple and direct: If poesy can be treated as a divine benediction, then for that faith my Divan will be the sacred book. But Sahar is still not clear why Bijnouri compared Divan-e Ghalib to Vedas. He writes: ‘In brief and with reservations, I can’t call it the most absurd sentence in Urdu language though it qualifies to be the most ambiguous’ ([Sahar 1994: 32](#)).

We can say that ambiguous or difficult or nonsense are all relative terms. What is ambiguous for Ahmed could be difficult for Zaid, and what is difficult for Zaid could be nonsensical for Bakar. The exact opposite is also possible. Yet, Sahar insists on calling it ‘ambiguous’. According to him, Nawab Zia Uddeen Ahmed Khan Nayyar-o-Rakhshan wrote a foreword in Persian which is included in the Persian *Kulliyat*, in which he metaphorically described the pages of *Divan-e Ghalib* as ‘matchless lustrous beauty’, ‘a sacred place of worship’, ‘Artung’,² and a ‘temple of idols’, ‘Brahmans reading Ved [Veda]’, among others ([Sahar 1994: 35–6](#)). It is just possible that Bijnouri also read that foreword and he might have borrowed some ideas from there. The truth is that the foreword talks about Veda but the focus of the metaphor is on Brahman and not Veda. We can see that there are several pointers and associations in Ghalib’s own writing where he claims his Divan to be a sacred book. In fact, Bijnouri quotes the Persian ruba’i before the sentence, which is subject of this debate, in which Ghalib makes the above claim. Words can sometimes be construed as ambiguous but when the writer hints about some association, it carries some meaning—either conscious or unconscious. We can read the sentence as it is but can make only relational guesses to find out the meaning behind it. For now, its meaning is what the words say it is.

The word ‘Veda’ often means Rig Veda which is a very old collection of sacred shlokas and rituals and, as a matter of routine, it is considered revelatory. There are four things to be noticed. First, Vedas are sacred Indian texts. Second, the scripture is said to be based on divine revelation. Third, Divan-e Ghalib too is a revelation, and thereby sacred. Fourth, there are no other scriptures in this discussion. There is a relationship and closeness that is established between these two texts. One important takeaway from this analysis is that the writer wanted to emphasize the deep

connection that each of these texts have with the soil of India. It is difficult for us to say what it is and what it is not but the indigenous nature of texts can be categorically established.

A point has been made in some parts of *Mahasin* that Bijnouri depended much on his faith-based, unquestioning logic. In other places, however, he has tried to argue convincingly, based on impressive argumentation and evidence. He writes:

From the first page to the last there are hardly one hundred pages. But ask yourself what is not present here. What is the melody in the thread of existence, in waking state or in dreams, which is not present here? ... Poetry is a revelation of life. As life is not limited in its manifestation, so is poetry unbounded in the variety of its expressions. (1952: 5)

Or, 'Ghalib has created a cover for human thought's candle of light that, when it revolves around the candle, shows images of people wrapped in paper clothing going through various stages of life's journey' (1952: 6).

Bijnouri was not only Ghalib's admirer; he was his unabashed deep lover. He wrote feverishly about Ghalib; he was analytical, he gave examples but what he did not do was to present an explanation of that 'one sentence'. Even Sahar is surprised about this. He made a big declaration and he never looked back. It appears from his study of world poets and dialectical frameworks that he was convinced Ghalib had attained the highest level of excellence in his work. In his comments about Goethe, Bijnouri makes it clear that the ultimate reach of human yearning is to reach a stage of 'wonder'. He writes:

This is nothing but darkness that people are in love with. People go to places where they have not gone before and they are not tired of their own efforts. Wonder is the ultimate object of human yearning. If something creates a sense of wonder and awe, it is the height of artistic achievement. We should not question too much as to what is behind this yearning. (1952: 10)

It appears that Bijnouri was convinced of his seminal declaration; he was overcome by its magical and wonder-creating force. He must have thought about maintaining it as a puzzle, an enigma, a mystery, or as an unconscious secret. Is it not true that like other revelatory texts, this declaration is also revelatory? Or is it possible for criticism to be like any creative activity in which unconscious factors play some role? Waris Kirmani comments about this saying, 'The way Bijnouri's one sentence was looked at routinely or non-seriously that was not right in my opinion. I'm surprised that everyone liked his statement but ... there was no critical appraisal and no one tried to evaluate its deeper meaning' ([Kirmani 2001: n.p.](#)).

Poetry cannot be looked at by the usual tools of analysis, which are rational and logical. Waris Kirmani has something to say about this:

Poetry is the domain of higher intelligence about which Imam Ghazali had alluded to in his great work *Ahya-ul'uloom* and he elaborated on the word 'Noor' found in the Holy Koran.... When we do critical analysis of poetry we need two kinds of intelligence. There is of course the intelligence of everyday life, cause and effect, and linear thinking. But we also need intelligence that can connect with the higher intelligence, maybe we can call it intuition.... During the reign of Aurangzeb, when the Indian poetry had reached its pinnacle, Nasir Ali Sirhindi, a great poet of the time, asked Bedil to define the quality of a good couplet. Bedil answered: *she'r-e-khuub ma'ni nadaarad*. Which means that a good couplet has no meaning or a good couplet's meaning has meaning that can't be conveyed by ordinary language. You can't pick a good couplet and do its post-mortem and then try to explain its beauty.... When Bijnouri calls Divan-e Ghalib a sacred book like the Vedas, and there are many other examples, that can't be put to any monotonous examination. ([Kirmani 2001: 144-6](#))

Poetry is not the domain of the monotonous or humdrum or run-of-the-mill. We need to have the ability and the subtle taste to appreciate the art of poetic idiom. If we stick with the rational argument then we suppose there are many things outside the scope of our discussion. Let us look at yet another opinion by a Ghalib proponent, even as he is trying hard to maintain his distance. Let us see what Baqar Mehdi had to say about this.

Bijnouri's historic achievement was defamed because what he said did not measure up to the demands of routine literary criticism. Poor Bijnouri may have exaggerated and crossed limits in his personal admiration, but he did successfully point to Ghalib's greatness as a poet. In my opinion we need to tone down our reaction so that we may objectively measure the historic role played by Bijnouri. I have no reservation in saying that for me as well Divan-e Ghalib is a sacred book because Ghalib's poetry and his personality is like a lighthouse of India's cultural heritage. ([Mehdi 1997: 33](#))

Baqar Mehdi is very clear about reassessing the historic role of Bijnouri. Waris Kirmani is sad that Bijnouri's one sentence, though generally liked, was not taken seriously. In our opinion, Bijnouri's declaration is a creative assessment and its true meaning is hidden in its paradoxical and dialectical twist. Urdu criticism may take it lightly but it is very much etched in the cumulative memory of Ghalib discourse. At the surface, the sentence simply says that India has two sacred books and both of them are named. There is no dispute about the Vedas being sacred books. The creative twist in the sentence comes up when Divan-e Ghalib is placed alongside the Vedas as something that is its coequal. Now if we remove Divan-e Ghalib, the sentence becomes routine and meaningless. So the real magic here is that the writer has brushed aside hundreds of other divans and has selected only Divan-e Ghalib for this high distinction, which is a matter of pride for Urdu. But does the sentence not reflect, maybe somewhat intuitively, on the

archetypal roots of Ghalib's mind and its not so visible connection with the Indian thought? This is the subject of our study in the chapters that follow.



ba har kamaal andaki aashuftagi khush ast
har chand aqle qul shudah ii be-junon mabaash

Every act of human excellence needs some madness.
You may have all the wisdom of the world,
but you shouldn't be without madness.
At least without some madness.
—Bedil

¹ In reality, the first line of the ruba'i has the word *zauqe sukhan* but Bijnouri might have copied from a text which had *sh'er-o-sukhan*. Also see [Ghalib's Kulliyat-e Ghalib Farsi \(1853: 555\)](#).

² A legendary Iranian artwork of great fame.

3

India's Thought and Negative Dialectics



Knowledge of absence is not absence of knowledge.

—Hiriyanna

IT IS NOT POSSIBLE to imagine Indian philosophy in any depth without negative dialectics. It is the basic logic behind ancient Indian philosophy and plays an important role in the conceptualization of the absolute consciousness and the nature of reality. The most complex issue in philosophy is that of the negative or *absence*, because without its help we can neither address the issues of logic, nor can we examine varied problems inherent in ontology, epistemology, and metaphysics. It is a paradox of first principles how a negative statement can be used to unravel the hidden truth behind reality. We find that every statement is an argument for establishing some facet of reality. If this is true, then a negative statement is not an exception to the rule. We need to clearly understand that negative statements are likewise affirmations of some object or situation. Just as we say, the book is on the table. The following statement is also true to depict another situation: the book is not on the table.

In this case, we are not looking at the absence of the book in a negative sense. We are making a factual statement. Then the question arises: what is the objective of a negative statement, the book or its absence? The paradox lies in the statement and its objective. We need to recognize that a negative statement, irrespective of its low or high intensity, is as good an affirmation of an objective or a conceptual truth. And this is not simply about any contradiction, since the book is not present on the table. In philosophy, there is a proposition that the cognition or comprehension of the negative is not

possible without the presence of its negative. This means that the thought about the absence of the book is about the lack of the presence of the book. A negative statement is therefore not devoid of meaning. On the other hand, it is as good a statement of affirmation where affirmation has been made somewhat complex due to the presence of the negative. For understanding Ghalib's poetics, we must keep in view this point that the negative statement is not devoid of meaning. Instead, it can signify a more profound or deeper meaning because the logic of affirmation is based on a negative twist, whereas a straightforward affirmation could have been conventional, monotonous, dull, or routine.

The central issue in the Indian philosophy pertains to the absolute cause or consciousness of Brahm or nirvana or moksha. All these concepts are difficult or impossible to define. For example, moksha is traditionally defined as the absence of something else, meaning it is the absence of suffering. Suffering is the negative or polar opposite of happiness or bliss, which means that the absence of suffering is required for the existence of a state that we call happiness or bliss or nirvana. This means that the dynamism of the negative is such a principle without which you cannot posit the idea of nirvana or moksha. A respected commentator of Indian philosophy, Hiriyanna, said, 'The doctrine of emancipation makes it imperative for this system to posit Absence as an ultimate real entity (*padarth*). If Absence is not accepted as separate or different from Presence, then the idea of Moksha would be impossible to establish' ([Hiriyanna 1949: 102](#)).

This means that just as the presence of something is a statement of truth, the absence too denotes equal amount of truth. *Padarth* or its opposite *abhaav* are both statements of fact. Absence is the truth in the same way as presence is of a truth. Bertrand Russell goes a step further when he says that comprehension or consciousness of absence is no different from that of presence. Things that are missing form a part of our knowledge in the same manner as things that are present. If we look closely, we find that the comprehension of the negative becomes a part of our consciousness after the comprehension of the positive. This means that we have *abhav* when there is no *bhaav*. It indicates that reality is of two types, one that is present (which is out there) and the second that is not there (which is absent). If presence is an absolute truth, so is absence.

The statement ‘the book is not on the table’ is related to its opposite ‘the book is on the table’. In Sanskrit, we use the term padarth for anything that can be explained by language. We take the help of words or language to describe the presence or the absence of thing or things, as well as concepts, concrete or abstract. ‘The very notion “it is not” presupposes the notion of something “that is”, thus in Nyaya terminology “negation is that cognition which depends on the cognition of the counter-positive”. Existence thus having negation as innate character is dependent on that whose negation it is’ ([Sharma 1970: 24](#)).

There is another important point to remember that a negative statement is not just the opposite of the positive. Rather, it could denote a number of situations. For example, the sentence ‘the book is not on the table’ can be conveyed or understood in many ways:

1. The book is not there.
2. The book is not visible.
3. The table is empty.
4. The book is somewhere else.
5. The book is missing.
6. The book has been removed.
7. Someone has the book.
8. The book is under the pillow.
9. The book is on the bed.
10. The book is on the chair.
11. The book is on the floor.
12. Someone has taken away the book.
13. The book has been stolen.
14. The book is somewhere around.
15. The book has fallen.

Nyaya has provided many examples of this kind. Let us take the example of ‘it is not raining at this time’, which could mean:

1. It is sunny now, meaning there is no more rain.
2. It is cloudy, meaning there is no rain.
3. It is snowing, meaning it is not raining.

4. The rain has stopped, meaning the sky is clear now.
5. It is not raining now, but it rained in the morning.

The same way, if we take the statement ‘the lotus is not black’, it could lead us to several possibilities:

1. Lotus is red.
2. Lotus is white.
3. Lotus is blue, and so on.

We see that negative dialectics plays a dynamic role in giving the everyday conventional language a vital multifaceted device, which provides more scope for play of creativity and imagination. Language is not referential but becomes more differential as it playfully signifies and posits one concept after another, thus paving the way for depth and density of meaning. Because of dynamics of the negative dialectics, this sort of signification becomes more self-reflexive so that it conveys not only the meanings that are at the surface but also enables poetic expression to be more suggestive and loaded with implications which are indeterminate and not so apparent, and in the process, new avenues for fresh meanings are opened. For understanding Ghalib’s poetics, we have to bear in mind that it is often hard to precisely identify the essence of his couplets, and in order to appreciate his work we have to keep in mind the role played by the dynamic of negative dialectics.

Kumarila Bhatta, a philosopher who lived around ^{AD} 700, used negative dialectics as a tool in his reasoning. He argued that *ka* is not *kha* in the same way as *kha* is not *ka*. Negative statement in itself is virtually nothing but, dialectically speaking, it says as much about reality as a positive statement. It all depends on the point of view. ‘All things are positive from their own standpoint, but negative from that of the other’ ([Sharma 1970: 28](#)). Kumarila Bhatta draws our attention to the following statements: ‘He does not do anything’. And, ‘He does not eat anything’.

Consider the fact that ‘do-ing’ and ‘eat-ing’ are indicative of the end states of some activities. Grammatically, ‘not’ denotes what is not being done. Therefore, ‘he does not eat anything’ or ‘he eats something’ are both objectively true statements. Thus, we can say that both ‘presence’ and ‘absence’ are not only interdependent but that they also express two

different realities. 'The metaphysical statement "that nothing exists" informs us that "nothing" is being treated as a semantic substance in the grammar book of the metaphysician. In the cognition of nothing, there is "something", i.e. the knowledge of absence' ([Sharma 1970: 35](#)).

Hiriyanna lays down a principle which is important for us to remember: negative truths or realities become a part of knowledge in the same way as positive truths or realities. If we wish to understand the meaning of the magical treasure trove of Ghalib's poetry, then we need to understand the dynamics of the negative as if negative truths are like other truths, though they may not unravel something objective, or creatively they may lead to a complex web of signification, as it often happens in Ghalib's poetics.

This means that the statement 'it is raining' is as factual as 'it is not raining', though it may not matter much in one way or the other. The point is reinforced in several ancient philosophical traditions of India that put forward similar claims that both presence and absence are signifiers of reality and they can be called two valid states of knowledge. In Ghalib's poetics, if the presence of something is important, then its absence is equally important as it provides ground for the play of signification leading to new and innovative meaning.

The Indian philosophy holds a viewpoint that reality can exist outside the domain of knowledge. This ontological state occurs beyond the traditional linguistic boundaries. That is why the language that deals with it is called the language of silence. Silence as a concept carries a lot of weight in the Indian tradition. This is in fact the fountainhead of language. Silence as a means of poetic expression or creative signification in the work of poets of Sabke Hindi tradition, especially Bedil and Ghalib, will be discussed later.

Buddhist philosophy in the conception of the *negative* is much more developed and far ahead of the Indian philosophy (as discussed in [Chapter 4](#)). Although there is a difference in a state that is described as 'what is present' and 'what is not present', one does not exist without the other. We cannot imagine 'night without day' or 'white without black'. Dharmakirti, a Buddhist philosopher, said something that helps us understand Ghalib's dialectical poetics. He said we cannot conceive of 'A' without 'not-A', meaning 'A' is that which is not 'not-A', or blue lotus is the notion of not anything else but blue. We can see that negative is not simply 'something not there', but also a mental imagination of phenomena that could not be fully cognized otherwise. Ghalib's poetry is marked with this dynamic

where negative meets with another negative, thus creating a complex state of affairs that lends his work not only uniqueness but beauty and inventiveness.

We have to concede that negative is the foundation of affirmation, confirmation, ratification, or endorsement as the latter is representation of the former. Several Buddhist philosophers are of the view that all words are simultaneously negations and affirmations. Our cognition rests on how we differentiate one from another. It is apparent that this runs very close to the twentieth-century developments in Western literary theory, especially Saussure's concept of *sign* and *binary oppositions* and Derrida's *différance* and *deconstruction*.

In the world of knowledge, it means that without the negative we cannot get the full view of reality. This also means that any vision of reality without the negative is empty from within, as reality manifests itself with the dynamic of the negative. In fact, it need not be overemphasized that Buddhists and ancient Indian thinkers are precursors to the Western literary theory in believing that language is a *construct*. There is no *essentiality* whatsoever in the language and all signification depends on the dialectics of the negative. We have hinted before that perhaps due to mainly unconscious factors, Ghalib's bend of mind, psyche, or innovative ability bears great resemblance to dialectical thinking. In Ghalib's creativity, dialectics is the mystery that enables him to present an image of reality which is shaped by the negative dynamic that demonstrates the above stated principle *that the marvel of language and innovative meaning depends on the dialectics of the negative*.

The principle of double negation is also of great significance. We have mentioned above that any idea of nirvana is impossible without the negative. Without the negative, we cannot construct any image of nirvana. If we look closely, we find that it is not simple negative. Instead, its foundation is built on the principle of double negation. According to Gautama Buddha, 'Suffering is the biggest obstacle in the fulfillment of any desire and freedom from suffering is Nirvana'. This means that suffering is equal to the fulfillment of desire in the negative sense, and our ability to not fulfill our desires is equal to nirvana, again negatively speaking.

Like nirvana, we cannot have a concept of ahimsa, a major tenet of Indian religions, without its double negation. Ahimsa is non-violence, that is to say, without *himsa* (violence). Ahimsa is therefore negation of

violence, which itself is negation of love, peace, justice, compassion, or understanding. Because love denotes a state of mind or a state of affairs in a particular situation, it is difficult to define it on its own. But dialectically, we can conceive love as a state where there is no violence, no aggression, no hostility, no conflict or prejudice.

We find that in the ordinary or conventional language, one may face problems while expressing innovative and unconventional thoughts. Therefore, consciously or unconsciously, one may derive help from negative dialectics or dual negation. This is especially true about the art of ghazal writing in Sabke Hindi tradition where due to the delicacy of inherent thoughts and the complexity of imagery that goes with it, there are layers upon layers of dialectical dynamics that have not yet received the attention that it deserved. We can see how Ghalib assimilated and redefined some of these modes coming from Sabke Hindi and how they formed part of his distinctive style involving innovativeness of ideas, diversity of subjects, delicate conception of fresh metaphors and similes, and beautifications that adorn his creativity.

There is yet another aspect of negative dialectics that forms part of poetic creative act. For example, ‘beauty is not ugliness’ and ‘fidelity is not faithlessness’ are two factual statements. One can think of other situations like:

1. She is beautiful.
2. She is not beautiful.
3. She is ugly.
4. She is not ugly.
5. She is not that beautiful.
6. She is not that ugly.
7. She is neither beautiful nor ugly.

As you can see, the first four are simple affirmative and negative statements. The next three are complex statements because negation has created a new situation where the end state is indeterminate. There is a hidden element here that compares one thing to another but that entity is unknown. Who determines that she is not beautiful, ugly, or both? In the dialectics of dual negation, what is not seen informs the imagery of what is seen and it has a deep relationship with Ghalib’s creativity, and we also find

traces of this in Sabke Hindi. We can say that the mind that pays attention to what is not visible, what is immaterial, what is abstract will be capable of bringing forward something away from the routine, conventional, or monotonous and will be open to embracing the *other*, indeterminate, novel, or fresh. That mind will have more affinity with the dynamic of the negative. The poetic journey from Sabke Hindi to Ghalib provides enough evidence of this. Otherwise, how could we explain Ghalib's tendency to use negative dialectics and his attempt to use intricate and magical expressions when he talks about human relationships or the web of suffering and joy of life? There are so many attributes and marvels of beauty that they all cannot be fully delineated, or named, or accounted for. *Bisyaar shevah hast butaan ra k naam niist*. (See [Chapter 11](#) in particular for an elaboration of this theme.)

It is also interesting to note that when we repeat negation, it turns itself into not-negation (positive). For example, 'non-A' means that which is not A, and 'non-A' of 'non-A' is actually A. Dharendra Sharma comes to the conclusion that 'not is not an "object word"'. The word 'not' has no distinctive identity of its own. British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951) says that if p is true then p (-) is false—the sign (-) means non. So when we write p - -, it becomes positive. In this way, there is no limit to negative dynamics or play of signification. For example, p - - - ad infinitum.

This discussion proves that the boundaries of negative dynamic are unlimited and it works at various levels of thought and philosophy. It has many forms and modes in poetic creativity, ontology, epistemology, and metaphysics. And it is not necessary that it could be indicated only with a negative sign. *Na, n'a, la', nahien* commonly appear in Urdu, Hindi, or Hindustani. Similarly, in the European languages, the use of terms similar to *un* or *non* or *not* is widespread. There are other ways and means to denote it, which differ from one language to another.

What is unique about negation is its p - quality without which it is difficult to put across things in the way they are. We find abundance evidence of this in Ghalib's poetry. Various creative forms of dialectical thought that we see in Ghalib's work, which surface suddenly without any previously 'known' relationships, are not only attention grabbing but they act as sparkles of meaning.

4

Buddhist Thought and Shunyata



Non-being and being emerges from the single ground that is darkness.
To make it darker is the gate of all wonder.

—Lao-tzu

It is not mere negation, but a negation of negation that is an existence-being beyond existence and being. It is best defined by negatives since all positive expressions not only limit but pollute the pure concept of absolute *shunya*.

—Benjamin Walker

Buddhist Philosophy and Shunyata

FOR BUDDHISTS, SHUNYATA is the core of awareness. They think that without it we can neither gain knowledge nor understand reality or the truth of the world around us. In its unique formation, shunyata is the awareness of our existence (which is temporal) and freedom of thought and action. This is not simple negation but negation of negation. It is an attempt to understand and make sense of existence from an objective perspective. Shunyata can be understood only as negation because all positive definitions not only limit its scope but also desecrate its essence.

Let us suppose that someone committed theft. Another person who was passing by, who did not see the first person commit the theft, says, ‘He is the thief’. He made this statement because he disliked that person. Then appeared a third person who actually saw the first one committing the theft and says, ‘He is the thief’. Both of these people made the same statement but there is a fundamental difference in the validity of their statements. One

person is lying and the second one is telling the truth based on personal observation or experience. Here lies the fundamental difference in determining truth. If we keep this difference in mind, then we can know how ordinary people are caught up in *avidya* (ignorance) or lack of *shunyata* (awareness). This example originally provided by Buddhist philosopher Chandrakirti was used by Bimal Matilal to reinforce the point ([Matilal 1973: 54](#)). The people who are caught up in *avidya* are those who have not experienced the truth but are desirous of knowing the truth. On the other hand, people who are aware of *shunyata* are those who have seen the truth and know that it is based on their personal experience. Truth or awareness is not dependent on a priori doctrinal knowledge. It is a personal experience.

Buddhist Philosophy Is Opposed to Brahmanism

During the time of Gautama Buddha (c. 563–483 bc), Brahmanism had fallen victim to different forms of ritualism. Buddha did not establish a new religion; rather he raised his forceful voice against all kinds of social regimentation, caste system, and ritualistic practices. He propagated simple inner experience of existential awareness devoid of ritualism, rejected the caste system based on social hierarchy, and suggested a new path to living and a new way to discipline our sensual responses. He maintained a stoic silence on issues like *atman/parmatman* (soul/God), which are central to the teachings of the Upanishads; he neither affirmed these beliefs nor denied them, as his way was different. Driven by the need to alleviate human suffering and realizing the provisional nature of temporal existence, Buddha focused his attention on meditative inner awareness and a new path of moderate living. He did not give a doctrine. He maintained that he be asked no theoretical questions. In Hinduism, this was the time when a firm belief was developed in extreme forms of asceticism and ritualism. After many years of performing ascetic practises and testing these approaches, Buddha came to the conclusion that one had to find a middle ground between sensual indulgence and asceticism. There was a common belief before the advent of Buddha that in order to control desire one had to give up all kinds of worldly activities, including embracing various forms of renunciation and engaging in practises that harmed the body. Instead of asceticism, Buddha preached control of the senses, and instead of renunciation he

preached a new approach to living known as the Eightfold Path, also called the Middle Way between two extremes. Instead of ‘transcendentalism’ or spiritual idealism, Buddha adopted down-to-earth existentialism, believing in the organic unity of temporal and transcendental, and thus denying the oppositional duality between the two contrasting viewpoints that had gone on for centuries. This difference is also essential for understanding Ghalib’s poetics.

Buddha paid particular attention to the nature of living and practical aspects of life. Buddha’s teachings were philosophized and codified many years after his death. On the nature of God or soul, as pointed out earlier, Buddha denied both, as he neither affirmed nor discussed anything concerning these matters and steered clear of all the prevailing belief systems. In fact, he preferred silence on most ontological issues. This made Brahmins strongly criticize his position. In reality, Buddhist philosophy is not a religious doctrine. It is a way to explore and understand reality, the human condition, the nature of knowledge, or the unity of existence. Buddha considers three things as ‘marks of existence’, namely, *anatman*, *anicca*, and *dukha* (see Billington 1998: 56).

Anatman is the first negation, meaning there is no soul or reality or essence in anything because what we see or think is of ‘dependent origination’. The second negation, *anicca*, says that there is nothing permanent in life—everything is transitory or in a state of flux; you can never put your foot in the same river twice; human forms and shapes change from one moment to another. Third, *dukha* is the highest truth of life whose roots lie deep in the human tendency to desire or to crave for things. As mentioned, Buddha provided a way to rationalize desire through a series of specific moderate actions. Buddha’s teachings however were formalized over a period of five hundred years after his death. Nagarjuna (c. AD 150–250) gave a philosophical shape to the concept of *shunyata* as the sum and substance of the ‘three marks of existence’, as stated earlier.

Nagarjuna and Shunyata

Nagarjuna says that although the world appears to be real, based on the highest differentiating principles of what is real and not, there is nothing real in the world. It is transitory and devoid of essence, and thus it is *anicca*. Whatever appears as a result of our senses has no *svabhava*, meaning it has

no independent existence of its own. Even the unconscious process through which the non-real appears to be real is itself non-real. Real cannot be known or understood through non-real or all that which is of dependent origination. As a result, we can neither affirm nor deny anything. That is why Buddha answered most of the ontological questions through silence or shunyata. It is also the reason why he recommended the middle way between the two extremes. It means that in the act of silence itself, shunyata's uniqueness, affirmation, or identity cannot be delineated in positive terms. It has to be stated in negation. The world exists but is not permanent, as everything is of dependent origination, thus devoid of essence. Its reality cannot be proved through any known way of knowing (Stcherbatsky quoted in [Narang 1993: 364](#)).

The nature of reality or awareness has been described by the great seers in what is called 'the language of unsaying'. Buddha, who uses silence to describe the absolute reality, also used the term *shunyam* to address the day-to-day reality. A simple translation of shunyam is not possible but it hints at emptiness, meaning that something was there but now it is not; it is absolute silence or stillness. But emptiness points to the absence of something that was present before. Shunyam is not emptiness in that sense. Rather, it is a feeling of being aware of something which is not describable. It is not negation. In common words, it is not positive either. It is limitlessness and infinite that has no knowable boundaries—total awareness that cannot be put into words.

The word 'Buddha' literally means one who is awake or who is aware. He said that he was nothing other than his awareness or existence of himself. The name, Buddha, was given after he attained enlightenment, or when he was fully awakened; at that moment, he transitioned from Gautama to Buddha, or became a personification of awareness. In the metaphorical idiom of the East, there is a concept of a mirror or a burnished or polished mirror in which there is reflection of reality, or rather a reflection of everything the way it is—non-differential, pure, unpolluted, unrelated, without any conscious motive or intent, just being or shunyam awareness, a Buddha state of mind or Buddha-hood. This is non-denominational, non-religious, an absolutely free state. It has nothing to do with any doctrine, faith, religion, or dogma.

As mentioned earlier, it is impossible to literally translate shunyata, though in common parlance it means zero, empty from within. This is the

Zero Principle which says that everything is empty, yet it is full—it is a field of awareness that cannot be put into words.

Nagarjuna's basic doctrine is called *prajnaparamita*. He accepts the reality of things but everything that exists is of the nature of dependent origination, which means that everything is related to everything else in a dependent relationship (Billington 1998: 57; [Matilal 1973: 56](#)). Therefore, things do not exist by themselves. Everything that we see is without any real substance, essence, or *svabhava*. This means that it is *shunya*. In the whole range of numerals, we find that zero is rather unique because it appears empty though it hides so much in itself. This is the biggest power of number. Despite being *shunya*, it is the beginning or the end of everything. In the known reality, things depend on other things and this cycle of dependent relationships goes on endlessly, so that nothing has anything of its own—*svabhava*, or essential nature, or essence. Therefore, everything is *shunya*. To understand the dialectical nature of this logic, which forms the very basis of reality, is *shunyata*. According to Buddhist thinkers, this is the highest point of wisdom or we can call it a philosophy of philosophies. Void or *shunya* according to Buddhism is the highest wisdom.

Nagarjuna says that anything that does not have real essence cannot claim to have non-real essence as well. Logically, non-existence can relate only to something that has existence. We have day because we have night. If there is no day, there cannot be night. Therefore, *shunyata* is our escape from extreme doctrines. When there is a thing or nothing, when there is no existence or non-existence, when there is extinction or non-extinction—the appearance of polar opposites or duality of empirical and transcendental is deception of our perception; in other words, it is *shunya*. This means that we can neither prove the existence of individual soul (*atman*) or the Universal Soul (*parmatman* or *Brahm*). For Nagarjuna, existence or non-existence, thing or no-thing, yes or no are all labels generated by differential nature of language. These are principles or terms devoid of any essentiality that language conventionally operates with. Language cannot function without differential dualism, which by itself is empty from within, whereas the universe is an organic whole. Therefore, the way that avoids extremes is the middle way or the way of *shunya*, the way of infinite freedom.

Philosopher Chandrakirti (sixth century ^{AD}) in his explanation of Nagarjuna's thought mentioned that when things lack *astitva*, neither their presence nor their absence can be logically proved. *Shunya* avoids the

extremes. Where no is 'not no', yes is also 'not yes'. In other words, every yes arises from no, as every no arises from yes. Since we cannot prove existence, we cannot prove non-existence either. According to Bimal Matilal, 'What lacks origination by itself lacks existence or emergence (astitva), and having lacked existence or emergence, it lacks destruction or non-existence (nastitv). Emptiness (shunyata) is thus intended for the two extremes, existence or presence and non-existence or absence, and in this way emptiness (shunyata) means the Middle Way' (1973: 56).

The game of ontological thought is really the game of existence versus non-existence. According to Buddhist thinkers, if we cannot prove Brahm's existence, we cannot prove individual essence as well. Shunyata ends this dualism. As we have mentioned before, shunyata does not address the problem of religion. It dismisses all dualisms in Brahmanism that relate to transcendental versus empirical, existence versus non-existence (Brahm versus Maya). This rejection, one after another, is in fact the dialectical energy of shunyata. Negative dialectics in Buddhist philosophy possesses radical energy that dismisses one system after another, thus opening the higher path to freedom.

It is worth noticing how at the young age of nineteen, Ghalib wrote the following couplets with emphasis on 'devoidness' and 'non-existence' in the style that was distinctively close to Bedil's:

qat'a-e safar-e hasti o aaraam-e fana hiich
raftaar nahien beshtar az laghzish-e pa hiich

Life's journey is nothing
but a flicker of non-existence.
The speed itself is nothing
but the limping walk
of a crippled person.

hairat hama asraar b majbuur-e khamoshi
hasti nahien juz bastan-e paimaan-e vafa hiich

All is wonder
and we are surrounded
by a sealed silence.
Life is nothing
but a promise
that could never be fulfilled.

*aahang-e Asad mein nahien juz naghma-e Bedil
aalam hama afsaana-e ma daarad-o ma hiich*

This song of Asad is
nothing but the melody of Bedil
bounced back.
'The world is my story
but I am simply nothing.'¹

Let us look at some couplets from *Nuskha-e Hamidia*, which Ghalib wrote when he was twenty-five:

*rasiidan gul-e baagh-e vaamaandgi hai
abas mehmam aaraa-e raftaar hain ham*

The flower is ready to wither
when we reach the garden.
Speed does not matter;
there is nothing except loss
in this journey.

*khalq hai safha-e ibrat se sabaq nakhvaandah
varna hai charkh-o zamiin yak varaq-e gardaandah*

World's eye is closed
to the lesson
it would have learnt.
Earth and sky are like a
leaf of a book
that has been turned.

*ibrat talab hai hall-e mua-ammaa-e aagahi
shabnam gudaaz-e aaiina-e e'tibaar hai*

The puzzle of knowing
has hundreds of lessons
for those who can discern.
Under the mirror of belief,
there might be moisture
of hidden dewdrops.

*laaf-e daanish ghalat o nafe ibaadat ma'luum
durd-e yak saaghar-e ghafalat hai ch duniya o ch diin*

Hollow is the claim of knowledge

just like the reward for worship.
Be it religion or the world,
they are nothing
more than what is left in the goblet
of my forgetfulness.

These dialectical flares that originated in Ghalib's younger years were even more intricate and spontaneous in the later years.

*nisyaa o naqd-e do aalam ki haqiqat ma'luum
le liya mujh se meri himmat-e aali ne mujhe*

Knowing how promises
for rewards and salvation
in the other world
are a sham,
it was my fortitude that saved me
from such transactions.

*hai pare sarhad-e idraak se apna masjuud
qible ko ahl-e nazar qibla numa kahte hain*

The One whom we call upon
is beyond the limits of human mind.
Kaba is merely a pointer
to the direction of our prayers.

*asl-e shuhuud-o shaahid o mashhuud ek hai
hairaan huun phir mushaahida hai kis hisaab mein*

The one who is observing,
the one who is observed,
and the very act of observing
are all one and the same.
I wonder how to make sense
of what we are observing.

*hai ghaib ghaib jis ko samajhte hain ham shuhuud
hain khvaab mein hunuuz jo jaage hain khwaab mein*

The mystery of mysteries
that we witness
is a dream for those
who have been awakened
in their dreams.

*juz naam nahien surat-e aalam mujhe manzuur
juz vahm nahien hasti-e ashiya mere aage*

The way the universe looks
it is nothing but a name for me.
Maybe things do exist,
but for me it is just an illusion.

These examples are limited in range and purpose. In the genre of ghazal since every couplet is a unit, one cannot build a thesis with the help of few couplets because there is always the risk that another stray couplet at another place might come across quite differently. In view of this, we have to look at the totality of the poet's work, mark distinctive characteristics and patterns, as well as unconscious factors that play a significant part, or inherent relationships between diverse aspects of his creativity and the nature of his encounter with the tradition. In the chapters that follow, we shall look closely at the evolution of poet's mind and thought starting with his earliest manuscripts. What we say at this stage is nothing more than a hint of our proposed thesis.

One must also keep in mind that the poet is a social being. His creative world pours forth from the fire that burns inside and many a time things are completely transformed. Ghalib was a worldly wise person and like other men of his time he too struggled with social and cultural issues, and had common religious beliefs with their inherent contradictions. While we have to carefully look at these issues, we need to be cautious because a poet can creatively bypass himself from his current reality and live his imagined life in a totally different dimension where day-to-day mundane issues matter little, where the glow of creative 'white heat' generates a magical world of its own in which new meanings and new shapes and forms emerge with their own distinctive ground and the sky above; where rivers may suddenly appear in deserts; where gardens may spring up from nowhere; where destinations walk ahead of the traveller at a faster speed; where there is no dearth of magical mental images; where spring is ever bright and beauty has a heavenly glow. Ghalib in his real life could be a sufi or non-sufi, believer or non-believer, shia or sunni, *rafzi* or *maavaraa-ul nehri*, sinner or virtuous, but in his creative world we meet him at a place where '*daaman nichor dein to farishte vuzu karein*' (angels might envy my piety though I am steeped in sin). While talking about Ghalib's poetry, our primary concern will be the passion and meaning of his creative world, or the

beneficent light that emanates from the depths of his poetic artistry. We shall however keep in view his worldly concerns as well.

Vedanta and Shunyata Differentiated

In the Indian philosophy, whenever there was a need to define the indefinable absolute reality negative dialectic has been used. For example, in the Upanishads wherever Brahm is defined (what is Brahm, for instance), all the descriptors, one after another, turn out to be negative, *neti, neti*, not this, not that, and so on. He is *nirgun*, meaning He is free from all known qualities and attributes. He is *amorti*, meaning He has no form or appearance. He is beyond human imagination. He cannot be described. No one can reach His depths or measure His height. We cannot see His fullness, and so on. How hard one might try to define Him, he shall run out of words. That is why every definition turns to be *neti, neti*, not this, not that.

On the face of it, both Vedantic maya and Buddhist shunyata might appear close to each other. But their attitude is opposite towards the world and the reality. Buddhist philosophy has no place for ontological concerns. It treats reality as *vikalpa* or *drishti*, meaning a point of view, and considers every situation as tentative and therefore devoid of essence or shunya. According to Vedanta, there is a difference between empirical reality (illusionary maya) and Brahm which is *parmaarth satya* (the ultimate truth). In other words, the world is maya, a make-belief or relative spectacle. It gives the appearance of being real, but is not real. It is the play of the absolute or ultimate reality or Brahm, who permeates it through and through. Buddhism rejects this dualism of the empirical and the transcendental. If this duality is wrong, then the idea of renunciation is wrong too.

The fact is that both the traditions have fundamental differences. Vedanta has deep connection with the atman tradition of Upanishads, which means they believe that atman and parmatman are two sides of the same coin, that is, Brahm or the absolute reality. Buddhist philosophy believes in anatman, which is denial of the soul to start with. Upanishads look upon reality and call it maya, an illusion, and whatever we see is the *leela*, a deception of our perception. It is an ever-flourishing ground of beliefs (people generally trust their beliefs to be true). But on the other hand, the Ultimate Reality (Brahm)

or the Cosmic Consciousness is present in every particle, which ordinarily we might not know. In Urdu poetry, we have echoes of some of the Vedantic thoughts as well. Let us start with Mir.

*ye tavvahun ka kaarkhaana hai
yaan vohi hai jo e'tibaar kiya*

In a world of never-ending illusions,
the real is what you believe is real.

*buud naqsh-o nigaar sa hai kuchh
suurat ik e'tibaar sa hai kuchh*

Forms and images appear as works of art.
If you trust them, they are there for you.

Ghalib writes:

*shahid-e hasti mutlaq ki kamar hai aalam
log kahte hain k hai par hamein manzuur nahien*

The visible world is no bigger
than the expanse of the Creator.

It is like the waist of the beloved.²

People say it is there
but I do not believe it.

*juz naam nahien suurat-e aalam mujhe manzuur
juz vahm nahien hasti-e ashiya mere aage*

All that I see is a mere name for me.
The worldly forms that exist
are nothing but an illusion.

*haan khaaiyo mat fareb-e hasti
har chand kahein k hai nahien hai*

Do not be deceived
by the illusions of reality.
People say that unreal is real,
but in fact it is not.

Buddhist philosophy does not consider atman to be the real essence. External reality can be known by its qualities, but every quality turns out to

be of dependent origination, hence free of any essence. Buddhists treat soul, matter, atman, paramatman, existence, and non-existence as dualistic which are accepted on their face value but their bona fides cannot be verified or tested. Negative dialectics has its origins in Upanishads, but the Buddhist method is very different ([Murti 1973: 9–11](#)). Ontology is no different from what exists. The reality is cosmic, a continuum, it permeates all, and is one and the same.

Shunyata: A Way of Thinking, Not a Theory

In the Buddhist philosophy, negative dialectics is the central way of thinking. But negation after negation does not reveal any hidden elements of reality. It is a way of knowing prajna, which is a summation of different ways of thinking—how the process of one negation after another eventually leads to absolute freedom and inner awareness. Shunyata is not a viewpoint or theory for discovering new knowledge or establishing a belief system. In reality, it is a negation of everything that nullifies all belief systems and patterns that our mind is used to, and opens the way to unique openness. Prajna is awareness that is not a means to any particular end. It is awareness of the fact that in the real world, there is no one ‘thing’, one idea, one viewpoint, one image, or one principle that is a solution for our concerns. Because nothing is stable, inherently permanent, or has essence; everything and every thought is shunya, a mere product of differential lingual dualism.

As explained above, Buddhist philosophy stays away from transcendental and ontological questions. It looks upon every issue as a statement of some form of duality and then critically examines the issue using its dynamic of negation. Shunyata does not present any philosophical position of its own. Rather, it confronts others’ viewpoints and positions and then demolishes them. Shunyata, as a critique, is open and ready to consider all those that claim to find any aspect of reality which may have an essence. In Nagarjuna’s logic, every argument has a counterargument that rejects it. When any doctrine, together with its trimmings, is thrown into shunyata’s dynamic dialectical fire, it is reduced to a pile of ashes. What remains is awareness and freedom ([Murti 1973: 11–14](#)).

Even the biggest creation of Buddhists known as nirvana is a negation. According to Osho, nirvana means to turn off a flame, which is a metaphor

for total darkness. As we know, there is no greater negation than total darkness. 'The existence of nothing is the greatest.'

Buddhist philosophy avoids all kinds of extremes, dualisms, and contradictions. Vedantists try to reconcile dualities, while Buddhists leave all dualities aside. Buddhists aim to free the mind from preconceived notions. Ghalib's poetics does the same thing in its own way. Vedanta is ontological, whereas Buddhist philosophy or shunyata is epistemological ([Murti 1973: 10](#)). But this epistemology is not a theory of knowledge; it is a process of how knowledge is obtained. Its purpose is to provide the human mind with a sharp tool with which it can cut through the smog of dualisms and eventually experience freedom. This critical process, which is *critique par excellence*, obviously has a dialectical base ([Matilal 1973: 60](#)). It goes after all binary propositions to prove their emptiness. Shunyata is a way of cleansing up of one's mind so that we can see the real for real (*tathyata*), away from extremes and dualisms. In shunyata, the emphasis is not on finding a certain kind of knowledge but on a process that can be used to explore any domain of knowledge. According to the Buddhists, it is a huge mistake to make dualistic thinking the foundation of human thinking. Shunyata's job is to destroy all empirical and transcendental viewpoints. That is why it does not entertain concepts like Brahm, atman, parmatman, maya, caste differences, and so on. It neither accepts nor rejects these ideas, as none of them, when critically examined, are found to have any essence of their own.

From one perspective, shunyata can be criticized for being a belief system that rejects not only all prior dogmas but also all future transcendental or empirical bases for interpreting reality. Examining any position and finding it empty from within is an endless process. In our day-to-day life, the obvious is the rule of thumb; we normally take things for granted and this has made us conceptually blind. We accept many assertions uncritically as the truth and do not take the trouble of examining or looking deeply inside. To open shunyata's window, we need to remember Nagarjuna's principle: 'Anything that is not different or similar in its own right doesn't have any essence.' In other words, there is no existence without qualities and there are no qualities without existence. If everything is dependent on everything else and it is impermanent, then where is its real essence? Nagarjuna says that fire is not same as fire logs but it is also not very different from fire logs because we cannot imagine fire without fire

logs ([Matilal 1973: 15](#)). There is an undercurrent of dialectical system of negation that is at work. We cannot imagine any action without a doer (the person who does the action). Anything that is dependent on another has no essence of its own. In other words, the game of creation or genesis is empty from within. (Derrida says that the play of signification in language is empty from within.)

Shunyata and Nihilism

A question arises about shunyata: if it is simply a philosophy of negation after negation, then is it not the same thing as nihilism? Nihilism is the rejection of all positions and moral principles, often in the belief that life is meaningless. It is also a philosophy of extreme scepticism that says nothing in the world has any real existence. Murti answers this question (see [Matilal 1973: 22](#)). Although Buddhist philosophy rejects every known empirical and transcendental concept, it does not mean that it rejects life or reality. It only says that we do not know how ‘real’ the reality is. If there is a proof, then shunyata is more than willing to look at it. Buddhist outlook is not empirical or transcendental; it is epistemological based on its approach and method. It looks upon everything, be it nirvana or *tathagat*, for the purpose of gaining knowledge. It is a mental attitude that everything is of dependent origination and devoid of essence, hence shunya. Having reached this pinnacle of realization and awareness, it dissolves itself. Therefore, shunyata is not a belief system or a theory.

If shunyata rejects every point of view, it means that no metaphysical system has passed the validity test. While explaining this point, Bimal Matilal writes that shunyata’s logic is not aimed at refutation or repudiation. You refute when you want to prove your point of view. Shunyata has no axe to grind. It has no vested interest ([Matilal 1973: 59](#)). Shunyata is a critical way of looking at the sorrow-stricken world which has no essence, and in which everything is of dependent origination. According to Nagarjuna, the problem of suffering is not solved by destroying suffering but to understand and be aware of the causes that lead to suffering. It is a mental tool that keeps our thinking sharp. It saves us from being affected by the concepts that are contradictory, yet they bind people to behave in a certain manner. Shunyata frees us from these self-impositions. As Ghalib writes:

*taa'at mein ta rahe n mai-o angbiin ki laag
dozakh mein daal do koi le kar bahisht ko*

People pray to gain
Heaven's promised comforts
of wine and honey.
Why not take the heaven
and throw it into the hell?

Shunyata as Freedom, Awareness, and Plurality

As we have mentioned before, Buddha rejects maya, Brahm, and caste divisions. He talks only of shunyam, the king of negations. In the words of Nagarjuna, 'All named things come to rest in *shunya*' ([Sprung 1973: 6](#)). Freedom means freedom from all kinds of conflicting positions and dogmas. Shunyata is awareness of this freedom. According to Nagarjuna, the treatment for an ailment should not become another ailment. If the existing world is an ailment, then shunyata is the treatment. But the Bodhi stance warns that shunyata should not be viewed as another viewpoint. After giving us a feeling of freedom, shunyata disappears.

How shunyata becomes synonymous with freedom is a secret that Buddha shared with Kayshapa. Imagine that there is a sick person and he has received some herbal treatment from a medicine man. With this treatment the malady disappeared but the herbal remnants in the body made the person sicker than before. Buddha said, 'O Kayshapa, shunyata is simply the medicine that frees us from contradictions and dualisms but if someone accepts the medicine as a cure for everything (meaning accepts it as a theory or a viewpoint) then there is no cure for that ailment' ([Matilal 1973: 62](#)).

As we have seen, the Bodhi perspective does not attach much importance to dualistic arguments. Its approach to understanding of reality is strictly dialectical. Ghalib's inventiveness astonishingly parallels this approach. Negative dialectics in Ghalib's case is also unselfish and non-differentiating. It is not an end in itself but a way to reject named propositions, or to free ourselves from the tyranny of the routine, or an attempt to create a magnetic field after rejection upon rejection of beliefs and paradoxes. He allows meaning to flow in different directions, or he creates a magical world of his own that has no parallel, and it never fails to dazzle.

We should keep in view that Ghalib creates inventive meaning with the help of his own type of negative dialectics that is critical of every given position, and which goes through rejection upon rejection. But rejection in this case is not like trashing something. It is a creative clash of different viewpoints to find a grey area somewhere in the centre—an attempt to free the meaning from the tyranny of mechanical interpretations of limiting proportions. This approach is similar to shunyata dialectics. Shunyata treats the world of conventional language as ignorance. It is shunya, unreal. Ghalib too considers conventional expressions, popular thinking, belief systems, viewpoints, and shared understandings as chains that bind us. What matters is our ability to free ourselves from the tyranny of common beliefs and to gain a sense of freedom by rising above these things. We can gain this feeling only if we reject the familiar. The feeling of opening up new vistas of meaning brings with it a new sense of freedom and awareness. Like shunyata, there is no forcible imposition or hidden trick, no fear, no reward or punishment here, except dialectical rejections and an attempt to find the centre where pain and pleasure, sorrow and merriment, good and bad times, fame and obscurity, honour and disgrace are all levelled and give the feeling that all this is present but devoid of essence; nothing is permanent. Life is an interregnum; live and then let go. This is not your permanent abode; take it as if you are crossing a bridge while travelling. Ghalib writes:

*agar badil nakhalad har ch dar nazar guzrad
zahe ravaani-e umre k dar safar guzrad*

If the heart is not captivated
by whatever it sees,
rave about the flow of life
as if you were celebrating a journey.

*huun main bhi tamaashaai-e nairang-e tamanna
matlab nahien kuchh is se k matlab hi bar aave*

I am wanting to see
the outcome of my yearning.
My desire may come to fruition
but it is unpredictable.
I should better act
as a witness to my own doings.

*vaarusta is se hain k muhabbat hi kyon n ho
kije hamaare saath adaavat hi kyon n ho*

I care less if she does not love me.
Let it be a denial.
Is not that a relationship?

*mera shamuul har ik dil ke pech o taab mein hai
main mudd'aa huun tapish naama-e tamanna ka*

I am like the hidden anguish
found in every human heart.
I am the intent of writing
on the leaf of longing
destined to burn and perish.

*nahien gar sarv barg-e idraak-e ma'ni
tamaasha-e nairang-e suurat salaamat*

No trappings of meaning.
But the spectacle of beauty
unfolds continuously
and that is all we should be
celebrating.

*nahien nigaar ko ulfat n ho nigaar to hai
ravaani-e ravish-o masti-e ada kahiye
nahien bahaar ko fursat n ho bahaar to hai
taraavat-e chaman-o khuubi hava kahiye*

If there is no response, let it be
because love is there.
Point the finger at the charm and pull of beauty.
If spring does not last, let it be
because spring is out there.
Point the finger at the beauty of the garden
and freshness of breeze.

Shunyata and Derrida

We have dealt with the relationship of advances in theory with the Indian thought in one of our other books on literary theory and eastern poetics ([Narang 1993: 337–86](#)). We have before us the views of Professor Rupert J.

Firth, Kunjunni Raja, Robert Magliola, Harold Coward, and many others. It appears that Ferdinand de Saussure based his idea of binary oppositions and differential functioning of language from what he learnt from the ancient Indian thought. Robert Magliola, devotes the complete third chapter of his book *Derrida on the Mend*, saying that there is a close relationship between Derrida's dialectical thinking and Nagarjuna's shunyata, as is clear from the following excerpt:

Notice that even the name and concept of Shunyata are Provisional, i.e., Crossed-out. Shunyata, like Derridean difference, should not be hypostatized and cannot be framed by ratiocination. Remark as well that Shunyata is the Middle Path. Clearly, Nagarjuna means Middle in the sense of the Derridean between tracking its and/or (absolute constitution and absolute negation) between the conventional and/or proposed by entitative theory. Shunyata is not void but devoid. (1984: 116)

Harold Coward, in his book *Derrida and Indian Philosophy*, has written extensively about Bharthari Hari, Aurobindo, Shankaracharya, and Nagarjuna. About Nagarjuna, he says:

In fact Magliola finds that in his destruction of the principle of identity by reductio ad absurdum analysis Nagarjuna employs the same logical strategy and often the very same arguments as are later used by Derrida. On this point Magliola seems to be correct. Nagarjuna's *shunyata* (devoid of being or self-existence) is as he says equivalent with Derrida's *difference*, and the absolute negation which absolutely deconstitutes. (1990: 126)

Shunyata Crosses Itself Out

As we have said before, shunyata is a process—not a point of view. In the words of Magliola, 'even the name and concept of shunyata are provisional, i.e., crossed-out'. After dialectically dissecting everything, it dismembers itself. Shunyata is a tool of critique. It is not a point of view or a doctrine. Nagarjuna lays down a principle: 'A sword's sharpness can cut others but not itself' ([Matilal 1973: 60](#)). Do we not find something similar in Ghalib's poetry? Does he not use the inherent dialectical crossing out? Does he not creatively exploit latent or obvious negative dynamics to bring out contradictions or eke out fresh meanings in the complexity of human relationships and the mystique of the world he is commenting on? Let us see what he is saying in the following couplets beginning with *Nushka-e Hamidia*:

kaashaana-e hasti k bar-andaadkhtani hai
yaan sokhtani aur vahaan saakhtani hai

Isn't this world a play of self-plundering?
Some place it is being born
and somewhere it is being burnt.

*ae be samaraan haasil-e takliif damiidan
gardan b tamaasha-e gul afraakhtani hai*

What if the bud struggles
and blooms a bit!
The moment it raises its head,
it is plucked.

*hai saadgi-e zahn tamannaa-e tamaasha
jaae k Asad rang-e chaman baakhtani hai*

The desire to be known and be noticed,
What innocence, Asad!
Even the garden's bloom is transitory
and is destined to vanish.

A few couplets from the Divan:

*jab ke tujh bin nahien koi maujuud
phir y hangaama ae khuda kya hai*

When this world
does not exist without You,
then, O God, what is this
tumult all about?

*y pari chehra log kaise hain
ghamza-o ishva-o ada kya hai*

What are these beauties
looking like fairies?
How do you describe
their alluring and
seductive demeanour?

*shikan-e zulf-e umbariin kyon hai
nig-h-e chashm-e surma sa kya hai*

Why are there curls
in thy fragrant tresses?

What is the reality
of these magnetic
blackened eyes?

*sabza-o gul kahaan se aaye hain
abr kya chiiz hai hava kya hai*

Tell me the source
from where these flowers
and greenery came.
What are these clouds about?
What is the secret of air
that we breathe?

Shunyata, Silence, and Language

Both Bedil and Ghalib look upon language with suspicion, something that they share with Buddhist thinking. Language is a construct and it can operate only through differentiability. It is a victim of duality and routine and has its limits. It cannot describe all aspects of reality. Moreover, language is not a transparent medium. When it presents reality, it cannot do so without polluting it by its differential duality. When it comes to inner experience or deeper mystic thought between conventional language and silence, it is silence that takes the precedence ([Murti 1973: 21](#)). Silence is said to be the *language of languages*. From the standpoint of shunyata, silence is a dynamic force, more powerful than speech, filled with a vast potential of meaning. If we want to enter the inner reaches of human psyche, there is no better guide than silence. The best form of speech (*shabda*) is a form of silence. In the Indian classical music, the first *sur* (note) *sa* comes from the inner depths of silence and is known as *anhad* (limitless). The music produced by an instrument opens new pathways to aesthetic pleasure, but the voice that we cannot hear is a sign of limitlessness of infinite. *Mastam z navaae k n az taar bar-aamad* (I swing at the sound struck not by a chord). The great rishis, yogis, sufi seers, and *aulias* centre their attention on the voice that filters through the feeble threads of the mind, springs from the womb of silence, and gives them the feelings of utmost fulfillment and freedom. Treating the following Ghalib couplets casually will be doing injustice to ourselves. They call for deep reflection as we read them.

*aagahi daam-e shuniidan jis qadar chaahe bichhaae
mudd'aa anqa hai apne aalam-e taqriir ka*

Spread the net of awareness
to unravel the mystery of my words.
You will end up chasing a bird
no one has ever seen.

*basaan-e sabza rag-e khwaab hai zubaan iijaad
kare hai khaamushi aihvaal-e be-khudaan paida*

Dreams too speak to us
like the leaves of grass.
Those who are aware
know only the speech
of soundless silence.

*az khud-guzashtagi mein khamoshi p harf hai
mauj-e ghubaar-e surma huui hai sada mujhe*

I find myself at a stage
beyond forgetfulness.
Lo, by the wave of antimony
I have lost my speech.³

*khamoshiyon mein tamaasha ada nikalti hai
nigaah dil se tere surma sa nikalti hai*

Coming straight from your heart,
your seductive charm
silently starts a spectacle.
Your glances laced with antimony
make me speechless.

*bahaar shokh-o chaman tang-o rang-e gul dilchasp
nasiim baagh se pa dar henna nikalti hai*

With spring so bright
and the garden aflame
with the dance of colours,
the breeze that blows across
has its feet dipped in henna.

*huun hayuulaa-e do aalam surat-e taqriir Asad
fikr ne saunpi khamoshi ki garibaani mujhe*

The visible and the invisible
are a whirlwind
of soundless speech.
And I am the custodian
of this boundless silence.

*gar khaamushi se faaida ikhfaaye haal hai
khush huun k meri baat samajhni muhaal hai*

I can hide the real condition
of my heart
by not saying anything.
I am happy
that no one understands
what I am saying.

*nashv o numa hai asl se Ghalib furu'u ko
khaamoshi hi se nikle hai jo baat chaahiye*

Our growth in reality, Ghalib,
radiates from our roots.
The speech we cherish
emanates from our silence.

*khudaaya chashm ta dil dard hai afsuun-e aagaahi
nig-h hairat savaad-e khwaab-e be ta'abiir behtar hai*

From eyes to the heart
I am afflicted
with the pain of knowing.
Thank God!
This dream lacks interpretation.

According to Buddhist thinking, language is a system of signs generated by common practise in a social formation. It has no essentiality and no meaning outside that formation. In a given language you cannot go out of the bounds of that language. Saussure theorizes on similar lines while Vedanta is different. It emphasizes the spiritual power of shabda. Although it is not apparent, shabda is metaphorically linked with Brahm. But according to Buddhist thought, language is fictive, empirical, and

constructed. It is a system of differential signification and the first job of shunyata is to shoot all contradictions and differential dualisms. According to Nagarjuna, language is a victim of dualism and doctrines. It can only operate through binary oppositions. In Buddhist philosophy, this is the root cause of non-essence. Buddhist thinking tries to go beyond the rut of this differentiation and open the path for realization of the non-differential total whole, the Ultimate Unity.

It is surprising that the same feeling is also at work in Ghalib's creative process. Surprisingly, we often meet Ghalib at the boundaries where language and silence play hide-and-seek and merge into each other. Ghalib's creativity always tries to break bonds of language's conventionality. Many a time we meet Ghalib at the frontiers of language where meaning and non-meaning embrace each other. Ghalib's poetic idiom is generally marked with an urgency that wants to go beyond language. He expresses this creative anguish repeatedly, even as the heat of his inner fire is such that the glass of the flask cannot hold this wine. The glass melts under its pressure. As he asserts, *aabgiina tundi-e sehba se pighla jaae hai!* (What is the inner secret or the unconscious pull that Ghalib expresses this enigma or restlessness time and again?)

Whether it is Nagarjuna, Shankaracharya, Heidegger, Bedil, or Ghalib, they are all in search of answers to resolve the mystery of reality. We do not have to say it but Ghalib and Bedil are closer to Nagarjuna than they are to Shankaracharya or Heidegger. Ghalib's concern is not the other world but existence per se, the life itself: its nature, suffering, justice, joy, love, beauty, sorrow, unfulfilled desires. Yet, we find the unending yearning and the indefatigable struggle and quest to unravel the mystery, the unique place and dignity of man, the freedom, and the unity of mankind. This might appear different from the ultimate goal of the conventional transcendental Sufi mind but it is no less significant as Ghalib looks more towards the problems of the earth than towards the bounties of the heaven. Heidegger does want to go beyond his dictum, *language is being*. While, according to Nagarjuna and the Buddhist thinkers, language itself is the main suspect, it is constructed, caught in duality and subjectivity, and cannot go beyond its limitations. Ghalib, while being preoccupied with man and his empirical predicament, wants to go beyond language's limitations, but try as best as he may, he cannot do without language. Hence, we can understand Ghalib's anguish and restlessness, and the urge to speak of his inner fire in an idiom

different from the conventional dualistic language. He, time and again, questions the existence of God, sin or virtue, joy or sorrow, heaven or earth, Kaba or Kashi. Are these not products of the differential duality of language? Do we not conceive them only as much as the differentiability of language can construct them? Does this not signal that it is but imperative to look at Ghalib's world once again and examine his text more closely keeping in view his predicament, his thought, his poetics, and the magical field of semantics he creates? In our view, a fresh close reading is not only necessary, it is overdue.

But before we proceed to take up his mentor Bedil's poetics and the tradition of Sabke Hindi, it might be of some help to move back a little and take a quick look at the nature of Zen and the language of silence; and also the indigenous bhakti-sufi saint traditions, especially Kabir, as time and again they also use the language of silence. This might facilitate our understanding of Ghalib's enigmatic creativity, the roots of which lie hidden in some of these medieval and archetypal cultural practices.

Zen and the Language of Silence

The word Zen is derived from the Indian Sanskrit word 'dhyana'. This is the branch of Buddhism that originated in the East but it came to fruition in Japan. Swiss psychologist Carl Jung has written that in Zen everything seems to come from darkness that cannot be explained logically ([Suzuki 1964: 21, 49](#)). Zen practitioners believe that language is insufficient for fuller existential understanding. Zen teachers always tell their students that we have nothing to teach you with the help of words. True knowledge or *buddhi* is beyond any system of logic. Mind muddies reality and fouls meaning. If you really want to learn anything, do it with your inner experience ([Suzuki 1964: 49](#)). Zen is not a play of imagination, a domain of knowledge, a point of view, mental concept, conscious or unconscious schemata; it is nothing of the sort. It is not nirvana. It stands apart from all mental and linguistic constructions. To be completely free and have a feeling of freedom is the very essence of freedom ([Suzuki 1964: 50-1](#)). A Zen saying that is associated with Heze Shenhui (c. AD 670) is as follows:

Empty-handed I go,
and behold the spade is
in my hands

I walk on foot, and yet
on the back of an ox
I am riding;
When I pass over the bridge,
lo, the water floweth not,
but the bridge doth flow. ([Suzuki 1964: 58](#))

In terms of the traditional logic, A will always be A and not –A, or A cannot be B. Logic is the limit of mind and denial of intuitive freedom. We clap with two hands but Zen is said to be like the sound of one-hand clapping. It is like rain without a drop of water, calmness of a desert in the sea, or like the sound of ocean waves in the wasteland ([Suzuki 1964: 59–91](#)). Zen is absolutely against any kind of agenda; it has no set of instructions, no set of things to do. As Billington points out, ‘Follow your own path without recourse to given agenda. Given agenda is like asking a friend, “What is that?” While pointing at the moon, and receiving the reply, “that is your finger”’ (1997: 75).

According to Zen, absolutism is a prison, and to proceed in the quest of awareness one must be free from absolutism. The common sense is nothing but the rust of absolutism, which must be cleansed. It is the biggest obstacle in the inner quest as it operates on the surface, goes by the given, the ritualistic, and the custom, which make us blind. It is oppressive and denies freedom to deviate from the beaten track or to question anything received in the name of truth. While Zen is opposed to any blind faith or absolutism, it emphasizes freedom—freedom to challenge; freedom to question; freedom to deny or to delve deep and experience one’s own truth, one’s own meaning, and awareness of one’s existence. It cannot be analysed or described; it can only be felt or realized by personal discovery and inner experience.

Kabir and the Language of Silence

Sufi saints, bhaktas, and aulias have been using the language of silence or the language of unsaying for centuries to share with their followers the inner truth that they could not express in the normal worn-out conventional language. The Bhakti movement started in the sixth to seventh centuries with the Adyar and Alwar poets of the present-day Tamil Nadu region. The movement gained momentum during the tenth century in Karnataka and in

the twelfth century in Maharashtra. From the fourteenth century through the sixteenth century, the mystical poetry associated with the movement had spread like wildfire into most regional and local languages of the entire northern India. The cultural interaction and popularity of Sufi ideas strengthened the trend. Spiritually enlightened Sufi seer-poets like Kabir, Bulleh Shah, Shah Husain, Guru Nanak, Waris Shah, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, Jay Deva, and Tukaram brought popularity that most poets had never dreamt of. In addition, there were local poets who carried the message of Bhakti and Sufism everywhere to villages and homes. You could not find anyone living during this time who had not been influenced by the poetry of these saints and their disciples. The Persian poetry associated with Sabke Hindi tradition that flourished between the thirteenth and the nineteenth centuries could not have kept aloof from these extremely popular writings in local languages like Braj, Khari Boli, Awadhi, Rajasthani, Bhojpuri, Maithili, Maghdi, Saraiki, Punjabi, and so on. Among these poets, Kabir was someone special because he combined in his work ideas of Sufism and Nirguna Bhakti, and he was probably one of the greatest folk poets of all times.

In order to help ordinary people, who had their mirror of consciousness rusted in the routine and humdrum of day-to-day life, there were experiments in Sanskrit and other local languages, using innovative methods and involving different forms of negative dialectics for centuries, and these were an integral part of the ancient Indian civilization. The use of folk idioms, magic, puzzles, and paradoxes for this purpose was prevalent for centuries and examples of these are found in the Upanishads, Puranic tales, and Mahabharata. In the epic story of Mahabharata, when the five Pandu brothers during the time of their exile go to a pond to quench their thirst, they are confronted by a hidden (mystical and magical) voice that asks them some paradoxical questions. Four brothers die as they cannot provide the correct answers. It is the eldest brother who, by using his innate intelligence, offers correct answers and thus revives the four dead brothers after which they all had water to drink to their heart's content. Such examples are found in other traditions as well. In Amir Khusrau's Hindavi and Persian poetry and later *masnavis*, we find abundance of riddles, puzzles, and magical tales, the purpose of which was to ignite interest among common folks to think about and reflect on the mystery of existence.

Kabir's time is nearly a century after Amir Khusrau. He not only wrote songs like any other poet but also experimented in writing poetry that did not fit into any of the known genres, or sometime did not even make any sense to the reader at the first look. The language used in this form of poetry has been called 'upside-down language', *ulat bamsi*, because of the dialectical twist, whose sole purpose was to create a shock effect on the reader or the listener. Through the simple act of poetic provocation, the listener was prompted to ask questions and enter into a deeper dialogue. Because the language used novel signifiers and phrases, it is also called 'twilight language' ([Doniger 2011: xiv](#)). Dim-lit language, topsy-turvy language, abstract language, and paradoxical language are different forms of the same problem. Such modes were common in local folk traditions. With the evolution of ghazal as a popular genre in Sabke Hindi poetry, it is not improbable that these indigenous modes in some form permeated into the sophisticated style of the Persian masters. The indigenous genres of *kabits*, *sakhis*, *sorthas*, and especially the two-lined *dohas* were not very distant from the two-lined couplets of the ghazal. The ghazal had travelled to scores of lands with the advent of Islam in the medieval times but nowhere did it gain such popularity, strike such deep roots in the local soil, and synthesize with the poetic traditions of local languages as it did in India. Such cultural questions have not yet been fully addressed by Persian scholars. Nowhere is the genre of ghazal so soaked in the indigenous poetic traditions as it has been in India. Bedil is at a much higher pedestal in terms of the use of sophisticated literary language compared to Kabir but they share many common existential and poetic concerns. Both are different in many respects but Bedil's imagination is as much on fire as Kabir's to unravel the mystery of the existence and the predicament of humankind. The density and paradoxical complexity of Bedil's poetics cannot be fully appreciated unless the cultural synthesis at work at that time is comprehensively understood. Both of them were passionate about spreading the message of love and mitigating the suffering of the common folks.

From Bedil, the path to Ghalib is pretty discernable. But Bedil is a transcendental Sufi poet, while Ghalib is a worldly poet whose main concern is the condition of a human being. In Ghalib we find that mysticism and transcendentalism of the saint-poets mesh into an existential poetic concern of its own kind. He is caught between the joys and sorrows of life while facing the challenges of living in a mysterious world abandoned by

its Creator. This is the place where Ghalib's voice consciously or unconsciously is at home using the archetypal negative dynamics found in the ancient Indian and Buddhist traditions about which we talked earlier in this chapter.

In order to illustrate the point regarding Kabir's upside-down folk poetics, we present here some excerpts from his writings. It is futile to look for any urban sophistication as we find in Bedil or Ghalib but one can certainly feel the touch of the artistry of folk, the warmth of rural idiom, along with the whiff and smell of the soiled earth that is at the very centre of this kind of poetry, though one can also feel the dialectical innovative pull of the pulsating quest which tries to be in communion with the mystery of existence:

1. O learned one,
 tell me how I became a woman from a man.
 I was neither someone's wife, nor a virgin,
 Never pregnant, yet I deliver kids;
 I am the mother of many.
 I have not spared a single unmarried man,
 yet I am still a virgin.
 In a Brahman's house I am his wife,
 but in a Yogi's I am a disciple.
 After reading the Koran,
 I walk like a Muslim woman.
 I do not belong to my parents or to my in-laws.
 I do not allow any man to touch me.
 Kabir says I will live long.
 I am the one who is untouched. ([Kabir 1961: 160](#))
2. I am neither a believer, nor a non-believer.
 I am neither an ascetic, nor a temple worker.
 I do not say anything; I do not hear anything.
 I am neither serving anyone, nor being served.
 I am neither bound, nor completely free.
 I am neither separate from others, nor I am with anyone.
 Neither bound for hell nor heaven.
 I have indulged in every act, yet I am detached.
 This is understood
 only by the one who is perceptive.
 Kabir does not cheer lead
 any one established belief system,
 nor does he trash any particular one. (Kabir, quoted from [Narang 2005: 223](#))

¹ The second line of this couplet was written by Bedil. Young Ghalib composed this ghazal, employing the same rhyming scheme and metre as a mark of respect to his mentor.

² As a convention in ghazal writing, the waist of the beloved is described as so thin (exaggeration in describing attributes of beauty is permissible) that it is hardly visible.

³ There is a traditional belief that by eating antimony (*surma*), vocal cords can be damaged.

5

The Sabke Hindi Tradition and Its Indigenous Roots



There is a point of view that needs attention, that is, the elegance that Persian poetry gained by coming to India was not received by it in Iran. Apparently, this is something astonishing. That is why we need to fully understand this. Just think about it. There is something special in India's cultural climate that anything that comes from outside within a short time span attains distinctiveness and exquisiteness that it lacked in its country of origin. There is something distinctive in the beauty of Kashmiri, Turki, and Irani. But these ethnic groups, after a generation or two, gain a new identity when their face, hand and feet, body structure, height, and complexion gain a refreshing look after some natural adaptation, which is nothing short of a magical transformation. The same way we can talk about cuisine. Many Indian dishes like qurma, qaliya, pulao, etc., came from Iran. But the taste that was added by the Indian chefs was not found in Iran. Golden embroidered silk came to India from Iran but what Benares made of it does not bear a comparison. There is no building like Taj Mahal in Iran. The same difference is found in Persian poetry written in India.

—[Shibli \(1986: 175\)](#)

IF WE LOOK at the march of history, we shall discover how due to cultural encounters, immersion, engrossment, and eventually synthesis of civilizations, myriad changes have taken place. Some changes are visible, while others are not. There is a revolution that is recorded by historians but there is also a silent revolution that civilizations and languages record through their inherent creative processes. Kingdoms are lost in the wink of an eye but culture and language-related evolutionary cycles take much longer. Their growth and cultivation have come about over a period of centuries. There are several changes that occur naturally. But the beautification and enrichment of language and culture is the result of actions based on collective as well as individual contributions. These things cannot be forced from the top or their design consciously selected by a chosen few. Freedom of cultural interaction is the first prerequisite of creative intermingling and transformation. History is known to support the

emergence of new saplings through mysterious creative processes. Cultural changes that are rooted in indigenous conditions are deeper, more potent, and more widespread than the changes that are seen at the surface.

The spectacular spread of Persian in the subcontinent was the result of such a cultural change. This was the time when Persian had established its hold on a wide area in the Middle East as part of the advent of Islamic faith. At that time, Persian was not only the language of Shiraz, Isfahan, or Mashhad but also that of Samarkand, Bukhara, Khutan, Kabul, Qandhar, Ghazni, and Kashgar. It was not only the language of choice in Iran but also in Turan, Sestaan, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and in many other parts of Central Asia. The literary tradition established as a result of the contributions of great poets like Firdausi, Saadi, Khaqani, Hafiz, Khayyaam, Nizami, Jami, and Rumi showed vibrant growth in terms of diversity of themes and principles of creating literature at the hands of a large number of able masters over many centuries. These developments were viewed with great admiration. Against this background, when Persian came to India, it not only impacted its host (which was expected) but also got impacted in return. Cultural intermingling is a two-way street. The outcomes are subtle, mostly invisible and deep, and they last for a long time.

Politically, India at that time was in a state of utter disorder and disintegration. Gone was the golden age of kings like Chandragupta Maurya, Ashoka, and Kanishka but, on the positive side, the country was a repository of one of the oldest, extremely rich, colourful, and varied civilizations. Its arts and crafts were a matter of great pride. There was immense creative potential. There were marvellous works of ancient thought and philosophy backed by traditions of earlier centuries. There were also compilations of great works like the Vedas, Upanishads, Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Puranas. And, most importantly, these were poetic traditions whose basic language was Sanskrit, an Indo-European language that had reached India, travelling for several thousand years in Central Asia, with some of the time spent in the company of a sister language Avesta (old name for Persian) that later became the sacred language of Zoroastrians and their scriptures, even before it assumed its shape as Irani, Turani, or Farsi—the Persian which Ghalib called the language of his Afrasyabi and Turani ancestors. It may be noted that Arabs used the word ‘Ajam’ to denote the region where Persian was spoken.

Because of its status as the language of Islamic religious discourse and a language in which Allah had spoken to the Prophet, Arabic had a unique claim to sanctity, elegance, calligraphic beauty, great architecture, grandeur, and a high level of cultural sophistication. As Persian came to India, it also brought with it the influence of Arabic. But interestingly, Arabic influence had arrived in south India and Sindh much before the entry of Persian into north India. The seed of Persian became a sapling, and very soon it was a full-blown tree with many branches. For about eight or nine centuries, the Persian language was a companion to many medieval, indigenous dialects, and regional languages, and slowly it became the subcontinent's most influential language of artistic, literary, and poetic expression. It is hard to find another example like this one. There is a rainbow of beautiful colours of Persian literature in India going back to Masud Sa'd Salman, the multidimensional polyglot composer and court poet of the sultanate period Amir Khusrau, and also later great Mughal names such as Faizi, Urfi, Naziri, Zahuri, Talib, Kaleem, Nasir Ali, Bedil, and Ghalib. No other language in the Middle East saw such outpouring of outstanding literature. This does not mean that Arabic was not influential. But those core influences were of a different kind. There are some cultural reasons that worked invisibly, as pointed out above, through the intermingling of two great cultural traditions. Arabic had already found a place in the Indian mind, basically through its religious sanctity and grandeur. Persian, through its historical development, had earlier absorbed Arabic influences. Later in India, Persian uniquely became a part of the widespread creative flowering of the literature that was occurring in various parts of the country.

The linguistic plant of Persian found such deep roots in India that it was difficult to imagine that this seedling was actually an import. The language found a receptive environment in which it could grow easily. It was like twins meeting after a separation of centuries. There was the patronage of kings and princely courts but, more importantly, there was acceptance by the common folks and local culture. Royal patronage also works only in situations where the cultural climate is receptive and there are linkages of shared heritage. Creative act is complex, unconscious, and full of hidden intricacies. Surprisingly, many Persian literary historians are silent on this unique cultural mingling and transformation. This includes those who were indifferent to Persian's widespread silent acceptance in India and those who were fully aware of phenomenal Persian blending and meshing with Indian

languages, and especially its impact on Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, Kashmiri, and Bengali, and down to Marathi and Telugu. What was the secret of this cultural acceptance and embrace? To find an answer, we do not have to go very far. Persian and most of the Indian languages share the same linguistic descent as they belong to the same Indo-European/Indo-Aryan stock. Both the Indic or later Sanskrit and the Old Persian or Avesta were sister languages when the Aryans came to India via Central Asia and Iran. In other words, the modern Indian languages and the modern Persian's great-grandparents or great-great-grandparents were the same. This was before the Christian era; later when their offspring met on the Indian soil from the tenth and eleventh centuries onwards, with the arrival of the Afghans, Turks, and Mughals in India, naturally the Persian found a ready acceptance and favourable climate in India. No wonder, sometimes the cultural links that are under the surface, invisible or forgotten, are more potent than the surface, superficial, or exterior links.

We have an example of Amir Khusrau's third *divan* named *Ghurratul-Kamaal* (The Prime of Perfection), which is a collective testament to the fact that how within a short time, the Indo-Persian poets had started to use Hindavi besides Persian in their poetic work. Khusrau mentions the name of Masud Sa'd Salman who engaged in such experimentation before him. Interestingly, the labels such as Hindi and Hindavi were coined by Persian scholars in order to describe the languages that were spoken in India (Hind) at that time. In about one or two centuries of Indo-Muslim cultural interaction, the hybrid form of north-western Prakrit which was generally called Hindavi or Hindi gained currency as the common speech of the people. When used in mixed Hindi–Persian compositions, this was called *Rekhta*, then *Gujri*, *Deccani*, and *Hindustani*. This hybrid speech continued its journey, and from eighteenth century onwards it emerged as a sophisticated literary form centred in and around Delhi. Then it was called Urdu or Urdu-e Mu'alla (the elated name for Urdu). It had by then perfected itself as one of the respected idioms of poetry. Though Persian was still the language of the court and high culture, Urdu—under the shadow of Persian—had already become the speech of the people. It produced great masters such as Mir, Sauda, Mus'hafi, Insha, Nasikh, Anees, Dabeer, Ghalib, Zauq, Momin, and many others. The Persian language, which was an import, thus started to make cultural space for Urdu, as we know it today, and which is the preferred language of Indian poets. In the

words of Khurshidul Islam, 'The language known as Farsi slowly shed its old apparel and Urdu became the heir apparent to occupy the poetry's seat of honor' (1979: n.p.). It is nothing less than a miracle that due to meshing and blending of civilizations over a few centuries, Sabke Hindi, the Indian style of Mughal–Persian poetry with indigenized poetics, evolved into Urdu ghazal's immediate ancestor.

Waris Kirmani says:

Sabke Hindi is as great as its criticism has been harsh. First, this poetry, especially the ghazal, has certain unique qualities that continue to inspire poets of different climes and regions in India even today when Persian has been replaced by Urdu. In fact, Urdu poetry is essentially Sabke Hindi poetry in the garb of a different grammar and syntax. Secondly, Sabke Hindi gave to the Persian ghazal an unprecedented psychological (and philosophical) depth, making it a vehicle for transmitting the vibrations of the subconscious mind. (1984: 22)

The literary use of the term 'Sabke Hindi', somewhat derogatory in the beginning, is not very old. It came into currency much later. Various major works on poetry, Hali's *Yadgar-e Ghalib*, Shibli's five-volume *Sherul Ajam*, or Azad's writings, including *Aab-e Hayat* make no mention of this term. The tendency to downgrade Indo-Persian poetry had started with Sheikh Ali Hazein (d. 1766). What was written in Iran was more of an expression of superiority, meaning that Persian literature in India was no match for what was produced in Iran, the place of Persian's origin during the same time period. But the fact is that the progress Persian made in India and what it achieved was far superior to what happened in Iran. But because they were the mother-tongue speakers and they owned the language, Persian poets did not give much importance to the Indian poets who wrote in Persian. This continued for a long time. When anthologists started classifying all the *sabks* (styles or schools of Persian poetry) such as Sabke Khurasani and Sabke Iraqi, they used the term Sabke Hindi for the Indian poets. This was not done as a way of recognizing or honouring their work but to show superiority and an attempt to separate themselves from the Indian poets. As mentioned, although this effort to downplay Persian poetic tradition in India started with an Iranian poet settled in India named Sheikh Ali Hazein, it was joined by Indian commentators such as Azad Bilgrami, Imam Bakhsh Sehbai, Muhammad Husain Azad, Hali, and Shibli as well. There were exceptions like Sirajuddin Ali Khan-e Arzoo who defended Persian poetry in India. The same tendency was seen in the reaction of Western commentators to the work of Russian formalists that were initially

described in demeaning terms. With the passage of time, the true merit of Sabke Hindi has however become obvious. Today, we celebrate the greatness of Bedil's and Ghalib's works along with that of Urfi, Faizi, Naziri, Zahuri, and many others, and, in unison, they light up the less evaluated, dense, philosophical, semi-dark streets of Sabke Hindi.

Shibli, in his multivolume work *Sherul Ajam*, has painstakingly elaborated on the poets writing in Persian and the patronage and commendations of these efforts by various Mughal emperors. He is liberal in his praise of poets who came from Iran. About the poets who were born in India, though he recognizes their distinctive style and merit, he shows ambivalence and expresses doubt and hesitation. He promises to come back to this subject for a detailed analysis but the promise is never fulfilled. He completely ignored Bedil and Ghalib in *Sherul Ajam*. He even presented only one side of the works of Nasir Ali, Talib, and Kaleem.

About the Mughal emperors, Shibli wrote that Emperor Akbar was a great patron of arts, especially the poetic works. He created the position of a poet laureate to which he appointed Ghazali Mashhadi. Because of the royal patronage, several other Iranian poets were tempted to come to India. Abu'l Fazl in *Aaiin-e Akbari* describes the names of the 51 court poets in his time ([Shibli 1988: 4–5](#)). Taking a cue from the Mughal rulers, many local sultans, nawabs, and rich elites started to provide similar patronage to poets. One such patron was Ibrahim Adil Shah of Deccan in whose court Zahuri found a place, thereby earning for Deccan the honour of being called Iran's match or equal. Shibli is very clear in showing how the patronage factor was contributing to the migration of Persian poets to India, a fact that finds confirmation in the words of the poets themselves.

Saib

hamchuu azm-e safar-e Hind k dar har dil hast
kuqs-e saudaaye to dar hiich sare niist k niist

Just as every human being is keen to see India,
you will not find a head in which this frenzy,
this madness is not dancing.

Abu Talib Kaleem

asiir-e Hindam o ziin raftan-e beja pashiimaanam
kuja khvahad rasaandan par-fishaani murgh-e bismil ra

I am a prisoner of love for India

and I am troubled for going back from here.
The unbearable pain suffered by a fowl,
that is about to be slaughtered,
makes it rise from one plane of reality
to another.

*b Iraan miiravad nalaan Kalim az shauq-e hamraahaan
b paaye diigaraan hamchuun jaras tay karda manzil ra*

Kaleem is appealing and lamenting,
as he is travelling back to Iran
to fulfil the desire to meet friends,
while listening to the sound of caravan bells.

*z shauq-e Hind zaan saan chashm-e hasrat bar-qafa daaram
k ruuham gar baraah aaram nami biinam muqaabil ra*

With the overpowering wish to see India,
I am walking with my eyes filled with desire
so that I cannot see anyone.

Ali Quli Saleem

*niist dar Iraan zamiin saamaan-e tahsiil-e kamaal
ta neyaamad suuye Hindustaan henna rangiin nashud*

Iran did not offer the means to acquire
the talent that I desired.
Without coming to India,
even henna does not get the colour
that is hidden in it.

Shibli writes:

India's magnetic attraction was not only limited to that time period. The nets of patronage had been spread for a while to attract suitable Iranians. Hafiz was invited by the King of Baghdad several times but he sent him his ghazals while still living in Shiraz. But once he got an invitation from Deccan, he boarded a ship and came up to Hormuz. Jami lived in Iran but he was sending his qasidas¹ to India. (1988: 8)

The promise of luxurious life brought Saib to India and he stayed here for six years. Rich people like Abdul Al Fateh Gilani and Abdur Rahim Khan-e Khanan created a sanctuary for these poets. Shibli writes, 'We must remember that Persian by coming to India attained a special quality of

innovativeness ... this innovativeness was the work of Abu Al Fateh's patronage and encouragement' (1988: 9).

Shibli talked about this innovativeness in *Sherul Ajam* (volumes 3 to 5) in several places but he postponed a detailed discussion to a later time. The reason for this was psychological reservation in the sense that he was so overpowered and absorbed in Persian written by the Iranians that in spite of being an admirer of poetry written by India-born poets, he avoided being openly appreciative of their work and discussing in detail its distinctive characteristics. Not only that (as we have seen in the case of Bedil and Nasir Ali), he never missed an opportunity to humiliate and deride the craftsmanship and philosophical patterns of Indian poetry in Persian. As we can see from the following excerpt, on the one hand, he appreciates how India's cultural climate helped in beautification and enhancing of the quality of Persian poetry, on the other, he is extravagant in his praise of Iranian poets while downplaying the characteristics of Indian poets.

Shibli writes: 'On this occasion there is a point of view that needs attention, that is, the elegance that Persian poetry gained by coming to India was not received by it in Iran.' Apparently, this is something astonishing. That is why we need to fully understand this. Just think about it. There is something special in India's cultural climate that anything which comes from outside within a short time span attains distinctiveness and exquisiteness that it lacked in its country of origin. There is something distinctive in the beauty of Kashmiri, Turki, and Irani. But these ethnic groups, after a generation or two, gain a new identity when their face, hand and feet, body structure, height, and complexion gain a refreshing look after some natural adaptation, which is nothing short of a magical transformation. The same way we can talk about cuisine. Many Indian dishes like qurma, qaliya, pulao came from Iran. But the taste that was added by the Indian chefs was not found in Iran. Gold-embroidered silk came to India from Iran but what Benares made of it does not bear a comparison. There is no building like Taj Mahal in Iran. The same difference is found in poetry.

If we look at the work of Iranian poets who came to India and benefitted from the climate here and the quality of prevalent thinking, and compare their work with those who remained behind, we shall find the difference. The aesthetic sensitivity, beauty, deep thinking, dexterity and skilful presentation that we find in Urfi, Naziri, Talib Amli, Kaleem, Qudsi, and Ghazali, we can't find in Shifai and Mohtashim Kashi though they lived under similar circumstances of royal patronage and were respected. Even Iranians agree with that a distinctive style appeared after Fughani. Abdul Baqi

Raheemi, who was Iranian, agrees that this freshness was the result of the efforts of Hakim Abul Fateh Gilani, who was also Iranian though he was brought up in India. The patronage and appreciation of Khane Khanan in this regard was also accepted by all concerned poets. ([Shibli 1986: 175–6](#))

As we shall see later, Shibli's casual comments about Sabke Hindi, though made en passant, became the basis of deeper evaluation of this genre later. Let us see what he had to say:

(1) Philosophy and deep thinking—Urfi started the trend of mixing philosophy in the traditional ghazal format; (2) *Misaalia* ingenious statement and poetic justification, meaning putting forward a thesis or saying something novel or different than the conventional and then providing a defence through inventive poetic logic. Abu Talib Kaleem, Ali Quli Saleem, Saib, and Ghani Kashmiri were founders of this trend. This gained lot of popularity and stayed in place until the end of Mughal era and even after; (3) Encapsulating dense thought patterns and presenting big ideas with skilful brevity. This quality is found in most poets, but specifically in Jalal Aseer (a contemporary of Shah Jahan), Shaukat Bukhari, Qasim Deewana, etc. Among our own Indian poets, Bedil and Nasir Ali were expert swimmers of this vortex. (1988: 19)

Shibli then talks about innovations in the language of poetry.

(1) Poets in the olden days did not present complex ideas in intricate yet graceful manner. The contemporary poets say what they have to say with a little twist. This complexity arises because they try to present a big or innovative idea in one couplet that should normally take several. Sometime this complexity is also due to the use of ingenuous similes and metaphors that listeners find difficult to comprehend. (2) In these times, we find that several themes are based on words that have double meaning. But the poet uses only one of the meanings as the intended meaning or the core meaning. (3) Another distinctive quality of the times is delicate crafting of metaphors and fresh similes. (4) This period is also known for innovative crafting of new words and phrases. For example, the poets before used words like *maikadah*, *atashkadah*, etc. But now we find *nashtar kadah*, *mariam kadah*, etc. Earlier, there was *yak gulshan*, *yak chaman gul* but now it is *khanda lab*, *yak aagosh gul*, *yak deeda nigah*, etc. With this kind of word usage the impact of what the poet is saying is enhanced and a big idea is conveyed in one phrase or one small word. For instance, in the following couplet, the compact phrase *duur gardi* is key to conveying the central meaning of the couplet:

b duur gardi-e man az ghuruur mi khandad
hariif-e sakht kamaane k dar kamiin daaram

I am in love
but I keep some distance
from my beloved
lest I am wounded
by the love's arrow.
But the beloved is laughing
at my amateurish attempt
to escape her. ([Shibli 1988: 18–23](#))

On the very next page, Shibli writes: 'After the poetic revolution came something new that is called the phase of abstract and crafty thoughts.

Fughani (died 1519) was the founder of that trend. Fughani's style was so different that people looked upon his work as absurd. In fact, couplets presented in his style by his followers were named *Fughania*' (1988: 24).

In volume 5, Shibli comes back to this topic but by then his ridicule of India-born poets assumes even darker colours.

After Fughani, the trend towards paying attention to how thoughts were sketched and captured, and how big ideas were dealt with caught on. Urfi started it. Zahuri, Jalal Aseer, Talib Amli, Kaleem, etc. made further progress. This style gathered such momentum that it captured the attention of the whole world of poetry. But indiscriminate use of a style has adverse consequences. Later, we saw that Nasir Ali, Bedil, etc. gained control of the poetic sphere and a grand tradition came to an end. (1921: 67)

In this way, Shibli comes to the conclusion that although Sabke Hindi was revolutionary, it ended up harming the art of ghazal writing. Whenever a new style emerges, it is prone to excesses and imitation and becomes artsy and empty by indiscrimination. There is a need for objective assessment for which some pointers are found in Shibli. But he does not spare a chance to condemn and humiliate Nasir Ali and Bedil. Interestingly, he did not even consider Ghalib worthy of a brief mention.

According to Nabi Hadi, during the time of Safavid Dynasty (1504–1722), due to religious violence and general disorder, many Iranian poets were forced to come to India. Everywhere people knew about Mughals' generosity and patronage of poetry and literature. Also, India was a safe haven and had an open, peaceful, and liberal climate for the promotion of the arts. Persian poetry and literature were more in demand in India than in Iran at that time. Some historians even make the claim that though Sabke Hindi originated in Iran, it reached its full potential in India in terms of its philosophical complexities and other characteristics for which an interaction with Indian art and literature was essential. Therefore, the flowering occurred in India and it gained popularity on account of the work done by the poets here.

Nabi Hadi writes:

The earliest markings of the skilful Sabke Hindi were seen in Jami and Fughani. It gathered speed during the reign of Temurian kings and by the time Akbar ascended the throne it got its hold on all of Persian literature. According to the critics, the first reason for adding the word *Hindi* to Persian *Sabk* [style] was the fact that most of the action happened in India. In the Mughal Court, Sabke Hindi poets presented their best work and lot of praise was showered on them. The second reason was that most Iranians considered India to be the land of philosophy, especially the land of intricate abstract thinking. Because of these reasons it was called Sabke Hindi. (1978: 263)

Hadi further adds:

The form and shape of Mughal poetry was different from the normal Persian poetry due to different social circumstances and geographical conditions. This genre of poetry was blossoming in a land known for its long philosophical traditions and the people were naturally oriented towards pursuing psychological arts and philosophy. Iranian critics associated philosophy, complex modes of presentation, the emphasis on finding the artistically innovative words as unique features of Sabke Hindi. In this category, we can even include those poets who didn't come to India but their poetry had some of the above-mentioned qualities. As a result, the reader could not get to the depth of meaning without some self-reflection. There is no doubt that in terms of the choice of subjects and the use of complex ideas and expression Mughal poets were influenced by the intricate Indian philosophical traditions. (1978: 12–13)

Some of the Iranian experts explicitly identify the roots of Sabke Hindi in Buddhist philosophy. In this connection, the statement of Amiri Feroz Kohi is quite significant. He has clearly admitted to Bodhi influences in Mughal-era Persian poetry. [Kohi \(1345 Shamsi: 5\)](#) writes, 'When Persian poetry reached India, it gradually immersed itself in the subtleties and deep thought of Bodhi philosophy and it coloured itself in the complex Indian orientation to craft thought patterns as one arranges particles with colourful motifs, and places them one on top of the other'.

According to Shibli, the foundation stone of Sabke Hindi was laid by Fughani. But it gained influence and prestige due to Saib and Kaleem. Saib stayed in India for six years and he was part of Shah Jahan's court. Saib liberally used the statement and defence style in his poetry and dealt with ethical topics so much so that this subgenre got stuck with his name, although Kaleem and Ghani had also contributed to this trend. All three of them shared the same poetical frame of mind and spent time together in Kashmir. With later masters, of course, Sabke Hindi made a mark for subtle thought and deeper meanings.

Ghalib was born into these cultural traditions and he was aware of their pervasiveness. Ghalib used to say that his love of Persian poetry was a divine gift. His study of Persian language and grammar at a very young age was astonishing. He started visiting Delhi when he was seven, though he resided in Agra with his maternal grandparents. Sheikh Moazzam was a well-known teacher at that time. We know that Ghalib had started writing when he was ten or twelve years old. Hali had recorded an interesting event of those days. He writes:

During those days (meaning when he was 10–11 years old), he wrote a few couplets of a ghazal in Persian in which he used the radiif *k ch* instead of *yani ch*. When he recited these couplets, his teacher Sheikh Moazzam told him that the radiif that he had selected was meaningless or obsolete. What is the use of writing such meaningless couplets? Mirza listened to this but remained silent. But one day he saw a couplet by Zahuri in which he had used *k ch* as *yani ch*. He took the book to his

teacher and showed him the couplet. Sheikh Moazzam was surprised and told Mirza, 'You know your Persian well. You should write as you feel. Don't worry about what others say.' ([Hali 1897: 97](#))

It was not only Zahuri, the instruction provided by his mysterious Parsi teacher, Harmuzd Abdur Samad, created an unusual interest in Persian poetry. Ghalib himself pronounced that poetry was Providence's gift to him and that he had the skill of bringing abstract words from the darkness into the ingenious light of meaning. It is possible that it was his superconscious orientation and exceptional ability and the desire to be different from others that took him closer to the soul of Persian. Although in his early years Ghalib was influenced by Jalal Aseer, Shaukat Bukhari, Ghani Kashmiri, Nasir Ali Sirhindi, the poet who stayed with him up to the age of twenty-five or thirty and whose mark was permanently imprinted on his subconscious, and from whose influence he could not free himself in his whole life, was Bedil and none else except Bedil. Among all the poets of Sabke Hindi, the time of Bedil was also closest to Ghalib's.

Prigarina, a Russian scholar, writes:

The growth of Sabke Hindi was an intermission in the process making the principles of verse making prevalent at that time to be more complex. This could be attributed either to patronage by the Mughal court or to the Indian tendency of emphasizing the finer, the more subtle, delicate or intricate aspects of craftsmanship and the pressure to accomplish more in the tiny space of two lines in the genre of ghazal. There was clear emphasis on attaining density and greater depths of meaning so that much could be said with minimal use of words. (1997: 67)

As stated earlier, Shibli had pointed out some of the characteristics of Sabke Hindi poetry, though not at great depth. Based on his and Nabi Hadi's views, we can say that ghazal during this time went through a creative transformation and new ways of expressing poetic thought came into being. These can be summed up as three outwardly noticeable and distinctive features of this poetry:

1. Poetry of new or deep ideas; the poetry in which encapsulation of ingenuity of thoughts and new themes are dominant.
2. Poetry in which step-by-step arguments are built up in poetic defence of an innovative idea or where more real-life examples are used.
3. Poetry in which artful word associations are harnessed as linkages of images and innovative meaning.

Are these characteristics highly distinctive and independent or are they interdependent? Or, are these parts of a complex innovative poetry and the

apparent differences are superficial at best? For example, how is it possible to write poetry that belongs to category 2 without new ideas (category 1)? Or, how is it possible to write poetry that falls in category 1 without artistic word associations (category 3)? It needs to be considered closely whether this categorization can be accepted as distinctive or separate, compartmentalized silos. In our opinion, Sabke Hindi's distinctiveness is a complex admixture of ideas, themes, thoughts, ingenuity, arguments, and paradoxes. Prigarina selects the complexity of word *ma'ni* (meanings) as a distinguished mark of Sabke Hindi. For example, *ma'ni* is anything from *khayaal*, *matlab*, *mafhum*, *tassavvur*, *khayaali tasveer*, *khayaal-e shaa'eraana*, or *mudd-aaye shaa'eraana*. A single term or its associated terms can be used in different meanings, sometimes in highly imprecise, intricate, or abstract manner ([Prigarina 1997: 90–1](#)).

Waris Kirmani attributes Sabke Hindi's complexity to the diversity and rich variety of Indian thought. He writes, 'Poets in Sabke Hindi tradition mirrored the *unity in diversity* of Indian civilization. Poets found a language and poetic idiom that was capable of expressing diverse thoughts in dense artistic language. What was written on one subject easily lent itself to different interpretations' (1984: 88; emphasis added).

Ghalib started with Urdu poetry but after about 10 to 15 years, he turned to Persian and wanted to be recognized as a Persian poet. This was also a time of his mental development as well as that of finding his own identity and voice. French philosopher Jacques Lacan (1901–1981) says that man as a subject is divided against his own self. Its best example is Ghalib himself. His 'other' is extremely dissatisfied, troubled, and emotionally distraught—someone totally immersed in the desire of achieving something. A man's personality is controlled by the language and culture in which he lives. The 'other' emerges in many shapes, including deeper psychological tendencies. In Ghalib's case, this creative 'other' takes dual forms. His natural speech is Urdu but his inner psychological yearning is to have complete control of Persian—a language that is 'other' of the 'other'. This determination is the fire of that urge which continuously drives him to surpass the maestros and seek perfection or excellence. Nature had bestowed upon him exceptional creative and intellectual qualities coupled with an intensely sensitive temperament. That is why, right from an early age, he aspired to recite verse that was better than others' writing in Persian. Even his early couplets revealed constructions that were not only unusual but in which one could

hear the sound of forthcoming blazing energy and dynamism, which in later years became a storehouse of new and innovative ideas—a distinctive mark of his poetry.

The poetry of this time depicted a complex relationship between deep new themes and how those themes were captured in brevity. This tension led to a situation in which one was trying to get better of the other. Prigarina provides examples based on two couplets, one written by Shaukat Bukhari and the other by Ghalib. Here is the one by Shaukat:

*m go k maatamiye niist marg-e majnuun ra
k hast chashm-e ghazaalaan siyaah-posh hunuuz*

Who says Majnun's death was not mourned?
Look at the black covered eyes of desert's gazelles.
They are still mourning.

This is Ghalib's response to the couplet:

*sham'a bujhti hai to us mein se dhuaan uttha hai
sh'ola-e ishq siyaah-posh hua mere ba'ad*

When I am gone
the flame of love will die after me.
Smoke rises while the candle dies,
leaving nothing behind,
just a garb of pure blackness.

Here, the death of a lover is compared to the death of a candle, where the smoke is the funeral attire of the flame that has died. This is a much more complex metaphor. The flame is candle's distinctive quality that actually burns it. Similarly, the flame of love slowly consumes the lover. There is death in both cases and the smoke represents what death symbolically leaves behind. While in Shaukat's case, the black eyes of deer signifies sadness, despair, and despondency, the rising smoke with its blackness which Ghalib depicts is demise or passing of life ([Prigarina 1997: 92](#)).

Regarding the interaction between the thought and its presentation, Prigarina says that there was a welcome tendency among the poets to build on each other's ideas. One poet says something, the other picks up the same idea while at the same time expanding and enriching it. It could be more complex. Ghalib was particularly good at this. He would not only expand the meaning but also, at the same time, give it a twist that made a totally

new and innovative aspect to emerge. She gives the example of cotton swab, as used by Ghalib in a new way:

*ae khusha vaqte k saaqi yak khumistaan va kare
taar-o paud-e farsh-e mehfil pamba-e miina kare*

What a blissful time, O Saki,
open the cotton spigots of the barrels of wine
so that the criss-crossed floor looks
as if it were made of cotton.

Prigarina comments, ‘The seal of earthen wares, filled with wine, is broken to pour it into wine-cups for drinking and then cotton is used to secure the remnants. Guests, who are not restrained, drink so much wine that if the cotton, used as corks, is collected it could be used for weaving a carpet, sufficient for all wine drinkers to be seated’ (1997: 94).

According to Hali, Ghalib succeeded because he could metaphorically take a piece of cotton and then create linkages or images that expanded the original thought. Prigarina thinks that in the poetic logic one idea can be derived from the other but Ghalib is not constrained by what is ordinarily presented and is obvious. In our opinion, Ghalib has this knack of going from the known to the unknown; he has the dialectical tendency to move from what is easily felt to what is hidden (that is still away from the realm of sensation), the ‘other’ of the obvious. When he picks up a theme, he wants to explore its newer or unusual or contradictory aspects. He does this by using a dialectical twist, especially the tool of negative dialectics that opens the door to complex and varied interpretations.

Not everyone is comfortable with this approach. There is a couplet by Ghani Kashmiri:

*az bas k sh’er guftan shud mubtazil dariin ai’hd
lab bastan ast aknuun mazmuun-e taaza bastan*

Verse-making has been reduced
to a low level task.

The creation of a new idea
is like sealing one’s lips,
because sealed lips cannot talk.²

Since Ghalib has mastery of dialectical twist, he is much more comfortable than Ghani in playing with ideas and using them in describing

a scene, adding beauty and delightfulness that the original idea lacked. For example:

*Asad uthna qayaamat qaamaton ka vaqt-e aaraaish
libaas-e nazm mein baaliidan-e mazmuun-e aali hai*

The couplet presents the delightful image of a tall, tender beauty sitting before a mirror embellishing herself; as she rises, her standing up is like the emergence of a beautifully fresh theme in the apparel of enticing expression in poetry.

About this fusion of ideas and their expressions, Hameed Ahmed Khan writes:

Through the arrangement of words, a poet expresses events, his personal feelings, and even goes beyond to things that exist only in his imagination. Abstract thinking is an essential part of metaphysics and poetic expression and its use is popular. There is a difference between things that are *imaginary* and those which are *illusionary*. Imaginary things are those which are not present in the outside world but they do exist in our mind like blood-soaked rain or a static waterfall. Illusionary things are also not present in the outside world but they are novel creations of human mind like *anqa* (an imaginary bird). Imaginary things are born of our unconscious. Illusionary things are produced by our super conscious with help from our innate intelligence. ([Khan n.d.: 106–11](#))

The metaphoric use of blazing fire or lightening is quite popular with the poets. Prigarina comments about this:

*samandar tiinataan ra pusht-e garm az sokhtan baashad
rag-e barq ast taar-e pairahan aatash qabaayaan ra*

The lovers' back smoulders from the heat of suffering.
They keep burning like salamander but they do not die
as if the lightening weaves their protective wear.

The mythical lizard-like creature called salamander lives in fire. In poetry, a lover is compared to a salamander because he is on fire all the time inasmuch as fire becomes his apparel. This Zoroastrian thought inspires Ghalib to come up with a memorable couplet.

*gham nahien hota hai aazaadon ko besh az yak nafas
barq se karte hain raushan sham'a-e maatam-khaana ham*

People with a free-mind
do not lose their cheerfulness
even for a fleeting moment.
They light candles in their darkened abodes
from the sparks of the bolt of lightning.

Life is short and it is like a dark abode filled with sadness where the dead are mourned. But if one could find a candle that could lighten up this place, then life could be saved from being a complete waste. The young Ghalib reaches new heights of humanistic values by showing how acts of courage or doing something unthinkable could save life from the clutches of sadness and grief ([Prigarina 1997: 99](#)).

Ghalib inherited this action-oriented, freedom-loving, and courageous viewpoint about life from his ancestors like Urfi and Bedil. But he reinvented it with his dialectical temperament inasmuch as there is nothing conventional or ritualistic in his work. He is a rebel from start to the finish—in his poetry, in his thinking, in his poetic rules and principles. He had to live with mental and creative tension and struggle against what was considered to be traditional or routinely current in his time. We need to remember that the challenge before Ghalib was not about building bridges with conventional ways of thinking, finding a shared language, or exploring metaphors or similes that made people comfortable. His real challenge was to ignite an ingenious mental spark that brightened everything, and created links that were highly creative. Once this was done, only then did he proceed to capture his innovative experiences in the form of poetry. If he did not do this, then his poetry would have been nothing but verbal acrobatics or wizardry, as it happened in the case of many other poets of his generation such as Nasikh or Zauq and scores of their followers.

After all, what is that speciality that distinguishes Ghalib from others? What is that which appears as some formal wordplay in others' work but in Ghalib it is a blazing spark which seems to brighten the entire horizon of meaning? On the surface it looks like the tip of the iceberg but its volcanic fire is hidden beneath. In Ghalib's case, this dialectical foundation was such that its enchanting quality slowly embraced the entire body of his ghazal writing. As a result, there was a silent revolution and the whole tenor of ghazal in Urdu was transformed. His poetic inventiveness was such that it upset the established canon; the poets who occupied centre stage were pushed to the margin and those who had been marginalized moved to the centre.

In addition to encapsulation of thought patterns and deeper meanings, there are other characteristics that we need to discuss. Thoughts, themes, and meanings are part of Sabke Hindi verse making but they are not obvious at the surface. These are matters of artistry and innovative

creativity. These are not compartmentalized separate structures but things that are part of the total creative process—something that is complete in itself and not a summing up of several ingredients. The constituent elements of Sabke Hindi may appear separate but they are part of one poetic whole. Any attempt to separate these elements, in our view, is to deny its creative integrity.

If we look closely, the visible form of Sabke Hindi is constructed by a certain arrangement of word meanings, metaphors, similes, and allusions. Among these elements, there is a conscious effort that binds thoughts and images into relationships involving negative dialectics and paradoxical patterns. The truth is that thoughts, meanings, thought making, or meanings of words, or purposefully embellished text are all part of the same colourful texture, and they can be understood only via one creative and integrated relationship. For example, in a couplet relating to day-to-day events of life, Ghalib refers to a place for mourning (*maatam khaana*). Mourning is related to grief but it also has a dialectical relationship with freedom. The darkness of mourning is removed by the candlelight that is related to light, which in turn is related to lightening, fire, destruction, death and recreation, and so on. The embellished text has a pronounced philosophical base. These structures of meanings within Sabke Hindi tradition took centuries to come to fruition. In the end, it all depends on the poet's creative ability—whether he presents the meanings hidden in his words naturally or mechanically. For instance, let us look at the following couplet of Ghalib.

*ahl-e biinish ne b hairat-kada-e shokhi-e naaz
jauhar-e aaiina ko tuuti-e bismil baandha*

Those who could see,
saw the beauty's trifling way.
The green spots on her mirror
fluttered like parrots.

The theme of the mirror and the parrot has been used in Sabke Hindi in different contexts. As experts have pointed out, there is something particularly appealing about this metaphor. It is a favourite of Ghalib and he derives different meanings from this one image, and by expanding its scope and surpassing dialectically what has already been said, he creates altogether new meanings and a magical effect. When a parrot is taught to speak human language, it is made to sit in front of a mirror. The teacher hides behind the mirror but the parrot looks at its own image in the mirror

and thinks that it is doing the talking. A poet is like the parrot. He looks at the mirror, which is a metaphor for the world at large. But reality is a many-splendored thing. The poet's words cannot fully describe its beauty and complexity and, therefore, he is in a state of turmoil—wounded metaphorically in body and soul. On the other hand, if the poet succeeds in describing the reality the way he sees it or has an impression about it, then he is referred to as the sweet-tongued parrot, as in the case of Amir Khusrau who was called the 'parrot of India' (*Tuut-e Hind*).

This brings us to the most used aspect of Sabke Hindi poetry (*tamsiil nigaari*), which is based on a real experience, an incident or an example, or an attempt to present an innovative thesis and defend it poetically. This has been used more frequently in creative ghazal writing, especially for presenting something ingenious, something fresh or unusual, and even for the routine, mechanical, or low-grade didactic poetry. This genre is both easy and difficult. It is easy because others had prepared the ground for it or it simply deals with the obvious. It is difficult because in order to create something innovative and fresh, it takes a lot of effort and artistry. The 'present and defend type of poetry' provides a couplet into two parts. One line presents an argument or makes a statement or a principle that the poet wants to establish. The other line provides an argument to defend the thesis poetically. Its application is comparatively easy in the case of ethical, mundane, or didactic themes, where the arguments in support of the thesis are easily available and well understood. This is what made this poetic device extremely popular. Its practitioners among the Persian poets included Saib and Ghani but, later on, many Urdu poets adopted this style such as Shah Naseer, Nasikh, Zauq, and their followers. For the second category of Urdu poets, the task was much more difficult because in the case of non-mundane or non-didactic subjects the arguments are not well established. The poet has to create something new, not only a simple rational or intellectual argument but a poetic ingenious statement that appeals both to the head and heart. This requires 'dual inventiveness'. Ghalib had this in abundance. He does not just use common sense or surface reason but weaves his ingenious argument in the poetic garb that makes the couplet layered with meaning and extremely appealing to the reader, as it can relate to many situations and lend to different interpretations.

There is evidence, on the other hand, that Sabke Hindi poetry suffered because of the traditional and commonplace approaches that tended to be artificial and mechanical. At the same time, the excessive use of present and defend genre for pushing didactic positions in a bland and unimaginative manner, completely lacking in creative fire, tarnished its reputation. The difference in the two forms lies in the fact that while one is primarily rational and cerebral, the other is basically creative and imaginative. That is why we find Ghalib rejecting the obvious or conventional, and coming back time and again to emphasize *ma'ni aafriini* and *dil-e gudakhta*, inventiveness and freshness of meaning, and the molten, free-flowing heart as the first prerequisite for anyone to be a poet. If Shibli or later critics like Khurshidul Islam criticized Sabke Hindi, they did it for the average-quality cerebral poets. When these poets saw a new style catching up, they adopted it and jumped on to the bandwagon ([Islam 1979: 108](#)).

Shibli, while commenting on such poetry in *Sherul Ajam* writes, 'Saib was famous for this kind of verse-making. This was the first step towards initiating a trend for bad taste that later became a pathway for others' (1988: 177). The later poets made liberal use of moral and didactic themes, and this included Kaleem and Ghani besides Saib, Aseer, and Nasir Ali. Here are some samples:

Saib

mai zer dast-e khud n kunad hoshmand ra
parvaaye sail niist zamiin-e buland ra

Drinking does not intoxicate someone
who is fully self-conscious,
just as land at a higher plane
is not concerned with flooding.

Ghani

ishq-e be parva ch mi daanad ziyaan o suud ra
sho'la yaksaan mishumaarad chuub-e bed-o uud ra

Love is not troubled
by questions of gain or loss.
In the eyes of a flame,
there is no difference
between quality wood
or ordinary hay.

*nami saazad ghizaaye charb zaayil z'of-e piiri ra
kamaan ra har ch roghan miidahi farba-e nami gardad*

Food however rich
cannot turn an old man
into a young man.
You can apply as much oil
on the bow as you wish
but you will not make it fatter.

The real power of poetry lies not so much in word construction as in the creative spark that is inherent in the verse and comes from the inner fire, which is hard to describe in words. Also the fact that the poet makes use of *dil-e gudakhta* (free-flowing molten heart)³ to create new ideas and images. In Ghalib's own words,

*husn-e furogh-e sham'a-e sukhan duur hai Asad
pehle dil-e gudaakhta paida kare koi*

Asad, the poetry that captures the beauty
of the brightness of candle
is difficult to achieve
First, you have to produce
a free-flowing molten heart.

Ghalib uses his creative prowess of dialectical ingenuity to lend such meanings to words that both the thesis and the paradoxical or ingenuous defence are woven into one organic whole. It is strange that Khurshidul Islam, who was a Ghalib scholar, could not notice this difference between the commonplace and the inventive.

While discussing innovative aspect of *tamsiil nigaari*, Prigarina has quoted three examples from Ghalib's work. It is quite obvious that what is considered to be purely cerebral becomes, with Ghalib's innovative treatment, a secret that the reader can understand only through some kind of creative reflection (1997: 100).

*bas k dushvaar hai har kaam ka aasaan hona
aadmi ko bhi muyassar nahien insaan hona*

It is difficult
for every little thing
to be easy.
It is difficult for a man
to be just a man.

*aata hai daagh-e hasrat-e dil ka shumaar yaad
mujh se mere gun-h ka hisaab ae khuda n maang*

Remembering the wounds
that I suffered in the pursuit
of my heart's desires,
ask me not, O God,
the count of my sins.

*milna tera agar nahein aasaan to sahl hai
dushvaar to yahi hai k dushvaar bhi nahien*

Meeting you is not easy,
yet it is easy.
Otherwise, I would have given up
trying to see you.
The challenge is that
there is no challenge.

Prigarina, while evaluating innovative aspects of Sabke Hindi such as tamsiil nigaari, writes, 'For this kind of poetic logic, you need flow of such thoughts that fill your thesis with two or more new thoughts and it offers several new avenues for reasoning and presenting your case. This approach affords more opportunities to the poet to make the subject appear complex (in the sense of making it more sophisticated)' (1997: 100–1).

In fact, these three couplets were among those selected by Hali to highlight something else, that is, his own thesis based on two main aspects of Ghalib's poetry, *turfagi-e khayaal* or ingenuity of thought and *jiddat-o nudrat-e mazaamiin* or innovative freshness of ideas and subjects. This is discussed in great detail in [Chapter 1](#).

We have picked up 7 couplets to highlight Ghalib's dialectical bent and they are also from Hali's list of 20.

*havas ko hai nishaat-e kaar kya kya
n ho marna to jiine ka maza kya*

Craving drives us
to gain much
before we die.
But if there were no death,
life would not be
as much fun.

*taufiiq b andaaza-e himmat hai azal se
aankhon mein hai vo qatra k gauhar n hua tha*

Since the beginning of time,
ability is seen
to accompany courage.
A drop can become a pearl
but that is nothing
like becoming a tear
in the lover's eye.

*girni thi ham p barq-e tajalli n tuur par
dete hain baada zarf-e qadah-khwaar dekh kar*

The lightening
should have struck me,
and not the Mount Sinai.
The wine is given
only proportional
to what one can hold.

*ranj se khuugar hua insaan to mit jaata hai ranj
mushkilein mujh par parien itni k aasaan ho gayien*

Getting used to sorrow
alleviates the pain of sorrow.
Hardships do not bother me now.
They are so many
that they have become
easy to live by.

*vafaadaari bashart-e ustavaari asl iimaan hai
mare but-khaane mein to ka'abe mein garo brahman ko*

Fidelity if it is stable
is the very essence of belief.
It does not matter
if you bury the Brahman
in Kaba though he dies
in the house of idols.

*raha aabaad aalam ahl-e himmat ke n hone se
bhare hain jis qadar jaam o subu mai-khaana khaali hai*

The world is filled with people
but where are the courageous ones?
Goblets and decanters are filled with wine
but why do taverns look empty?

*na kardah gunaahon ki bhi hasrat ki mile daad
yaarab agar in kardah gunaahon ki saza hai*

I should get credit
for the sins not committed.
O God, it is a question of fairness.
Because I am punished
for sins committed.

A few observations are in order. First, these three selections—Hali’s, Parigarina’s, and our own—have unique characteristics without any contradictions. All three of us have used the same text but for different reasons. There are three theses served by the same text for three different interpretations based on objective analysis, and each interpretation is well argued and well defended. The question is: are these interpretations mutually exclusive and only one could be valid? If so, then the different features that each of us have highlighted for different purposes can be compartmentalized. But this is not so. This establishes the fact that they are both inclusive and integrated. They are part of a single creative organic whole. The cheese digar puzzle can only be resolved when all the pieces fit together and make an inclusive statement of unique poetic vision.

Second, Ghalib’s ‘present and innovative defence’ style of poetry is not limited by its definition. It is not merely a mechanical structure or cerebral formulation, as is the case with Shah Naseer, Zauq, Zafar, Nasikh, or others. It goes far beyond the known elements of poetry and brightens the lamps of meaning, inasmuch as there is a playful interaction between the outer form of the couplet and what is hidden in the creative bonfire inside.

Third, all the 10 couplets are great examples of what Hali called Ghalib’s *turfagi-e khayaal* and *jiddat-o nudrat-e mazaamiin*, and the other two critics have chosen them for other equally important and valid but interrelated features.

Fourth, it is also worth noting that among the above couplets, there are two which Ghalib wrote before the age of nineteen; five were written between the age of nineteen and twenty-five. The remaining three are from

the later part of his life. Based on this microanalysis, we can also say that Ghalib had attained the ability to write poetry with rich philosophical undertones and to creatively use novel metaphors and similes from an early age. With the passage of time, this capacity was further enhanced as if there were not one or two but multiple fires that were fuelling this creative engine. He described the desire of his heart in the following couplet.

*sukhan-e saada dilam ra n farebad Ghalib
nukta-e chand z pichiida bayaane b man aar*

Simple verses do not excite my heart.
If possible, present to me new ideas
framed in ingenious speech.

Before we bring this discussion to a close, let us look at a number of couplets that belong to Ghalib's early years, around the age of twenty-five, and which were found in *Nuskha-e Hamidia*.

*yak qalam kaaghaz-e aatish-zadah hai saf-ha-e dasht
naqsh-e pa mein hai tab-e garmi-e raftaar hunuuz*

The marks
on the burnt-out pages
in the book of wilderness
make my footsteps run faster
in that direction.

*rasiidan gul-e baagh-e vaamaandagi hai
abas mehmil aaraaye raftaar hain ham*

Does not matter how fast
we get to the garden of desires
Springtime is already over
despite our speed and success.

*gila hai shauq ko dil mein bhi tangi-e ja ka
guhar mein mahv hua iztiraab dariya ka*

Desire complains
about the narrowness
of my heart.
Like a tumultuous ocean
engrossed in a pearl.

raftaar-e umr qat'e-e rah-e izziraab hai
is saal ke hisaab ko barq aaftaab hai

The speed at which
life is passing
through its turbulent route,
one year can be measured
by the time it takes
for the lightening to strike.

har qadam duuri-e manzil hai numaayaan mujh se
meri raftaar se bhaage hai bayaabaan mujh se

Each step makes it clear
how far away I am
from where I need to arrive.
Watching the speed
at which I am going,
the wilderness too is running
away from me.

As we read these couplets, we find that each one has a unique meaning. Even the style is different. But if we look at the construction of each line, we can find a very distinctive approach to tamsiil nigaari (present and defend kind of poetry)⁴ which is much more complex and difficult to define than what we find in Saib and his contemporaries or later Urdu poets, what we have already called, a very cerebral procedure.

In the end, we would like to present some representative samples of Sabke Hindi poetry that have distinctive integrative qualities which we have discussed above. They relate to Ghalib's innovative poetics in one way or the other.

Ghazali

shore shud va az khwaab-e adam diida kushuudem
diidem k baqiist shab-e fitna ghunuudem

There was noise and I opened my eyes
from the eternal dream state.
I saw the evening of turmoil
was not over yet.
I closed my eyes and slept again.

Muhammad Quli Maili

*saazad khamosh taa man-e hairat fazuuda ra
goyad shunuuda am sukhan-e nashanuuda ra*

She has become silent
so that the one
who is wonderstruck like me
should listen to
what has never been uttered.

Faizi

*aan k mi kard mra man'aa parastiidan-e but
dar haram rafta tavaaf-e dar-o diivaar ch kard*

The one who stopped me
from idol worship,
why is he going around
and venerating walls and doors?

Urfi

*aarif ham az Islam kharaab ast o ham az kufr
parvaana-e chiraagh haram o dair nadaanad*

The enlightened one
is beyond faith's boundaries.
A moth does not inquire before dying
whether the lamp is that of a Mosque
or of a Temple.

*gumaan mabar k to chuun beguzari jahaan baguzasht
hazaar sham'a bakushtand o anjuman baaqiist*

Do not take pride in the fact
that the world would end with you.
Thousands of candles are extinguished
but the gathering remains.

Zahuri

*shaahide ra k bar atlas nakushaayad aagosh
vah ch zauqiist k dar kharqa-e pashmiina kasham*

My beloved who cares less
for silky and satiny couch
looks at my imprudence!
I want to draw her

into my rusty sheepskin coat.

*saal-e nau gasht beya ta may-e paariina kasham
khurramiia chaman-e saakhta dar siina kasham*

The New Year has arrived.
Why do you not come too?
I will refresh the old wine
and fill myself with the garden
of pleasure and paradise.

Nau-ee

*iin but shikani z khud parastiist
rao but betaraash o khud shikan baash*

The habit of breaking the statues
is a manifestation of self-aggrandizement.
If you wish to break a statue,
first make your own and then break it.

Kaleem

*ma z aaghaaz-o z anjaam-e jahaan be khabarem
avval-o aakhir-e iin kuhna kitaab uftaadast*

What can we say
of world's origin and end?
The first and last pages
of this decayed and rotten book
are already lost.

Talib Amli

*z ghaarat-e chamanat bar bahaar muntaha ast
k gul badast to az shaakh taaza tar maanad*

Your picking of flowers
from the garden
is a favour to the spring.
The flower in your hand
looks crisp and refreshing
than on the bough.

Ghani

agar shuhrat havas daari asiir-e daam-e uzlat sho

k dar parvaaz daarad gosha giiri naam-e anqa ra

If you wish to be known widely,
then do not chase fame
and just be yourself.
Though nobody can see anqa,
its name is on everyone's lips.

Nemat Khan Aali

*ch bedardaana imshab haal-e dil b yaar mi guftam
k oo kam mi shuniid az naaz o man bisiyaar mi guftam*

Last night,
I was unconsciously describing
the condition of my heart
to my beloved.
She did not hear much
but I continued to mutter.

Unsi Atashi

*diivaana baash ta gham-e to diigaraan khurand
aan ra k aql besh gham-e rozgaar besh*

Practise insanity so that
others have sympathy for you.
Having too much sanity
is troublesome too.

Anwar Lahori

*dareen hadiiqa bahaar-o khizaan ham aagosh ast
zamaana jaam badast-o janaaza bar dosh ast*

In the garden of life,
spring and autumn
go hand in hand.
It is like having a goblet
of wine in one hand
and carrying a corpse
on the shoulder.

Chandar Bhan Brahman

*mra diliist b kufr aashna k chandiin baar
b Ka'ba burdam-o baazash barhaman aavurdam*

My heart is that of a Kafir.
I took it to Kaba many times
but it came back as a Brahman.

Dara Shikoh

*har kham o pechi k shud az taab-e zulf-e yaar shud
daam shud zanjir shud tasbiih shud zunnaar shud*

All the twists and knots
are that of my beloved's tresses.
They are the snare.
They are the chains.
They are the rosary.
And they are the *zunnaar*.

Nasir Ali Sirhindi

*umriist k yak qatra-e khuun dar jigaram niist
aan dast-e hina basta ch daarad khabaram niist*

The whole life passed.
My heart does not have
a drop of blood.
I wonder about the source
of the colour
on her henna-stained hands.

Aqil Khan Razi

*ishq ch aasaan namuud, aah ch dushvaar buud
hijr ch dushvaar buud, yaar ch aasaan girift*

Love looked deceptively easy
but it turned out to be heart-rending.
Separation appeared to be very painful
but the beloved took it so easy.

Bedil

*dar nuskha-e behaasil-e hasti ch tavaan khwaand
zaan khat k ghubaar-e nafasash zer-o zabar shud*

In this rotten book of life,
what can you read?
The letters are misty
and difficult to read
by the incoming and

outgoing breath.

*z adam juda naftaada-ii qadme digar nakushaada ii
nigar aan k pesh-e khyaal-e khud b khyaal-e aamadan aamada ii*

You could not separate
yourself from your origin
and you could not take another step
with your own free will,
then how can you assume
that your coming to this world
was your choice and there is
something like free will?

*dar justajuuye ma nakashi zahmat-e suraagh
jaaye rasiida im k anqa nami rasad*

Do not waste time
in searching for me.
I am at a place
which cannot be reached
even by anqa.

*hama umr ba to qadah zadem o n raft ranj-e khumaar-e ma
ch qayaamati k nami rasi z kanaar-e ma b kanaar-e ma*

The whole life
we drank from the same cup
but the hangover of intoxication
has never left me.
Curse be on this apocalypse!
You were near
as well as not so near.

*sitam ast gar havaset kashad k b sair-e sarv-o saman dar aa
tu z ghuncha kam n damiida-i dar-e dil kusha b chaman dar aa*

Pity you cannot take a walk
in the garden
of your inner self!
You are no less
than a bud yourself.
Open your heart's door
and enter the amazing garden

which you yourself are.

*har kuja raftam ghubaar-e zindaagi dar pesh buud
ya rab iin khaak-e pareshaan az kuja bardaashtam*

Wherever I go
I had to take with me
the dust of life.
O God!
Where did I gather
this weary dust of distress
that clings to me everywhere.

*z farq o imtiyaaz-e ka'ba-o dairam ch mi pursi
asiir-e ishq buudam har ch pesh aamad parastiidam*

Why do you ask me
about the difference
between a Temple and a Mosque?
I was a prisoner of love.
Whatever came before me
I worshipped it.

*nami daanam ch nairang ast afsuun-e muhabbat ra
k khud ra ham tu mi pindaaram o ba khud sukhan daaram*

I do not understand
the magic of love.
But I know only this much.
I have this conversation
going on all the time
I am the speaker
as well as the listener.

We find that what was just a spark in Sabke Hindi poetry, it became a full-fledged fire in Ghalib's work. Among the older poets, Ghalib fondly remembered Talib, Aseer, Shaukat, Ghani, and Nasir Ali. Among his contemporaries, he mentioned Nasikh, Momin, Sehbai, Alvi, Azurda, and Shefta. Among the Mughal poets, he was full of admiration for Urfi, Faizi, Naziri, and Zahuri. But he was deeply influenced, as a stone is shaped with a chisel (*saakhta-o pardaakhta*), by Bedil's poetry. Ghalib's mental and philosophical development was complete by the time he reached the age of

twenty-five to thirty. This was the result of the influence of Sabke Hindi poetic traditions and the inspiration that he received from Bedil, whom he saw as his mentor and whose text verbatim was part of his mind. These influences were so strong that they stayed with him all his life. They were firmly engraved and eventually became an indefinable part of his creative signature. Waris Kirmani is right when he wrote, 'The ambiguous metaphors and complex constructions that define Ghalib's philosophical and thought-provoking poetry point us toward the seventeenth and early part of the eighteenth century. His work can't be bundled with the early Mughal poets' (1984: 21).

There was an incident which is narrated by multiple scholars between Bedil and Sheikh Nasir Ali.

Once Mirza Bedil and Sheikh Nasir Ali were together at a *mehfil* organized by Nawab Shaakir Ali Khan Lodhi. The conversation brought up a reference to the following couplet written by Bedil.

nashud aaiina-e kaifiyat-e maa zaahir aaraayi
nehaan maandem chuu ma'ni bachandiin lafz paidayi

Outward ornamentations
like a reflection in the mirror
do not allow the inner feelings
to be revealed.
Despite abundance of words,
the meaning stays hidden.

Nasir Ali commented that the second line was against how we conventionally get meanings from words. Meaning is subordinate to words. When a word appears, meaning unravels itself automatically. Bedil responded, smiling disdainfully, those meanings which you think are subordinate to words, their reality is not more than a word itself. What we call meaning, in reality, cannot be contained in any one word. Despite all the words that have been written and are contained in the books, man or existence is still a mystery. Sheikh Nasir Ali listened to this and didn't utter a word. (Khan 2003: 298)

When we talk about meaning, we find a common ground between Ghalib and Bedil, on the one hand, and the modern thinkers, on the other. In the process of creating something new, we often arrive at a place where the meaning goes over and above the word and, while freeing itself, it spreads all around. Much before Derrida and his contemporaries, poets like Ghalib and Bedil understood that meaning comes into being because of the word but meaning cannot submerge in the word. The meaning that the word unfolds is also a word. We can run after meaning but will never find it. Meaning is like a fluid that flows and is never static. Meaning transcends

the word. Also, the meaning that is present at its origin is not everything. It is created in the act and the context of saying or writing or reading. Meaning is a play of absence as well as the context; as mind is *subjected*, meaning too is constructed, and the rainbow goes on with the spin of time and context. The relationship that Bedil's penetrating and insightful poetry, with its novel encapsulation of ideas, images, and thoughts, has with Ghalib is as much hidden as it is seen at the surface. But of all the Sabke Hindi poets, Bedil got the worst treatment. He was even called *khaarij-az-aahang* (out of tune with mainstream) but if we want to reach the soul of Sabke Hindi, we have to go through Bedil. And no discussion of the greatness of Ghalib's philosophical orientation and his creative genius is complete unless we keep in view Bedil's mystique. Much has been written about Bedil but he is still an enigma and a puzzle for readers of Persian poetry. In the next chapter, we shall make an attempt to try to take a look at this mystery.

¹ Qasida is an Arabic word for a poem with a single metre that runs throughout the poem and every *she'r* rhymes.

² The lips are two, and in a couplet misra's are two, that is, bringing misra's together amounts to not being able to say anything fresh or meaningful.

³ The word *dil-e gudakhta* has several connotations like sensitive, soft, melting, always responding to love and compassion, burning with suffering when separated from the beloved. This is Ghalib's advice to a poet: you could master the mechanics of writing poetry but your poetry will not move the readers unless you develop a sensitive heart with these qualities.

⁴ It is a creative form of poetic device where an innovative affirmation is accompanied by its ingenious defence. The affirmation may come in the first line and defence in the second but the order may get inverted for a poet like Ghalib. It is a powerful tool for a genius poet but a less accomplished poet destroys its creative beauty by being artsy.

6

Bedil, Ghalib, Masnavi Irfan, and Indian Thought



It is because of deep allegiance to the spirit of Bedil that my own work displays a prophetic quality. As Bedil is my guide like Khizr I'm not afraid of treading unknown paths and being waylaid.

—Ghalib

Dear Sir, in the beginning I used to write rekhta ghazals in Bedil, Aseer, or Shaukat's poetic style. That is why I ended one of my ghazals with the following confession:

tarz-e Bedil mein rekhta likhna
Asadullah Khan qayaamat hai

To write a ghazal like Bedil,
O Asadullah Khan,
how miraculous it is!

I wrote enigmatic and abstruse poetry between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five years. During these few years of my young age, I collected poetic work sufficient for a Divan. Then I opened my eyes and set aside the idea of a Divan and tore up the pages. I left about ten or fifteen couplets for my Divan as specimens of my earlier verse.

—Ghalib, via Abdur-Razzaak Shaakir ([Ghalib 1920: 204](#))

WE KNOW THAT by the time he was nineteen, Ghalib had compiled the manuscript of his first Urdu Divan in 1816, and the second Divan in 1821 when he was 24. Though he stated in the above quoted letter that he tore up the pages and discarded the early poetry, as a matter of fact he did not. Somehow, one copy in his hand survived. He also said that he left 10 or 15 couplets as specimen for a later Divan. This, too, is not factually true as substantial numbers of complete ghazals are found in the published Divan. These are contradictory facts which have a bearing on later developments that we will

discuss as we proceed in our investigation of the evolution of Ghalib's poetic thought. But first, let us turn to the start of his very special relationship with Bedil, his mentor.

At the masthead of the rare manuscript of his first Divan (which surfaced in an antique bookshop in Bhopal about a century later), he offered his highest regards to the memory of Mirza Abdul Qadir Bedil (1644–1720) in decorative calligraphy. While he was seeking benediction for himself, every word that he wrote was filled with his boundless love and affection for Bedil. In the beatitude, Ghalib invoked the revered name of Hazrat Ali and other members of the holy family but ended with the name of his mentor, Mirza Abdul Qadir Bedil. In the closing words found in the manuscript, Ghalib referred to himself as Faqir-e Bedil (a humble devotee of Bedil).

Based on his ancestry, Bedil was a Chughtai. Ghalib called himself a Turk. By origin, both Bedil and Ghalib were Turani and Afrasiabi and their roots were firmly planted in West Asia. Both of them were great representative poets of the Mughal period. Ghalib's beginner rekhta (Urdu) poetry that he wrote by the age of nineteen (referred to subsequently as *Nuskha-e Bhopal Awwal*, the First Rendition), showed that Ghalib was experiencing great turbulence both in his mind and his consciousness. In his style and expression, we find great deal of distress and creative fire. He wanted to achieve exceptional success as early as by ten or twelve years old. His thinking and imagination were imbued with a creative fire.

Ghalib read so much of Bedil in his early youth that the latter became a part of his conscious and unconscious self. In his early writings, Ghalib repeatedly drew heavily from Bedil. It was no surprise that he was more fond of Bedil than any other Indian or Iranian poet. If he considered anyone as his true mentor and a guiding spirit, that was Bedil. *Nuskha-e Hamidia* (the Second Rendition discovered in a library in Bhopal 52 years after his death, which contained poetry written till the age of twenty-four–twenty-five, and which was later published with the title *Nuskha-e Hamidia* by the Government of Bhopal) contained 11 references by Ghalib (who at that time used the nom de plume of Asad) of his indebtedness to Bedil, and repeatedly expressed his gratitude to him. He profusely praised *tarz-e-Bedil* and said that it was the gift of Bedil's verse that his own work showed messianic characteristics. These couplets contained a loving admission of the influence of song of Bedil (*Naghma-e Bedil*), his distinctive flourish, and his spring-like creativity (*Bahaar iijaadi-e Bedil*). He called the verse

of Bedil a great spiritual guide or Khizr. He compared him to ‘a river without the banks’ and invoked him time and again to bestow on him the gift of eternal meaning. He prayed that if Bedil transformed ‘a bud into a blossoming flower’, then with his blessings, Ghalib’s ability would also touch unknown heights ([Ghani 1982: 50–1](#)). Here is a selection of some of those early couplets which show his deep admiration and real affection for his polestar:

*Asad har jaa sukhan ne tarh-e baagh-e taaza daali hai
mujhe rang-e bahaar iijaadi-e Bedil pasand aaya*

I am a lover
of Bedil’s spring-like creativity.
How fascinating and colourful
is the freshness of his garden!

*mujhe raah-e sukhan mein khauf-e gumraahi nahien Ghalib
asaay-e Khizr sehra-e sukhan hai khaama Bedil ka*

I am not afraid of losing my way
in the difficult terrain of poetry
as the reed pen in my hand is nothing
but the wand of the holy Khizr
who guides wayward like me.

These couplets were composed before he was twenty-four or twenty-five. It is also noteworthy that none of these were included in the final Divan-e Ghalib but they showed how, from a very young age, Ghalib had established an inexplicable mental connection with Bedil. He was so deeply immersed in Bedil’s enigmatic style and voice that he was proud of the fact that it created an oracular feel in his verse. This influence was so profound that it wholeheartedly got embedded in his mind. The imprint was so deep that at times when Ghalib wanted to outgrow the master, his verse continued to show Bedil’s lasting influence on his enigmatic thought and style.

Bedil’s work that influenced Ghalib in his younger years had the feel of a mystery, as if something had touched the chords of his psyche, or an unknown inner pull had brought him closer to what he already felt in his mind and temperament. It was the benediction of immersion in Bedil’s verse that he was able to write couplets of such great depth, even before the age of twenty-five. Here are a few examples.

*latafat be kasaafat jalvah paida kar nahien sakti
chaman zangaar hai aaiina-e baad-e bahaari ka*

There is no manifestation of fineness without crudeness.
The garden, though mirrors the freshness of spring breeze,
the reflective coating alas is nothing but simply rust.

*va kar diye hain shauq ne band-e naqaab-e husn
ghair az nigaah ab koi haail nahien raha*

My passion has unveiled beauty's knots.
There is nothing that lies between us
except my own seeing.

*dair o haram aaiina-e takraar-e tamanna
vaamaandagi-e shauq taraashe hai panaahein*

Temple or Mosque—
they are nothing but mirrors
reflecting the quest of man.
They are resting places
in the sojourn of the tired.

*huun garmi-e nishaat-e tasavvur se naghma sanj
main andaleeb-e gulshan-e na-aafriida huun*

It is the joy
and upsurge of imagination
that keeps me going.
I am the nightingale
of the garden
that is not yet born.

*tab'a hai mushtaaq-e lazzat haaye hasrat kya karuun
aarzuu se hai shikast-e aarzuu*

It is in my nature to find joy in grief.
What should I do?
My desire drives me to seek longings
that have failed to come to fruition.

*jaam-e har zarrah hai sarshaar-e tamanna mujh se
kis ka dil huun k do aalam se lagaaya hai mujhe*

The wine cup of each particle is intoxicated
with the joy of my being part of it.
Whose heart am I that I am immersed
in existence as well as in non-existence?

As we can see, these couplets written by Ghalib reveal a different approach to creating poetic meaning, conveying creative commotion, presenting artful beautification, and showing an abundance of ecstasy. In other words, the arrangement of thought coupled with powerful images and stimulating new ideas signals the emergence of a new kind of poet who we had not seen before.

Bedil and Ghalib: Poetry and Poetics

Bedil is the founder of a new school of Persian poetry. There is no doubt that we can call his work the high point of Sabke Hindi. He was blessed by nature with an extraordinary ability to express his intricate thoughts. His poetic work is a treasure of various strains of philosophy, priceless similes, and metaphors. He presents a wonderful collection of new and innovative subjects in a beautifully arranged compilation of images and phrases. He achieves unusual lyricism in his poetry, though the complexity of his personal experiences and his interactions with a wide variety of local cultures and traditions made this task very challenging. Despite an undercurrent of mystery in his verse, there is such a smooth flow of words, such an intoxication of joyful cheerfulness, that the reader feels oneness with the whole cosmos. His poetry goes beyond a mere collection of philosophical ideas to the depths of selfhood to become a song of enlightenment. There were critics of course, who complained about a strange feeling of mystery in his poetry and the complexity of his thinking but the fact is that Bedil's influence spans across generations of thinkers and poets. It is no small matter that India's last two great poets, Ghalib and Iqbal, recognized his greatness. Iqbal called him the poet of conviction and action, while for Ghalib he was the supreme teacher and a guiding light.

Experts agree that Ghalib's Persian poetry is relatively easy and straightforward, whereas what he wrote in his mother tongue Urdu was prone to many excesses, experiments, and free expressions. He often said that his poetry was like a garden which had two doors—one named Urdu and the other Persian. He did not miss any opportunity to make it known

that he preferred his Persian poetry to his Urdu verse. It is also true that Ghalib's 'handful of Urdu poetry' has been subjected to criticism unlike the work of any other poet. At the same time, experts have come forward with all kind of praises. The more is written about Ghalib, the more it opens new avenues to look at his work. A reader cannot avoid the feeling that this poetic work, filled with delicate metaphors and artistry, is wrapped in one layer after another. No interpretation is absolute or final; every interpretation leaves something unsaid. To capture Ghalib's depth of meaning looks easy but in fact it is very difficult. He shares this quality with Bedil.

Ghalib's relationship with Bedil is creative but not soulless. What he borrowed from Bedil notwithstanding, he charted his own course. Both of them draw inspiration from the same fountain but they are emperors of their own creations. After a certain point, their paths seem to diverge, and like the grace and coquetry of the beloved, their power to beautify and to spellbind also becomes different.

Critics are fond of making comparisons. Those who have looked at the works of Bedil and Ghalib have mentioned similarities between the two poets. The similarities mostly extend to metaphors, similes, and usages. This has prompted some critics to suggest that some of Ghalib's couplets appear to be plagiarized versions of Bedil's ([Faruqi 1969: 13–14](#); [Ghani 1982: 50–80](#); [Khan n.d.: 87–137](#); [Kirmani 2007: 16–28](#)). Hameed Ahmed Khan was probably the first reviewer who hinted on certain mental commonalities between the two. He writes, 'An intellectual argument can be made that both Bedil and Ghalib share specific language and techniques of versification' (Khan 2003). When Ghalib draws from this common source he does not do it as a plagiarist but as a philosopher who melts everything into the mould of his own personality. Ghalib in his early poetic work showed great liking for certain terms and expressions that reflect the influence of Bedil's thinking. For example, please note words and expressions like *jauhar*, *arz*, *muta'alia-e baatin*, *parfishaan*, *baal-e tabeedan*, *kaaghaz-e aatish zadah*, *daamaan-e khayaal*, *ghubhaar-e sheesha-e saa'at*, *yak alif kam*, and *yak alif besh*. In the following two couplets, notice the similarity in the use of metaphors like bloodied heart and a red, blooming flower.

*ghuncha phir laga khilne aaj ham ne apna dil
khuun kiya hua dekha gum kiya hua paaya*

Buds began to blossom
and I found my heart
with traces of deep wounds.
Never mind the wounds and bleeding.
Glad, something lost was regained.

*ghuncha gardiidem gulshan dar gariiban rekhtem
ishrat-e sarbasta az dil haay-e khuuniin buuda ast*

By becoming a bud
I felt the garden's spring
in my collar.
Only a heart that has bled
knows how to enjoy
the secret pleasures.

There is a famous Ghalib couplet about the heart being nothing more than a drop of blood. Its roots are also found in Bedil.

*z ahvaal-e dil-e gham diida-e Bedil ch mi pursi
k hast iin qatra-e chuun ghuncha mahroom az chakiidan ha*

Why do you bother to inquire
the state of Bedil's sorrowful heart?
Lo, my heart is a rose bud
and therefore it cannot drip like blood.

It appears that after reaching a certain stage, Ghalib stopped following the footsteps of Bedil. But this was not easy or straightforward, as Ghalib believed. We agree with Hameed Ahmed Khan that after what was attained following a deep imprint which took shape at an impressionable age, it was difficult for Ghalib to just push aside Bedil's influence. But as Hali has pointed out, Ghalib was able to develop 'a new but similar' style, though what was nurtured during the early years always stayed with him. By the time he travelled to Kolkata, Ghalib had attained such mastery over Persian that his contemporaries had started to look at him as a master in his own right. In that position, Ghalib could talk lightly about Indian poets writing in Persian, including Bedil, more as equals than as superior in any way.

All said and done, we have to accept the fact that Ghalib's psyche had deeply absorbed the influence of Bedil's complex philosophic thinking and poetical expressions from which he could never completely separate himself. In the letters that he wrote in the later part of his life, we can see

Bedil's soul making an entry, though somewhat silently, into what he was trying to say. He wrote in a letter to Hargopal Tafta:

The cycle of time moves on. Whatever had to happen is actually happening. If we had the power, we could certainly do something about this. If there was something to say, we could say it. Mirza Abdul Qadir Bedil says it beautifully:

*raghbat-e jaah ch o nafrat-e asbaab kudaam
ziin havas-ha b guzar ya maguzar, mi guzarad*

You loved power and majesty
and acquired position and wealth.
You may hold on to it
or just give it up—
all this is going to pass.

Look at me. I'm neither free, nor in prison. I'm neither sick, nor healthy. I'm neither happy, nor sad. I'm neither dead, nor alive. I'm just continuing to live. When the death comes, I will die. I'm neither beholden, nor filled with complaints. What I'm telling is just a story. ([Anjum 1984: 306–7](#))

But there are differences too. Let us not forget that both of them are unique in their own distinctive ways. Bedil looks upon the world through the Sufi transcendental lens and he is a master seer, whereas Ghalib is fond of worldly life, its joys and honours, and his world view is essentially existential, meaning earthly or worldly. In his thought processes, he is a nonconformist and does not fit into any one category of things. Further, somewhat in a Buddhist sense, he emphasizes perpetual quest and prefers ideas coming out of his own awareness. He borrows the concept of centrality of human being in the universe from Bedil but twists it towards non-transcendental earthliness and raises it to new heights with his sense of urgency, conviction, determination, and passion.

The above analysis and similar analyses that we have referred to earlier are right in their own place and they do provide useful information. But we have to keep in view that creativity is a product of many known as well as unknown strains and relationships. These things are as much hidden as they might appear on the surface. One subject arises from another; one thought flows from another; one image gives birth to another; and one strain produces another. The end result is not the same as the one with which it starts. This is the dynamic of creation which is complex as it is mysterious. There are few things which are distinctive and they are associated with one particular poet and his diction but there are subjects, images, and terms in the broader tradition of Sabke Hindi that have been repeated hundreds of

times. We know that the process of building on one another's work, though complex and puzzling, goes on all the time. The creative connection between Bedil and Ghalib is as much underground as it appears on the surface. Or, should we say that it is more under the surface with lots of layers. In other words, it is not only about the surface structure as it is about the deep structure that is hazy and enigmatic and is hard to fully capture in the grammar of criticism. It is like we are swimming on the surface, whereas pearls and jewels lie at the depth of the ocean that we cannot reach. It is interesting that many things in Ghalib which appear to belong to others might not *actually* belong to others. At some point, the issue of Ghalib is Ghalib himself.

Waris Kirmani is a rare critic who appears to catch the secrets of Ghalib's enigmatic and dialectical artistry which, in fact, is solely his domain. When it comes to this, Ghalib is unique. He is different from all the others. He writes:

Ghalib's poetics is something unique and unparalleled which he created while grappling with great complexity and layer after layer depths of intuition. This creation generates a magical effect that we cannot describe in layman's language. This is something that was beyond the capacity of noted poets like Mir and Iqbal because their approaches were based on straight presentation of their subjects. (I include myself among their admirers and do concede that all the praise they get is not undeserved.) Nonetheless these poets never saw the tumultuous commotion or tsunami of the unresolved inner turmoil whose victim was Ghalib. It was some kind of madness that didn't allow the victim to either live or to die; it didn't allow one to fall in love or to be self-restrained; it didn't allow one to be a believer or an infidel. There is a touch of mystery or unresolved definitive meaning or multi-dimensional openness that goes on all the time. It must have been with indescribable deep anguish that Ghalib said:

kaari-e ajab uftaada badiin shefta ma ra
momin nabuvad Ghalib o kaafir natavaan guft

What sort of a strange man he is
who is deeply distracted and deranged.
Ghalib is not a believer,
but he cannot be called a kafir as well.

Ghalib's poetry covers a vast array of subjects no other Urdu poet ever touched. It throws light on varied aspects and facets of life. Yet all this seems to get absorbed in a fistful of his Urdu poetry. Sometimes it confers on us the power of speech to talk about subjects which can't be discussed otherwise. Before Ghalib, Urdu ghazal was limited to subjects like affairs of the heart (*amour*), Sufi spirituality, or traditional ethics, but with Ghalib it embraced the whole existence, the inexplicable predicament of man and an amazingly broad range of topics. (2007: 66)

Waris Kirmani also says another important thing:

Whatever Ghalib wanted to say could not be said in the language that was popular at that time. Even a great language like Persian could not be used for the purpose. That is why even Bedil sometime brought words, phrases, similes that were further away from the common usage that made a revered teacher like Sheikh Ali Hazein to say that Bedil's poetry was difficult to understand for the native Persian speakers. He dubbed Bedil as *khaarij az aahang*, out of tune with the mainstream. The same circumstance arose for Ghalib as well ... the moot point is whether Ghalib spoiled Urdu because of his use of extremely innovative and figurative language and dense style, or he raised its level to reach new highs and depths and meanings so much so that the poetry written in the language used by the contemporary poets appears to bear the relationship of a slave to the master. (2007: 68)

Waris Kirmani seems to agree with our assessment that we need to go beyond routine comparisons which can be useful only in a limited sense. But he also emphasizes the fact that comparing a selected set of couplets will not solve the issue. To understand Ghalib, we need to go into the hidden layers of his unconscious thought processes. Like Bedil, he raises the issue of the *baruun n shudan* (the door through which you can pass but cannot exit) that needs further elaboration. Yagana (one of the worst critics of Ghalib) might have thought that he brought down Ghalib a few notches with his criticism. Even great poets like Shakespeare and Rumi have not escaped allegations of plagiarism. But to think in this manner is ignorance. There is a very deep connection between Bedil and Ghalib which is multifaceted. Comparing some couplets here and there is a self-defeating exercise. Ghalib coined multiple innovative phrases and thought in terms of such strange conjunctions no other poet would dare do it. These things were considered improper and usages, which were common at that time, would not allow it. But today these things are considered as gems; they are part of the magic Ghalib wove. Their layered density has depth and artistry that cannot be described in any other way. He introduced knots and layers which appeared like a mysterious door through which you could come in but could not go out. This is what Bedil confided:

*z sarosh-e mehfil-e kibriya hama vaqt mi rasad aiin nida
k b khilvat-e adab-o naaz dar-e baruun n shudan dar aa'*

I hear all the time the voice of a heavenly angel
whispering that the condition of entry
into the solitude of eternal secrets and fidelity
is such that you have to enter it
through a door from which you can get in
but cannot exit. ([Kirmani 2007: 68](#))

The metaphor of *baruun n shudan* signifies the clarification of intricate meaning that exhausts further clarifications. In other words, it is a way of

resolving that enriches the meaning of what is being signified. The knots and layers also mean unconscious dim images, abstract thoughts, or resistance to transparent meaning. Mark it that resistance is a part of the aesthetic process, as the process of signification is not exhausted quickly and takes its own time to unveil. There is light outside the door but inside it is dark. However, the intuitive eye, which is open, can penetrate the wonder of beauty and colours. These are semi-dark arenas of poetry, which, by being labelled as knots and layers, function as markers. The central issue is not about words and inventive phrases but to deconstruct or decentre the obvious, as it is commonly understood, to dismiss the *presence*, to reject every aspect of what is mundane, commonplace, or *familiar*, and to put everything that is given into a dialectical merry-go-round as you come out with something absolutely inventive and fresh. It is the main attraction of this kind of poetry. In Sabke Hindi, this genre of poetry reached its pinnacle with Bedil. He uses similes, metaphors, and images that are distinctive. But when this genre passes through Ghalib's house of fire, it is further qualitatively transformed and gets charged with its own enigmatic magic. What Bedil told Nasir Ali Sirhindi ('a good couplet has no meaning') can be easily read in the context of demolition of transparency or mundane meanings in poetry.

Let us now see what Bedil had to say about his own approach to poetic language and poetics. The first thing we notice is that meanings in every case walk ahead of words but in reality meanings are shaped and formed by words. Saussure says, 'Nothing is signified without a signifier'. Bedil knew this long ago, and like seers and yogis, he emphasizes the elements of signification thus.

asl ma'aniist kaz taqaaza-yash
lafz mi baalid o ada-haayash

It is meaning
that creates the turmoil
and gives birth to the word
which expresses it
and goes beyond it.

Bedil also laid down a principle.

Shaa'iri ibaat az ma'ni-e taaza yaabiist

Poetry is that which creates fresh meaning

No wonder he was called Abul-Ma'aani (master of meaning). Word is what is routinely given. When we handle words in a certain way, they create signification. Bedil was proud of his ability to transcend the ordinariness of the expression and to create a new language of mystery. He says:

*Bedil az fitrat-e ma qasr-e ma'aniist buland
paaya daarad sukhan az kursi-e andesha-e ma*

O Bedil, because of my nature
I have created a mansion of signification
which is of great height.
Through the pinnacle of my thinking,
I have raised the stature of poetry itself.

Bedil also says *girah-kushaai-e sukhanvar sukhan buvad Bedil*, which means that the only way to enter the heart of a poet is by opening the folds of his poetry. We have left behind personalities in the pages of history but the word (or shabda or *sukhan*) lives on and continues to provide signification with changing times. And *sukhan* as the language of poetry is the best introduction of a *sukhanvar* (true poet). 'If you wish to know the ebb and flow of my *sukhan*,' he says, 'then you will need an intensive level of understanding.'

But the common language is inadequate. It cannot reach the depths of reality. To paraphrase this in Bedil's own voice, 'That is why my *sukhan* is free from these limitations. My verse is like the wings of the legendary bird *anqa*, which is invisible'.

*sukhan ta dar jahaan baaqiist az maadumi azaadam
zaban-e guftaguu-ha baal-e parvaaz ast anqa ra*

As long as poetry is alive in this world,
I am free from extinction.
For my readers, my poetry is like
the wondrous wings of *anqa*—
not easy to decipher.

During Bedil's time, poets tended to show mastery in superficial wordplays. They would say what they had to say in cleverly rhetorical ways. But for Bedil, everything starts and ends with meaning, which is fresh and ingenious.

*arz-e matlab diigar o izhaar-e sana'at diigar ast
Bedil az aaiina natavaan saakht vaz'-e jaam ra*

It is one thing to create an artistic meaning
but it is another to employ a rhetorical device.
Bedil, raw glass cannot match the beauty
of the decanter that emerges from it.

Look at the following two couplets. Words and their meanings grow and mature in tandem. But meaning transcends the words. Matter dissolves but the rise and fall of the jewel of thought continues to revolve as the world revolves around the sun.

*z ramz-e suurat o ma'ni dil-e khud jama kun Bedil
bahaar iin jaast saamaanash daruun boyi baruun rangi*

Bedil, the secret of form and sense is not easy to resolve.
Look at the spring, the seed disappears into the soil
but the beauty of blooming flowers is all over the place.

*dil agar mi daasht vus'at be-nishaan buud iin chaman
rang mai bairuun neshast az bas k miina tang buud*

If the heart had the capacity to contain everything,
there was no need for an outer garden.
If the goblet is narrow, the colour of the wine
spills outside.

Without bearing a new and fresh meaning, Bedil considers a poet's expression as lacking a soul. His biggest gripe about the poets of his time was that their poetry carried all manner of rhetorical display but it lacked depth of meaning. That is why it had no life and soul. In the following pages, we present a representative selection of Bedil's couplets to demonstrate what is so distinctive about his poetry and how it closely foreshadows Ghalib's writing. In this wide variety of couplets, there are issues of mystery of existence, secrets of life which cannot be resolved, questions of personal identity, enigmatic nature of relationship, as well as worldly matters. There is lustre and splendour of love, there is call to action, there is pull of desire, and there is greatness of man and his insatiable aspirations. We are not classifying these couplets in any manner because that would negate their poetic intent. They rise above categorization or compartmentalization; they hide within themselves the colours of life and its secrets. As was mentioned above, this poetry keeps the door closed so that there is no exit—so that the ordinariness of the ordinary is demolished. The transparency of language is a facade. The

common language is polluted and impure. The contradiction between the real and the surreal is a myth; they are intrinsic to each other and cannot be separated. These couplets, on the one hand, reject the lifeless cliché-ridden craftiness and, on the other, reject impurities caused by sticking to repetitive or restricted topics. They recreate a time period, which is as bright as it is dark and hazy. Words do not say what they say; they say more than what they appear to say. They create new possibilities, employing ambiguous metaphors and previously unused similes. They are not the prisoners of a single point of view. They are in conversation with yesterday and also have the ability to be in conversation with tomorrow. They challenge every commonplace given truth; they reverse every given point of view. It is poetry that aims to establish atypical poetic truths, where beauty is a continuing aesthetic act. It speaks words that it does not know, or it walks the path no one had earlier walked. It creates its own truth, the poetic truth. If you are seeking the whole garden of meaning, then you should open the inner door and enter into your own inner treasure without any reservation. Here silence is language, and language is silence. Words do not say what they say ordinarily, and what we hear are not mere words. It can ask the paradise to wait and keep the doors open until the next day. It rejects the stale tradition like that of messiah (the one who promises redemption) and Yousef (the one who personifies beauty). It does not promise this world or the next one. It does not show the way to paradise or hell, because the whole existence is a paradox, a puzzle. There is joy and cheerfulness, there is spring, and there is beauty. It is like going on an unseen expedition in which what you are seeking is desirous of searching for secrets of existence that could take many rounds.

Bedil's and Ghalib's poetry is multidimensional. To take into account all the dimensions is an impossible task. However, if we try hard we can find some traces in that direction. We can see the artistry and flair of Sabke Hindi, which includes zeroing in on the main point, producing thought from thought, image from image, meaning from meaning, bringing out hidden meanings, transcend from the obvious (*khayaal bandi*), intense sense of beauty (*ehsaas-e jamaal*), philosophic depth of thought (*ma'ni aafriini*), freedom of spirit (*azaadagi*), pain of yearning (*tamanna ki tarap*), bliss and joy (*kaif-o nishaat*), courage of conviction (*jurrat-e fikr*), and finally the courage to challenge the routine, which is accepted at its face value (*musallamaat ko challenge karne ki himmat o hausla*). There are other

things too which are sometimes ambiguous, and at other times they are like bright shadows. Bedil keeps his focus on higher intuition and super-consciousness. His motto is that if you want to unlock the secrets, then you should open your inner eyes. If you do this, then the seed that is dormant will automatically blossom. Normally, he breaks the routine and carves out beautiful goblets of meaning so that the hidden and not-so-hidden paradoxical play of language is laid bare. The secret is embedded in the paradoxical questioning by poetic logic. As we have mentioned in the previous chapters, even the best of artistic devices could be misused by imitators when adopted as a trend or fashion. Saib, his peers, and his followers wrote poetry that lacked inner fire and true creativity. Their words did not reflect their ingenious and inventive imagination. Therefore, they took the easy way and wrote on conventional and didactic topics. It was nothing more than trite and rhetorically verbose gamesmanship. Obviously, they downgraded the whole process. If more damage remained to be done, that was accomplished in Urdu by the school of Nasikh and Zauq and scores of their disciples. The creative possibility of paradoxical poetry with ingenious negative dialectics in the extensive structure that we find in Bedil and Ghalib is unique to their poetic logic of innovativeness and freshness. In Bedil's poetry, wherever we find a deficiency of paradox, he uses his mystical creativity that raises its dialectical shine to its pinnacle of artistry, and it appears very different from Saib, Shaukat, Ghani, Jalal Aseer, Nasikh, Zauq, and Zafar's didactic and insipid poetry. Great minds can find the seashell that produces the pearl even in highly polluted waters, and then they roll one pearl after another. Ghalib, in fact, revolutionized the worn-out conventional Urdu poetics and ushered in a new tumultuous phase by the innovativeness of paradoxical poetry which, because of its freshness, has pleasing and wondrous rainbow-like colours. There is no such example of miraculous speech before or after. Like Bedil, in Ghalib's case too we do not find evidence that there is any artificiality at work in his poetic structure. It is as if he absorbs what is outside in his inner creativity and colourfulness. It is not without reason that Bedil says that only a highly developed mind would recognize that he has taken the status of meaning to the highest level. In the couplets that follow, it is worth noticing that Bedil's style (tarz-e Bedil) creates magic that is rare and so unique that it could be compared to the act of creation itself, which is the sphere of Providence.

dar nuskha-e behaasil-e hasti ch tavaan khwaand

zaan khat k ghubaar-e nafasash zer-o zabar shud

In this rotten book of life
what can you read?
The letters are misty
and difficult to read
by the incoming and
outgoing breath.

*khaamosh sho o b biin k be guft-o shunuud
chiize mi goyi o hamaan mi shunavii*

Be silent
and see what you say or hear
without uttering a word
and without trying to hear.
What do you say and
What do you hear?

*dar justajuye ma nakashi zahmat-e suraagh
jaaye rasiida em k anqa nami rasad*

Do not scout on the goal
of my aspiration.
Where I have reached,
even anqa cannot get there.

*harf chandiin k sarf-e insaan ast
chuun ta-ammul kuni n aasaan ast*

There is no dearth of words
that man could use.
But if you try to explain
the outcome of your pondering,
then it is not easy.

*z adam juda n uftaada ii qadme digar n kushaada ii
nagar aan k pesh-e khayaal-e khud b-khayaal-e aamdan aamada ii*

You have not yet separated yourself
from non-existence.
You have not taken the second step yet.
Just see the one, thinking of whom you came here,
who is himself lost in his own thought.

*sitam ast agar havasat kashad k b sair-e sarv-o saman dar-aa
tu z ghuncha kam n damiida-ii dar-e dil kusha b chaman dar-aa*

What a pity your desire is compelling you
to take a walk into the garden!
You are yourself a blooming bud—
open the gates of your heart
and then enter.

*hama umr ba tu qadah zadem-o n raft ranj-e khumaar-e ma
ch qayaamati k nami rasi z kanaar-e ma b kanaar-e ma*

We were near and dear all our lives
and we drank from the same cup.
You were near me
but at the same not so near.

*muu'ammaaaii muu'ammaaaii muu'amma
agar khwaahi kushuudan chashm b kusha*

Life is a puzzle within a puzzle.
You have to open your eyes
and then see what it is.

*Bedil b husn-e matla-e naazash chesaan rasem
ma ra k zarra saakhta hairaan-e aaftaab*

Bedil, how can you reach the glory
of her grace and beauty?
Your existence is like a particle of dust
beholden to and reflecting the sun's beauty.

*kuu muqaame k tavaan markaz-e hasti fahmiid
az zamiin ta falak aagosh kashiidast adam*

What is that place
which we can take
as the centre of existence?
It is non-existence
that is embracing the earth
and the sky.

daryaast qatra k b dariya rasiida ast

juz maa kasi digar n tavaanad b ma rasiid

The drop of water
that reaches the river
is the river.
No one except ourselves
can reach us and be part of us.

*dar-haaye firdaus va buvad imroz
az be dimaghi guftem farda*

The doors to paradise
were open today.
But look at my vanity:
I said maybe tomorrow.

*ae be khabar az kam khiradaan shikvah ch laazim
aadam n buvad aan k z haivaan gila daarad*

Remember, not to complain
about foolish folks.
What kind of a human
would complain about an animal?

*Bedil az kulfat-e shikast manaal
bazzm-e hasti dukaan-e shiisha gar ast*

O Bedil, do not be disheartened
if you are heartbroken.
This existence is like a glassmaker's shop—
a slight slip and the things break.

*har kuja raftam ghubaa-e zindagi dar pesh buud
yaa rab iin khaak-e pareshaan az kuja bardaashtam*

Wherever I go,
This dust cloud of life follows me.
O God, where did I pick up
this grime of grief?

*khayaal-e zindagi darde-st Bedil
k ghair az marg darmaane na daarad*

O Bedil, the very thought of life is such a pain.
It has no remedy except death.

*bahaar-e aarzuu dar dil gul-e ummiid dar daaman
b har range k mi aayam chaman pardaaz mii aayam*

My heart is filled with the spring's longing
and I carry flowers of hope in my sleeve.
In whatever way I come, my arrival is bliss all the way
and good for the zest of life.

*nishaat iinja bahaar iinja bahisht iinja nigaar iinja
tu k az khud ghaafili sarf-e adam kun duurbiini ra*

There is joy and cheerfulness. There is spring.
There is paradise. And there is the one you love.
O my unconscious self, do not waste your time
thinking mindlessly of the future.

*rasaand paaya-e ma'ni b aasmaan-e nuhum
buland ta'ba shanasad kalaam-e Bedil ra*

I have pushed the edifice of meaning
to the Ninth Heaven.
To understand Bedil's poetry,
hope to be blessed by high thinking.

*mudd'aai baguzar az daavaa-e tarz-e Bedil
sehr mushkil k b kaifiyat-e aejaaz rasad*

Bedil's style is not easy to emulate.
Be aware, it is close to a miracle
that magic cannot match.

In Ghalib's case, we find an amazing quality to absorb, to accept, and to internalize. To reach the pinnacle of literary excellence, Ghalib had to struggle a lot. This was also due to his nature. Whatever he gained from Bedil, he did it mainly because of the fire in his belly and personal effort. He endlessly worked on polishing his compositions. In Ghalib's poetics, the voice that we hear is distinctly his own. He borrowed from Bedil as per needs of the moment but he left a mark on the end product through his

creative genius and distinctive verbalizations that made the outcome strictly his own.

*man ayaar-e khirad hami giiram
aql dar band-e imtihaan-e man ast
har ch az ghaib dar dilam rezand
aql goyad k ham az aan-e man ast
har ch daanish z khaama angezad
goyam aavurda-e bunaan-e man ast*

I keep before me the touchstone of intellect.
It is the centre of my being.
Whatever comes to me from the unknown,
intellect tells me that it belongs to me.
The wisdom and awareness
that flows from my pen, I think,
is the result of my own inner self.

Ghalib insists on the maxim ‘from me to me’. The distinctive quality of his poetics is that it absorbs everything and, with the jewel-like clarity of his own nature, he makes it rhyme with his voice and no one can suspect that it did not belong to him in the first place.

In the 800 years of Urdu–Persian literary history, we cannot find any two great poets who had such a close relationship as Bedil and Ghalib. Ghalib did not build a follower relationship with non-Indian poets like Hafiz, Sadi, Firdausi, Jami, or Nizami, as he did with Bedil, though the Iranian poets were considered great at that time. We have already talked about the temperamental and poetic affinity between the two. But, as it was hinted, despite many similarities there are some differences too. Bedil is Bedil; Ghalib is Ghalib.

Bedil aligned himself with sufis, seers, and men with strong spiritual leanings but Ghalib was a man of the world. He lived his whole life on the generosity of others. He looked for worldly pleasures and honours, prestige, dignity, and a place in the Royal Court.

Bedil was a poet with a message, like Rumi and Iqbal. But Ghalib did not wish to change anything. This was the age of Sufism and its themes were central to the poetic works at that time. Ghalib, though, had sufi aspirations. It is said that as a practise common at that time he owed allegiance to a sufi, Peer Mian Ghulam Nasiruddin, also known as Kale Sahib, who belonged to Chishtiya order. He inherited Shia faith from his maternal family. We also know that he had some familiarity with Hazrat Ghous Ali Shah Qalandar.

But in reality, Ghalib was neither a sufi, nor a dervish, nor a qalandar. His association with some leading sufi personalities or mystics was nothing more than a slogan of intoxication.

Ghalib's mysticism was purely cultural, whereas Bedil was a practising sufi seer deeply rooted in the mainstream of Sufism. Ghalib's awareness is mainly based on his own experience, deep suffering, his intense struggle and strivings. Ghalib's poetry is emblematic of man's fate, life's paradoxes, and defeats and events that cause deep anguish.

The defeat of man's aspirations, his predicament, joys, and agonies of human life—these themes which are central to Ghalib's poetry are not found in Bedil. The latter's flight of imagination is metaphysical and directed towards heavenly heights. While he asks us to 'listen to the voice that comes from behind somewhere' (*az parda-haae ghaib navaae tavaan shuniid*), Ghalib creates a culture of faith as per his pragmatic nature and then he demolishes the whole thing with the spin of a coin to show that things do not have just one side. Although Ghalib aspires 'to build a home on the other side of paradise', he lives on the earth and never leaves it. He gives voice to the earth, and the man who lives on the earth is central to existence—his aspirations, hopes, dreams, yearnings, and ambitions. He puts a question mark on everything. He is man's advocate and pleads that there should be some credit given for the sins not committed. He emphasizes that man being a descendant of Adam is inclined to sin, and in the court of Providence he becomes the spokesperson of man's plight and the injustice done to him. He is aware of man's greatness as well as failure. He treats man as a man. He does not attempt to turn him into a divine being. His argument with God is not about the aesthetics of worship but it is about a dialectical struggle for man's predicament.

Abdul Ghani beautifully sums it up.

Ghalib talks about mystical matters and he addresses God in such a way that by not providing for him, the Almighty took a blame for himself. It is clear that mysticism and materialism have nothing in common. Bedil's high thinking impressed emperors and elites, but Mirza was a free soul and a nonconformist to the core. This is a great quality of Ghalib and a secret of his popularity. This made his personality somewhat complex, multifaceted, and attractive for everybody. That is why people belonging to different denominations—from the learned to the commoners, from the faithful to the sinful and from the ascetics to the freethinkers appreciate Ghalib's down to earth nature and his elucidation of beauty. His fans and followers enjoy alike when he says:

*huuye mar ke ham jo rusvaa huuye kyun n gharq-e dariya
n kabhi janaaza utthta n kahien mazaar hota*

Why did I not drown myself
in a river to avoid notoriety?
It would have saved a coffin,
a grave and a stone engraving.

Mirza appears to be everyone's sympathizer and in tune with everyone's thinking, but in reality he belongs to no one in particular. When we think that he is in our grip, he slips away and stands aloof. He sarcastically smiles and comes up with a new insight that makes us breathless. This detachment is his greatest attraction. ([Ghani 1982: 78–9](#))

The point is not that Mirza does not belong to anyone; he does not even belong to himself. He seems to stand by each worthy stance but then with none of them. He demolishes every given projection but then he goes and creates a new one. He is as much with the infidel as he is with the believer. But in the end, he drifts away from both. He opposes all binary positions and demolishes all hierarchies, unhinging them or decentring them. As we have been saying, he knocks down the presence of given meaning in any situation. Moving from place to place, he is free from every kind of matrix, inasmuch as he does not even stand close to his own shadow. There is no easy way out here. His dialectical tendency is as much a part of his consciousness as it is part of his unconscious self. We cannot say much about it with any degree of certainty. It is obvious that Ghalib's dialectical thinking is not based on any given ideology. His freedom twists everything, opens new possibilities, and he does not accept any preconceptions. Ghalib's self-awareness is not transcendental, spiritual, or intellectual. It is rooted in self-knowledge and a unique temporal awareness. Later on, we shall examine how far this thinking draws from archetypal traces of Buddhist shunyata and its negative dialectics; how it rejects inner and outer aspects of given definitions; how it does not take into account arguments for and against and dismisses any given reality through a dialectical thought. One thing is clear: Ghalib values his freedom more than anything else. Listening to the sound of defeat rising from within a musical note and being a witness to the crashing of one's own desires is not something everyone is capable of doing.

*huun main bhi tamaashaayi-e nairang-e tamanna
matlab nahien kuchh is se k matlab hi bar aave*

I am waiting to see the outcome
of my years of yearning.
Who knows if it would come to fruition?
I care less, though.

I have become my own spectator.

We shall revert to this discussion in the following chapters.

Masnavi Irfan: Its Indigenous Roots

Bedil wrote four masnavis: Muhiit-e Aazam, Tilism-e Hairat, Tuur-e Marifat, and Irfan. He wrote two works of prose, namely, Chahaar Unsur and Ruqaat. A special characteristic of Bedil is that he uses Indian folk tales and legends in his writings. Muhiit-e Aazam contains a description of world religions and religious prophets along with many illustrative stories. There is a long story of an Indian king and his reincarnation which Bedil presented together with his own philosophic views. Nurul Hasan Ansari talks about these stories but he is silent about their relationship with ancient Sanskrit literature and local folk tales (2001: 198–222). Among Bedil's masnavis, we think Muhiit-e Aazam is the most important. It is also the longest and contains 11,000 couplets. According to Brindaban Khushgo, Bedil spent 30 years in writing this masnavi. Experts believe that after Masnavi-e Ma'navi (Rumi), Masnavi Irfan is the greatest treasure of enlightenment literature. Compared with other masnavis, the tone of Irfan is not descriptive. From the start to the finish, Bedil maintains a philosophic flavour. Whatever he writes is not only a proof of his skilled style of writing but something that the poet is trying to convey from the depths of his soul, something that is part of his heart and mind. There is no aspect of nature, cosmos, life, ethics, and spirituality that has not been adequately covered in Irfan ([Bedil vol. 3 1342 Shamsi](#)).

Like Khusrau, Bedil has great love and affection for India and we find evidence of this in Irfan in several places. While paying his highest tribute to India, Bedil writes,

*Hind baaghe ast kaz tasavvur-e uu
mi ravad aarzuu b khuld firuu
aagahi raa savaad-e uu mahak ast
shab nashiin-e nig-h-e mardumak ast
az zamiinash ghubaar agar khezad
bar hava mushk-e suuda mi bezad
bagzar az khwaab-e makhmal-e kaashaan
surmaa geer az savaad-e Hindustaan
chiist Hindostaan bahaar huzuur
kaiin zamaan chashm-e tust arzu purnuur*

India is such a garden whose very thought
makes your awareness
reach the boundaries of paradise.
Her dark colour is the touchstone of awareness.
The pupils of her eyes are blessed with insight.
The dust that rises from this land
carries with it and spreads the fragrance
of musk and black ambergris.
Even if we overlook the velvet of Kashan
India's earth is like antimony that enhances its beauty.
What could we say about India's spring?
It is so enchanting that it illuminates the sight.

Irfan contains several references relating to Hindu beliefs. Discussing the Hindu concept of incarnation, he says,

*umr-ha shud k ilm aziin aayaan
dadah bar zehn-e shaan rusuukh sabaat
man ham az ikhtara'a-e suurat-e haal
aalami diida am b khwaab-o khayaan
gar b tafsiiil ruu b arz aaram
az jahaani zabaan b qarz aaram*

Sometime ago, by reading these verses
I felt my mind was refreshed and it gained stability.
I witnessed a new world in a dreamlike state
and if I try to explain it in some detail
then I will have to borrow words
from the other world to describe it,
as common words fail to describe it.

In this connection, Bedil recounts the story narrated by a person from south India about his father who had gone through reincarnation. He referred to a story of a woman who commits sati, and her soul after death meets the soul of her husband. Bedil also narrates the tragic tale of a Bihari merchant's daughter named Rajwanti who sacrificed herself. Irfan contains several such incidents that were based on Bedil's eyewitness accounts and tales which appear to have connections with Indian folklore and legends.

In the world of letters, it is always interesting how some dots connect with others. In an international seminar organized by Jamia Millia Islamia in March 2004, a professor from IIT Delhi, presented his groundbreaking findings about Bedil's Masnavi Irfan and its close connection with the great Hindu Sanskrit scripture named Yoga Vashishtha ([Shukla 2004](#)). Wagish Shukla has been a professor of mathematics at IIT but he is also a scholar of

Sanskrit with a fairly good understanding of Persian language and literature. With the help of specific references from the masnavi and the Sanskrit scripture, their themes, and subject matters, Shukla proved that there was a deep relationship between these two texts. He mentioned that if Bedil wrote 1,200 couplets of Masnavi Tuur-e Marifat within 2 days, he must have written a substantial part of Irfan's 11,000 couplets after the demise of his only son at the young age of 3. (It is worth mentioning that Ghalib had 6 or 7 children but none survived beyond 16 months. He ended up adopting Arif, his wife's nephew, and he too died young.) Irfan took 30 years to finish in 1712, just one year after the death of his son. Shukla hypothesizes that Bedil must have used one of the two Persian translations of Yoga Vashishtha, the one completed during the reign of Akbar, and the other that was initiated by Dara Shikoh. He also assumes that Bedil must have come to know of this scripture through his frequent contacts with Hindu sadhus and yogis.

Wagish Shukla pointed out that the subject matter of some parts of section three (from pages 104 to 122) of Yoga Vashishtha appear to be assimilated by Bedil in his masnavi Muhiit-e Azam that starts with the following story.

*shuniidam dar eqliim-e Hindustaan
k khaakash buvad aabruuye jahaan*

I heard that in the ancient land called Hindustan
its dust as well is worthy of worship.

Shukla stated that although no Persian commentator ever mentioned this, Bedil had a lifelong relationship with the text of Yoga Vashishtha. From Masnavi Muhiit-e Azam, that was completed in 1668 when Bedil was only 24, we can infer that Yoga Vashishtha was his companion for most of his creative life. Based on textual investigation, Shukla concludes that the descriptive foundation of Irfan was built on the third section of the Hindu scripture (pages 85 to 103). In this section, there is a story about the 10 sons of a Brahman, who create 10 worlds with each world possessing its own sun and those suns tell their individual stories. In Bedil's masnavi too there is a story of a Brahman, his 10 sons, their 10 worlds, and their 10 suns. Shukla says that this comparison is not easy because Bedil is not a translator; he is a creator. It is not easy to come to grips with Bedil's

thinking. The central theme of Irfan is not one world but many worlds that had nothing to do with the belief system to which he subscribed.

In the words of Shukla,

The global plan of the narrative in Irfan follows the *aindavopakhyana* comprising the chapters 85 to 103 in *utpattiprakarana*, the third section of the *Yoga Vashishtha*. Briefly, the *aindavopakhyana* starts with the story of ten children of a Brahman who become creators of ten different worlds. Each one of these worlds of course has a sun and one sun narrates the story. Bedil also has this story of ten children of a Brahman, ten worlds, and the sun. This global plan is too complex to compare and analyze the similarities and dissimilarities between Bedil's narrative and the narrative of Yoga Vashishtha. Bedil is a poet, not a plagiarist. The central theme remains the Many-Worlds Theory, a shocking innovation in the universe of discourse within which Bedil was working. Such intrusions of novelty have resulted in the labelling of Bedil as a difficult poet, difficult being a euphemism for nonconformist. So we find Iqbal (who otherwise was his admirer) saying with relief: 'No one ever listened to him and better so.' (2004: 2–3)

Shukla cited some couplets of Bedil where he asserts, like Ghalib, that 'my other worldliness and non-conformist discourse is not indebted to a tablet or a pen. I write a song for tomorrow. I do it with heart. I am not concerned how others view it. I say what I had to say.' (Ghalib considers himself the nightingale of the garden of tomorrow. Even he is not concerned with what others think of him.)

az saf-ha kilk-e vahshat-e ma pesh rafta ast
imroz ham z nuskha-e farda navishta em

In the rush of frenzy,
I think my pen has crossed
the limit of these pages.
I wrote about today
in tomorrow's book.

dar zindagi mutab'eyat-e dil ghaniimat ast
khwahi b khwaan khwaahi m khwaan ma navishta em

In life, heart is a great blessing.
I do not know whether you will read it
or you will not read it.
But I have written it.

zikh-e aan barhaman-e taalib-e diid
ke tanaasukh zad o kanaas damiid

This is the story of a Brahman
who was reborn

according to the theory of rebirth
as an untouchable.

The above couplet introduces the story of a Brahman who wants to know the secret of enlightenment and it appears in section five (parts 44 to 50) of Yoga Vashishtha. The Brahman was taking a bath in a pond when he realized that he had died and he was reborn as an untouchable. In this new life, he attained the status of a king but he was removed from his throne with great distress and suffering. In frustration, he jumped into fire and committed suicide. But after death, he found himself in the same pond where he was taking bath. He had lived another life in the time it took him to take his bath. This was not an act of magic. There were witnesses. This was in fact the story of inner awakening. Bedil changed the name of the region where the above incident happened from 'Keera' to 'Audh', and he substituted the word 'Noor' for 'Vishnu'.

Shukla says that Bedil's purpose was not simply to narrate a story but to construct a whole new philosophical system with the help of a story. Masnavi Irfan, from beginning to end, is a creative work of poetry. Bedil himself says that in this kind of retelling of a story, it is meaningless to debate what is real and what is not. Khushgo refers to Irfan in his book *Safina* with the following couplet,

dariin ibrat sara Irfan-e ma ham taazgi daarad
saraapa maghz-e daanish gashtan o chiize na fahmiidan

In this worldly inn of admonitions,
Masnavi Irfan is a breath of fresh air.
This is the essence of my intellect,
though it is not easy to grasp.

Irfan is the title of the masnavi, and even literally the word denotes knowledge or enlightenment. It has also to do with his philosophical viewpoint, which Bedil reminds us is a fresh or a new approach. The knowledge or cognition that Bedil is talking about is the same as sufis understood at that time but he used a new terminology and thought pattern to describe it and that is what made all the difference. Shukla hints that in the Persian poetry there was an established pattern to describe sufi thought but Bedil moved away from it. That is why Bedil's style of writing could not be understood in his time (*cheeze na fahmiidan*). The difficulty of Bedil's poetry, according to Shukla, was not due to any inherent causes; it

was the result of peoples' engagement in their traditional, religious routines and their lack of attention to something different from the established norms of the times.

In Shukla's words,

Before Bedil, Persian poetry was never allowed to wander beyond certain syntactic constructions with well-defined semantic fields. In his choice of themes, Bedil has transcended these semantic fields; for him *ilm* means *jnana* in the sense in which it has been known in Indian philosophical circles; for him *sukhan* means *vaak* in the sense in which it has been known in Indian philosophical terms. For him *ishq* means *maya* and Adam means *sakshatkara* in the sense in which it has been known in Indian philosophical circles. For Bedil, *rang* means the formed world. Such repurposing usually leave Persian readers baffled and attempts have been made to integrate Bedil into the familiar terminologies of Sufism; thus Salahuddin Saljuqi has tried to equate *Irfan* with *Itlaaq* and identified it into the *Laahut* of the Sufi geography ([Shukla 2004: 2–3](#)).¹

Masnavi *Irfan* starts with couplets like this,

aql-o his, sham-o-basar, jaan-o jasad
hama ishq ast huuyola-e ahad
ishq az musht-e khaak-e aadam rekht
aan qadar khuun k rang-e aalam rekht
chiist aadam tajalli-e idraak
ya'ani aan fahm-e ma'ani-e laulaak

The intellect, the senses, the seeing, hearing,
the body and the soul—all this is *ishq*'s manifestation.
He is the Almighty, He is great and the only one.
The *ishq* squeezed the handful of dust that Adam was.
It was from his blood that the colourful world sprang around.
What is Adam? Nothing but the *nuur* of his mind,
nothing but the meaning of the sacred utterance *laulaak*.

While continuing this interesting discussion, Shukla postulates that Bedil was considered obscure because his conception of reality was not the same as that held by other sufis.

barq-e javvaala ra ch baal o ch par
Khatt-e parkaar ra ch paao ch sar

Of the Swinging Light,
where is the wing
and the feather?
Of the trace of a circle,
where is the beginning
and where is the end?

Assertions like these indicate not only a time-concept which is dissonant with the standard Sufi discourse, but also a theoretical departure from the usual formulation of *vujud* (Existence): for Bedil, *vujud* is not a reality, and thus the unity is somewhat anti-foundational. When Bedil dismisses both knowledge and ignorance as illusions of the same category, he is following an advanced text like Yoga Vashishtha, and not mere unity. This trans-numeration, usually regarded as the Doctrine of Zero because the great Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna has used the word Shunya to describe it, is the core of some of the most complex philosophical thought-systems India has produced, including that of the Yoga Vashishtha. When Bedil joins the group, it is hardly surprising that some of the best Indian poetry results. Since the poetic devices are entirely from Persian poetry's arsenal, a new glow is also added to the contents. In the long list of Sufi poets, no body except Bedil could do it because in that long list, nobody could go to those sources with the needed intellectual power, or the needed artistic talent. ([Shukla 2004: 5](#))

Traditional mystical poetry was quite popular at that time and was the order of the day. If people could not reach the central thrust of Bedil's discourse, there were two reasons. First, people lacked Bedil's range of mental and creative abilities. Second, people had little recourse to the ancient Indian sources from where Bedil drew his inspiration. Bedil's conception of reality is different and complex, something that continuously moved around its own axis, where time has no beginning and no end. It is not one still point; it is a circle. If knowledge and ignorance is a continuum, then the unity of existence does not start with the one (*Mabtada-ul aadaad*) but zero, Shunya, or *Sifar Asl-ulusuul*. The doctrine of zero which informs Yoga Vashishtha has been part of the ancient Indian wisdom. On this point, we have full agreement with Shukla. He further mentions, it is not necessary that everything in *Irfan* was drawn from Yoga Vashishtha. There are things in *Irfan* that might have been drawn from other sources, consciously or unconsciously. But it is also true that there are few things here that you cannot find anywhere else other than Indian sources. For example,

baagh-e berangiyat b rang rasiid
b sukhan baayad az khudat gul chiid

You came from non-existence to the world of colour
 and fragrance—the world of senses.
 This is because of vaak or the power of speech,
 that comes from nothingness or silence.
 This is the wisdom of ancient India.

Bedil has a complete section on Sukhan in *Irfan*. His concept is same as Vaak in the Indian philosophy. For instance, it is stated in *Rig Veda*: 'Man eats through Vaak. He sees, breathes, listens to what is said. Those who do

not know the Vaak are destroyed. Listen if you have the ears. This is the sacred truth.’ Upanishads consider, speech, as the highest point of consciousness.

Bedil elaborates this point in *Irfan*.

*ziin nihaal aan ch bar faraashta and
dar zamiin-haay-e hind saakhta and
az girohe digar bariin aasaar
niist aagaah khufta ta bedaar*

The tree that bears this fruit
is found only in the land of India.
People other than Indians—
awake or in sleep—
are not familiar with this.

In the Indian thought, the concept of Vaak is of seminal importance about which we have written in our theory and oriental poetics book. Zamir Ali Badayuni, a contemporary Pakistani philosopher, has commented on sukhān in *Irfan* about which we will talk later.

Shukla has also mentioned that the story regarding ‘Kamadi and Madan’ that Bedil included in *Irfan* has its roots spanning back to Sanskrit poet Bhibhuti (eighth century ad) who wrote a long poem called *Malti Madho*. Its Persian translations were popular in local languages under the title *Madho Nal v Kam Kundla*. This was translated into Persian by Bedil’s peer Nasir Ali Sirhindi. According to Nurul Hasan Ansari, the same story was translated with minimal changes by another Persian poet named Haqiri. He named it *Kam Kundla aur Madho Nal* ([Ansari 2001: 220–2](#)). But Bedil brought a philosophic touch to the same story. Shukla mentions that everything in Bedil appears complex, difficult, and somewhat abstruse because he does not go by the word of others; he uses his own awareness to sift through the things and goes much deeper in his re-enactment. This is part of his well-known creative process. Whatever Bedil wrote in *Irfan*, he did it with a great degree of confidence and self-realization. He wrote at one place,

*khatt-e tarsa o ikhtira’a-e hunuud
ham chunaan taab-e gesuuye maqsuud
gar chalepa kheraamiye daarand
na’al-e ma’akuus ganj-e asraar and
hama ashkaal ra z sar barhand
hama mushtaaq-e jumbish-e nig-h and*

The writing from left to the right
is an invention of Hindus.
It is cursive like the tresses of the beloved.
Ring upon ring, it is mysterious
and is enchanting like an amulet.
This treasure of letters shows the complexity
of India's secrets, demanding our attention.

Bedil mentioned in *Irfan* that some people thought that worshipping local gods and goddesses was abominable. Bedil appealed to Jews, Christians, Hindus, and Muslims not to consider only their religious tradition as sacred and all other traditions as profane. During that time, because of the influence of Bhakti movement, there was widespread criticism of all sectarian and restrictive practises. Noted local poets considered unconditional love of God as the only true path of salvation. According to Shukla, Bedil was unique among Persian poets of his time who declared that all religions are true in their own way and they are worthy of reverence from the followers of other traditions.

khwaab-e bedaari k ma daarem
bar hamaan jaada sair ha daarem

The dream of awareness
which I possess is quite distinct.
Because I have walked the pathways
of many faiths.

To those who think Bedil is obscure, he says clearly,

chashm va kun husn-e nairang-e qadam be-parda ast
gosh sho aahang-e qanuun-e adam be-parda ast
ma'ni kaz fahm-e aan andesha dar khuun mii tapiid
iin zamaan dar kesvat-e harf-o raqam be-parda ast
aan ch miidaani munazza e'tibaar-e besh-o kam
fursatat baada k aknuun besh-o kam be-parda ast

If you open your eyes and see
then you will find
that multicoloured beauty of creation
right from the beginning
is not hidden behind a curtain.
Open your ears and listen
to the clamour of maya
which is also not hidden
It is a vortex.
If you understand this,

your thinking will be illuminated.
My words are open in front of you.
What you think is secret or invisible
is exhibited here in front of your eyes.

Before we talk about other masnavis by Bedil, we have to keep before us the context in which we gain their understanding and in which we get traces of Ghalib's mental relationships and their continuity. We know one thing that Eastern poetics is the poetics of brevity and suggestiveness, conventions and delicate linking cues. This has been further complicated by philosophic explorations and its time-bound characteristics. Its meaning and beautification depend more on what is not said rather than on what is said. On the basis of this hypothesis, Bedil's poetic verse combines the two streams, one coming from Islam and the other from India's ancient traditions. In view of this, if Bedil's poetry appears mystically different or unimaginably difficult, then it is not a matter of any surprise. This complicates Iranians' understanding of Sabke Hindi. Bedil's creative strength and his courageous thinking is like a tempestuous river that knows no barriers. Sheikh Ali Hazein (d. 1766), who lived after Bedil and who was of Iranian descent, started criticizing Indian poets who wrote in Persian, especially Bedil, although another scholar of the time, Siraj-ud-Din Ali Khan-e Arzu (d. 1756) put up a great defence of Bedil and said that Bedil's idiom, his inventiveness, and creations were justified. Khan-e Arzu wrote *Tambihul Ghafiliin* in which he raised questions for Hazein. This led to a debate about the localness of Persian language as against its status as a foreign language. Indian poets were used to looking to the Iranians for approval. The pronouncements of Hazein and his sympathizers therefore came as a great shock to the self-respect of the Indian poets writing in Persian, and for years to come they struggled to come out of this complex. This is evident from the statements of Azad Bilgrami (*Khazana-e Aamira*) and Imam Bakhsh Sehbai. That is why Bedil, whose greatness was well-recognized during the reign of Aurangzeb, was relegated to the status of a backbencher by the end of the eighteenth century, and consequently, he became a poet of just one constituency. When this tragedy further unfolded, Urdu's leading historians such as Hali, Shibli, and Muhammad Husain Azad, who belonged to the nineteenth century, fell victim to this line of thinking.

Waris Kirmani says, ‘Bedil is high as the Himalayas who was expelled from the poetic lexicon by people who lacked understanding. We can include Shibli in those short-sighted people’ (2007: 47). The truth of the matter is that Shibli, who wrote a five-volume history of Persian poetry and covered almost all the major Indian poets, denied Bedil his rightful place by not including him in his work. Under these circumstances, for Ghalib to accept Bedil as his mentor was an act of great courage. Bedil captured Ghalib’s imagination right from the early years, and he admired Bedil from the depth of his heart. He declared it many times that it was the blessing of Bedil that his own work appeared to be messianic. Those who think that Ghalib gave up on Bedil after the age of twenty-five (sometime by quoting Ghalib’s own words) are clearly wrong. First, during his travel to Kolkata in 1828, when he was 31 years old, Ghalib was very proud of his association with Bedil (about which he talked in his masnavi *Baad-e Mukhalif* and other works). Second, around that time when Ghalib was growing conscious of his mastery of Persian language but given the situation that arose during his stay in Kolkata, proving his mastery of Persian became a matter of gaining self-respect. The fact is in these circumstances what he used in his defence were examples from Bedil. Thus, Bedil’s poetry had become a part and parcel of Ghalib’s mental make-up that could not be changed. This is quite obvious from the letters that Ghalib wrote. Qazi Abdul Wudud has written quite clearly that ‘even in the later age Ghalib was not out of Bedil’s influence. In his masnavi *Baad-e Mukhalif* Ghalib wrote a couplet at the outset to set a tone for his special poem. Until the end of his life Ghalib quoted Bedil’s couplets in his letters’ (1948: 45). Khaliq Anjum has produced at least seven such letters of Ghalib that prove that Bedil was a strong influence even in the last years of his life (2005: 101, 103).

During his travel to Kolkata, Ghalib wrote two masnavis, *Chiragh-e Dair* and *Baad-e Mukhalif*, and both of them in the same metres (*behr*) that Bedil had used for his masnavis, *Tuur-e Ma’rifat* and *Irfan*. In both cases, Bedil’s influence is reflected in form as well as content. Ghalib wrote the following couplet in one of the manuscripts of *Tuur-e Ma’rifat*. The manuscript is preserved in the University of Punjab in Lahore, Pakistan.

aziin sahiifa b nau’i zahuur-e ma’rifat ast
k zarra zarra chiraagaan b-tuur-e ma’rifat ast

This revelation leads us

to making the cognition apparent,
that because of *Tuur-e Marifat*
each particle of this planet
is illumined.

In the same manner, Ghalib wrote the following couplet in praise of Masnavi *Muhiit-e Azam* on a calligraphed copy,

har habaabi ra k maujash gul kunad jam-e jam ast
aab-e haivaan aabjuuye az Muhiit-e Azam ast

Every bubble that drowns
in this wave
is like the bowl of Jamshed.
This elixir of life
is a droplet
of masnavi Muhiit-e Azam.

These couplets make it clear that Ghalib not only loved Bedil's ghazals, even his masnavis remained a major influence on his creative life.

Bedil's Concept of *Sukhan* and *Vaak*

Ghalib's mental frame is multilayered like his poetry. It is true that Ghalib tried to build a relationship with early poets of the Mughal era. He confirmed this in his preface written for the Persian Divan. But according to the experts, 'this is not the complete truth, though we have Ghalib's testimony. To find the truth we have to look at Ghalib's poetry that doesn't blend very well with Urfi, Zahuri, and Naziri and it is spread far beyond the limits of their poetry. We hear the echo of Bedil time and again' ([Kirmani 2007: 19](#)).

Experts also reject the notion that Ghalib gave up on Bedil after the age of twenty-five. As Pakistani scholar Muhammad Munawar says,

A reader is sometimes misled when he reads a *maqta'a* in a Ghalib's ghazal where he talks about having benefitted from Zahuri or Urfi. Mirza is just playing with his peers who said that because of Bedil's influence, his poetry had become too abstract. But the fact is that by leaving behind so many marks of Bedil on his work, Ghalib was certain that truth would come out on its own in due course. ([Ghani 1982: 11](#)).

Ghalib's Italian commentator, Alessandro Bausani, points out that in Bedil's poetry we will find usages and innovative arrangements, based on which he was expelled from the Persian mainstream poetic lexicon that

carry great similarity with Sanskrit's poetic tradition. Such arrangements were common in Sanskrit. He also confirms the view that Ghalib never gave up on Bedil. If there is any misunderstanding about this, it could be attributed to Ghalib's own statements. Bausani also raises an interesting point that if Ghalib said anything about this, it had to do with his Persian poetry. It had nothing to do with his Urdu work ([Bausani 1970: 63–74](#)). In the subsequent chapters, we shall provide evidence that Ghalib did not abandon Bedil, rather he brought him to a level in the firmament of his consciousness where Bedil's influence is a distinctive quality of Ghalib's poetics.

The literary canon, as a set of standards and principles, has gained currency in the context of discourse in the contemporary literary theory. It is a dynamic concept signifying that prominence in literary canon is not absolute or fixed for all times to come. The canon keeps changing and readjusting with changes in literary history. The signification of text is not fixed for all times and all ages. It goes on shifting. The relationship between Bedil and Ghalib is one of the best examples. Whenever a new poet appears on the scene, he adds greatly to the literary treasure he inherits and, as a result of his acceptability as a major contributor, the literary scenario presses the canon for space. Bedil faced expulsion from the mainstream following the Indian–Iranian feud which was the creation of Hazein. There is great merit in Waris Kirmani's assertion that by rediscovering Bedil, Ghalib paid the highest tribute to the literary genius of his mentor. 'Bedil was moved out of the downward slope where he had been pushed and reinstated him to his well-deserved position in the Persian literary tradition' ([Kirmani 1984: 138–51](#)).

Ghalib, by establishing a relationship with the centrality of his signification and poetic genius, gave Bedil a new life. As a result, Bedil not only attained his rightful place at the centre stage of literary canon of mainstream poetry but it also added to the perception of depth of Sabke Hindi as a great literary tradition.

When he talks about Sheikh Moazzam incident, Hali makes a point that from the age of 10 or 11, Zahuri was one of the poets whom Ghalib studied rather closely. From this we can surmise that if he read Zahuri, he would have also read other great poets of the era. There was a whole rainbow of colours that Ghalib witnessed from his early childhood, he looked at all the colours and chose Bedil as a mentor to his poetic quest. This way, the mark

of Bedil's style of thinking was permanently imprinted on Ghalib's conscious and unconscious mind. We have discussed before that why of all the poets of Sabke Hindi, Ghalib chose Bedil. Why did he make him a companion of his melodious song when there were other poets to choose from? This question is even more relevant because of the Hazein-Khan-e Arzu controversy and the damage it inflicted on Bedil's standing as a poet. We can see from the statements of Muhammad Husain Azad, Hali, and Shibli that Bedil had been completely marginalized inasmuch as his poetry (*Bediliyaat*) had become another name for verse that was shunned as enigmatic and unreadable. Under these circumstances, to accept Bedil as a mentor was an act of rare courage and self-confidence. It is little wonder how Ghalib selected this body of luminous verse, which is the miraculous attraction of Bedil's poetry. But of all the masters, why Bedil? There is no definitive answer by the experts to this question, other than a guess that maybe it was high creative thinking different from the poets who towed the Iranian tradition, some archetypal pull or mysterious touch rooted in the soil, intense love of freedom in an atmosphere of plurality, courage of convictions, and so on, were things that were dear to Ghalib which he found in Bedil. Even Ghalib could not say in clear terms why he found Bedil so close to his heart.

In our own journey of discovery, our main thesis has gained strength based on Bedil's biography, his personality, opinion of experts, Bedil's poetics, the deep connection of *Irfan* with ancient Indian sources, and so on. There is a time difference of slightly less than a century between Bedil and Ghalib. But the mental gap is no more than a few steps. There was a common knowledge about the connection of *Muhiit-e Azam* and *Irfan* with local stories and tenets of indigenous ideas but Shukla made these connections more explicit. Although great minds have deep roots in the past, they also cast a shadow on the future. In other words, their feet are planted in the nether regions but they hold their head in the sky. It is not a matter of any doubt that poststructuralism lately contributed substantially to human thought, especially literary criticism. When we read Ghalib, we get the feeling that Ghalib's area of thought is extremely large; nevertheless he does not give a final opinion or speak in absolute terms to foreclose any issue. He does not close pathways or avenues. This connection of bold thinking, mental flexibility, personal effort and determination, freedom, and openness works as a bridge between Bedil and Ghalib. To consider Bedil as

the pioneer of new thinking is the crux of this relationship. A Pakistani scholar, Zamir Ali Badayuni, was working on deepening our understanding of relationship between Bedil and Ghalib when he sadly passed away. But his article on Bedil reinforced many of the points we have been raising. He also reinforces our view that the roots of structural thinking and modern dialectics are found in the depths of Eastern thought and that there is a deep relationship in this context between Bedil and Ghalib. Badayuni was familiar with the currents in modern thought but how Masnavi *Irfan* was rooted in the ancient Indian thought was not known to him. We already know, based on Shukla's investigation, that Bedil was greatly impressed by indigenous ideas related to the philosophy of *vaak* or *sukhan*.

Let us see what Zamir Ali Badayuni had to say about this.

We live in the age of structural thinking. Existentialism and Humanism are things of the past. But the disappearance of stars do [sic] not affect their luminosity. The sun of structural thinking is shining bright, but this structural thinking is not limited to structuralism; its circle expands to embrace post-structuralism and post-modernism. Man has been replaced by structure; writer has been replaced by the act of writing, reader by the act of reading. Today's reader, if he has to find meaning, he does not consider it necessary to go to the author. He goes to the heart of the text that is in continuous process of creating meaning. From Bedil's insightful way of looking at things, this power of the text was not hidden, but his terms are different. His way of saying, his expression is the result of his culture and conventions. His thinking is sky high, but it breathes in the depths of its cultural climate.

Zamir Ali Badayuni writes:

Structural thinking has greatly impacted the written text, the meaning latent in the text, the writer, and the reader. The traditional concept of unitary meaning-making is losing its grip. The process of signification is complex. This includes the influence of ideas such as *différance* and *deferment* of meaning.² Today the author is not the biggest reference point of his creation. Signification is not fixed as the context is not fixed. The meanings that reader brings to the text and the one that rises from the text do intermingle and chalk a new course. The reader's creativity cannot be denied, and he discovers the textual reality in his own way. Text and the reader interact and bring the literature to life. No text is absolute or complete by itself. It survives only in the collective textual living space. Bedil's exposition of *sukhan* binds together all the elements that are spread around the entire body of structural thinking. Bedil's whole world view is embedded in just one word—*sukhan*. It not only is the dynamic essence of signification, the means of communication but rather the whole ontological being. If there is any clear indication of evolution, then *sukhan* is the permanent mark of that. Ghalib had said that with some effort a parrot can see the mirror (reality) in all six dimensions. It is the same situation with words, diction, and language. For Bedil, a man is caught up in the scenes and sights of *sukhan* but the same *sukhan* has the ability to grant him freedom. Bedil says:

khaamosh sho o b biin k be-guft o shunuud
chiizi mi goyi o hamaan mi shunavi

Be silent and see
how without speaking

and listening
what you say
and what you listen.

According to Derrida, *there is nothing outside the text*, that is, there is no world outside of the world of words (text). And Bedil says:

z e'jaaz-e iin iisa afsuun mapurs
jahaan zinda-e uust afzuun mapurs

Do not ask me
about Messiah's healing touch.
A priceless world is born
with the creation of sukhan.³
Do not ask me more than this.

b ikhfā haqiiqat ba-afsha mājāz
b tashbiḥ aalam b tanziḥ raaz

Of sukhan's miracles
do not ask me more.
It hides what is real
and it exhibits what is unreal.
By simile it is this world
And by abstraction
it is the biggest secret.⁴

Whatever Bedil had to say about text, or the power of language, or speech is captured by the term *sukhan*. Structuralist thinkers tell us that we know only through the words that the world exists; it exists through the structures that are present in the language and lend meaning to the text. Bedil uses the word *sukhan* with grace and style and it covers a lot of ground. He writes in his book *Chahar Unsur*: 'Sukhan is the very soul of the world. When *sukhan* hides its meaning then the world comes to an end. When it expresses itself in clear alphabet, then the world rises once again.' ([Badayuni 1996: 21–5](#))

Badayuni also attempted to present Bedil in the context of other thinkers. Heidegger calls language *being*, because man realizes meaning of his being through the use of speech. Saussure unfolds the meaning of *sign* in the relationship of *signified*. Derrida's concept of text is same as Bedil's *sukhan*. Barthes says that text writes itself, meaning *sukhan* creates its own imprint. According to Heidegger and Mallarmé, it is the language (*sukhan*) that speaks, not the man. As Badayuni writes:

Bedil was familiar with these secrets. In his poetic constructions he is very close to modern thinkers when he says:

*b har rishta-e vahm diigar m pech
k ghair az sukhan dar jahaan niist hech*

Do not make your suspicions
and doubts too complex.
There is nothing in reality
except sukhan.

At the height of the twentieth century, Heidegger declared that the divine power when appeared last time in human affairs it was in the form of language. It is not one among many possibilities of history, but on the other hand, history itself is one among several possibilities of language. Bedil tries to find the mysterious reality of sukhan and, in his poetic search, reaches the legendary *pen and tablet* and sees sukhan acting and transforming even in the depths of angel's whispers and words:

*b fahmi agar ramz-e lauh o qalam
k ghair az sukhan chiist aanja raqam*

If you want to know
the secret meaning
of 'pen and tablet',⁵
then you should know
that nothing except sukhan
is written there.

Language conveys meaning but meaning is not static because meaning is created by deferment or differential dialectics. Therefore, language is empty from within. Everything that comes into being with the help of language is not absolute but dependent on the other. It means it is shunya in itself. Shukla mentioned this with reference to *Irfan* and its origins can be traced back to the Buddhist dialectics, Shunyata. These thoughts come from the ancient Indian roots and we cannot find their trace in any other thought system. Modern thought accepts the fact that language is unable to express reality. Bedil also says that there is something in language that makes it deficient for the purpose of finding the truth.

*bayaan dar vasf-e uu naaqis kamand ast
abas daaman m-zan aatash buland ast*

All cannot be explained in words.
Do not blaze the fire further
because the flame
is already very strong.

The primary purpose of language or sukhan is to create meaning. Bedil is unique among poets who say that meaning is not predestined in poetry. The intent of the author is a dimension of meaning. Bedil declared, centuries

before Derrida, that as long as sukhān is alive, the caravan of meaning will keep moving forward. Meaning is definitely free from determination. This point also unveils several layers of Ghalib's dialectical poetics.

Much before the arrival of structuralist thinkers, Bedil had told Nasir Ali that a 'good couplet has no meaning'. This means it is not essential for poetry to have any meaning in a manner that is foreordained. How can a reader reject the thought that arises in his/her mind? What the poet provides is a cue for looking at the text. As long as sukhān lives, the endless possibilities in which meaning can be derived will also exist. Derrida as a modern thinker is of the view that meaning creation is a process of the text that goes on moving forward. Since this process never stops, the text is always free of definite meaning. According to Derrida's deconstruction, 'meaning is always deferred'. Bedil's conception of meaning is no less insightful than that of Derrida's. Bedil interprets the word 'meaning' to include even the next world. He says:

ch duniya? rah-e lafz sar kardanash
ch uqba? b-ma'ni nazar kardanash

What is this world?
It is all a play of word.
What is the next world?
It is the work of sukhān too.

Bedil says that the next world is located at a constant space away from us. His view of meaning is therefore like Derrida's in the sense that both consider this to be something that is part of time. Time is part of meaning. But it is not stationary; it is always dynamic. It is work in progress and never a finished piece of work. It is not there because it is imprisoned in the process of emerging. It is like a wave that comes and goes, and each time it comes forward, it brings with it some newness and freshness. There is no tomorrow; when tomorrow comes, it is always now. In Bedil's case, meaning tries to gain some traction, but its sense of time and space keeps it in motion. Bedil's concept of time is the soul of meaning. Time never stops. Therefore, meaning is always in motion. ([Badayuni 1996: 25](#))

Bedil's thought has many dimensions, each one insightful and worthy of consideration. Every attempt we make to unravel his depth begs of further investigation. What is true of the fleeting beauty of the cosmos is also true of Bedil's thought.

hama umr ba to qadah zadem o n-raft ranj-e khumaar-e ma
ch qayaamati k nami rasi z kanaar-e ma b kanaar-e ma

We were near and dear all our lives
and we drank from the same cup.
You were near me
but at the same not so near.

Bedil is a product of India's rich cultural heritage. He is its prime proclaimer and a representative. In Bedil's mind and consciousness, there is an extraordinary mingling of the threads of Islamic and Indian thought, as a

result of which a new pattern of thought has come into being. Ghalib benefited from this heritage. Bedil's ecstatic and euphoric voice is present in Ghalib in its deepest sense. Rising above the material manifestations, Ghalib uses ambiguous metaphors to look forward to the future. In this way, he reaches such heights that were reached by others only by the end of the twentieth century. His thought even informs problems that are emerging in the twenty-first century's mirror of reality.

Basically, it is the same thinking that was responsible for expulsion of Bedil's poetry from the literary canon for quite some time, because it was alien for the contemporary ears and it was advanced for its time. Bedil lives at two levels—mystical as well as material, and his poetry breathes the cultural currents of his time. He is grounded in *sukhan*, and for him there is nothing that exists outside *sukhan*. He replaced the conventional static view of meaning with a dynamic one. Because Bedil's verse was mystical as well as dynamic, Ghalib's dialectical mode made it come alive in many colourful ways. This is nothing less than a poetic miracle. Ghalib's text is filled with vintage that provides a mellow and long-lasting intoxication. Every couplet that Ghalib wrote has left behind a mark on the space of possibilities (*Dasht-e Imkaan*). If his poetry, without being transcendental, shows us a vision of the hidden reality, it does it on account of its inherent strength. During the course of the last century, different commentators heard varied voices coming from the instrument of Ghalib's *Divan* and thought that they found the Ghalib whom they wished to have. As we come to the twenty-first century, we can have a peek at its fleeting multidimensional existential meaning. It is not fixed. It is reflecting the meaning that the reader is bringing to the discourse, and in this way it is opening up new horizons.

Ghalib's creativity and the strength of his writing have been blessed by Bedil's work. We can ask a rhetorical question: if there was no Bedil, how could there be Ghalib? The uniqueness of Ghalib lies in the fact that he fully absorbed the oceanic essence (*Muhiit-e Azam*) of Bedil's discourse but then he left his own imprint as he transposed some of these ideas into his Urdu verse, and in this way he not only proved his own greatness but also proved Bedil's finesse, and in the process put a seal of Bedil's signification and relevance by restoring him to his rightful place in the literary canon.

In the following chapters we shall approach Ghalib's Urdu text in a chronological order, keeping a tab on the graph of his mind, while systematically proceeding from his early to the middle years and ending

with the publication of the current Divan. This process will start in [Chapter 7](#) and will go on until [Chapter 10](#).

¹ Bedil wrote four masnavis. The first *Muhiit-e Azam* in 1668, the second *Tilism-e Hairat* in 1669, the third *Tuur-e Ma'rifat* in 1687, and the fourth and the last *Irfan* in 1712. To link *Irfan* with *Laahut* is a supposition in the sense that *Laahut* is the first but not the last stage of the traditional Sufi spiritual journey.

² This refers to Jacques Derrida's deliberate rewriting of 'difference' to indicate a process of differentiation and other means that create meaning. Thus, meaning is always deferred or postponed with an endless chain of signifiers.

³ This is also the meaning of *vaak*. For Lacan, there is no reality outside language. Vedas and Upanishads say that reality is creation of *shabda*, *vaak*, or *vani*; it is *maya*, play of words.

⁴ The speechless state of creation.

⁵ '*Lauh o Qalam*'.

7

Dead Leaves, a Romantic Interlude, and a Stricken Heart



*yaad-e roze k nafas silsila-e yaarab tha
naala-e dil ba kamar daaman-e qat'-e shab tha*

How can I forget the days
when I was one
with the essence of existence—
my entreaties in love
and the charm of that magical night.

*aakhire kaar giriftaar-e sar-e zulf hua
dil-e dii vaana k vaarasta-e har mazhab tha*

After all I was the victim
of the allurement of her curly tresses
and my mad heart was ready
to give up my faith for the sake of love.

—Ghalib

Misunderstandings about Dead Leaves or Deleted Verse¹

AS WE HAVE mentioned before, critics aimed their fire at the waywardness of Ghalib's early years. But in reality, that waywardness or turbulence had nothing to do with his inventive thinking, though it had everything to do with the unevenness of diction. Either due to deep immersion in Bedil's style, or audacious pursuit of Persian, or the passion to recreate spring-like

mysterious quality in his verse for which Bedil was famous, or probably a mistaken belief that the mark of excellence as a poet depended on using highly mysterious and difficult language that was beyond the comprehension of the masses, he made a conscious decision early on to adopt an unusual diction to express his poetic thoughts. The language was neither Urdu nor Persian. On the surface, he was writing in Urdu but his thought process was stuck in Persian. In other words, he was writing Urdu in Persian.

Hali himself mentioned this:

Persian had coloured Mirza's day-to-day speech and his power of imagination from the very beginning. The language was unfamiliar just like the thoughts it expressed. Mirza used Persian's specialties such as the use of infinitives and the word connectors liberally in his Urdu. There were some couplets where if you just changed one word, the whole verse would turn into a Persian couplet. These expressions were special inventions of Mirza that were neither seen before in Urdu nor in Persian. (1897: 102–3)

Thoughts and ideas are undoubtedly shaped by the words used to express them. As pointed out by Saussure, there is no signified without a signifier. This applies to a word, a technique, an image, a simile, a metaphor, a mark, a pointer, a thing, or a sign. It is also true that right from the beginning, Ghalib's power of imagination and creative energy was so forceful and compelling that the language in comparison showed its inadequacy. Criticism of Ghalib's early Urdu poetry started with both Hali and Azad, although they were known as Mirza's admirers. Azad writes in his *Aab-e Hayat*, 'As Mirza's name stands at a great height in the world, his verse is thousand times more closed to interpretation. In other words, some couplets have been delivered in such complexity that they are beyond the mental limits of our comprehension' (1950 [1881]: 502).

Hali says that Mirza was like the intellectually challenging youngster, who, instead of simple verse, liked to read more complex couplets. Maybe this also accounts for Mirza's attraction and following of Bedil. Hali quoted seven couplets as examples to reinforce his point. In his commentary, he says that since he did not derive any pleasure in reading them, he felt no need to explain their meaning. He commented only on one couplet that is reproduced as a sample. From this, it is obvious how Mirza worked hard to create innovative style to convey his new themes. Hali selected those seven couplets from the portion of verse that Ghalib dropped while arranging the print version of his Urdu Divan. He writes, 'Even now we can find that

Urdu Divan contains one-third such couplets which do not appear to be written in Urdu language’ ([Hali 1897: 100](#)). Included among the seven couplets are some priceless ones such as:

*le gaye khaak mein ham daagh-e tamanna-e nishaat
tu ho aur aap basad rang gulistaan hona*

I took to my grave
my longing for happiness.
Ah, your presence
and hundred ways
to rejoice.

*yak qadam vahshat se dars-e daftar-e imkaan khula
jaadah ajza-e do aalam dasht ka shiiraaza tha*

When I put my foot
into the frenzy
I discovered
a world of possibilities.
The strand
that binds this world
and the next is wilderness.

With his good intent, Hali appears to offer the following defence:

Right from the very beginning, Mirza chose a path so that if there was no criticism by his esteemed friends and self-critical minds, or if there was no sarcasm, mocking, or satire by his contemporaries, he would have gone astray and as a result he would have never reached his destination. It is said that in Delhi’s poetical gatherings (*musha’iras*), where Mirza was present, the local poets used to bring such sarcastic ghazals which appeared grand on the surface but they were meaningless from within. This was to mock Mirza about his work—grand but empty. (1897: 101)

Some critics also recount a joke attributed to Maulvi Abdul Qadir Rampuri:

Once Maulvi Abdul Qadir, who was generally considered a thoughtful person and had powerful connections in Delhi, told Mirza that he was unable to understand one of his Urdu couplets and then he read it in his presence.

*pahle to roghan-e gul bhains ke ande se nikaal
phir dava jitni hai kul bhains ke ande se nikaal*

First compress all the oil of the rose from the egg of the buffalo;
then take out the medication whatever it is from the egg of the buffalo.

Mirza was surprised and said that such a senseless couplet could never be his. Maulvi Abdul Qadir said laughing that he had read it in the Divan and if there was a copy around he could show it to Mirza. This proved to Mirza how people made up stories and tried to pick on him.

Prigarina blames Hali and his contemporaries for the inadequate appreciation of Mirza's early work. Hali's comments about the complexity of Mirza's poetry and the circumstantial evidence and jokes associated with Azurda are not inconsequential. Azurda, who had good understanding of poetry, stated that Ghalib's couplets were easily recognizable because of their intricacy and complexity. Once someone recited the following couplet, which on the surface appears simple, to which Azurda responded with appreciation and said that this was 'my kind of couplet'.

*laakhon lagaao ek churaana nigaah ka
laakhon banaao ek bigarna iitaab mein*

Millions of flattering testimonies,
one stolen glance of her eye.
Millions of beautifications,
one irate motion of her eyes.

About this, Prigarina comments, 'To tell you the truth, to me this couplet appears to be ambiguous and complex' (1997: 133). When Hali called the couplet an example of simplicity, he even confused Azurda:

Because Maulana (Azurda) liked simple and straightforward verse and he was often troubled by Mirza's poetry and would categorize it in a certain way. But that day, he listened to this couplet and in an ecstatic state of mind inquired who wrote it. When told it was Mirza's, although he never used to praise Mirza's poetry, he said spontaneously, 'What is there to offer praise to Mirza? This is just my kind of couplet.' (1897: 133-34)

This attitude was not limited to Azurda and others. Maulana Fazl-e Haq, for whom Ghalib had great respect, was its biggest proponent. Hali says that when Maulana and other friends prodded and nudged him too much, Ghalib deleted nearly one-third of his Urdu verse while making selections for his final Divan ([Hali 1897: 102](#)).

This kind of thinking later became the source of many misunderstandings. As we have stated above, this was not a simple affair. The indications of complexity, or density versus simplicity, in Ghalib's case were not as simple as Hali's and Azurda's examples made it out to be. Ghalib's relationship with Bedil was not straightforward that he could make or break under an impulse. It was not artificial and definitely not volitional. It had several unconscious knots which are not easy to disentangle. We have

talked at length about this in the last chapter. It is worth noting that after his trip to Kolkata, Ghalib moved somewhat away from Urdu and was drawn more towards Persian for some peculiar reasons.

After making two earlier unsuccessful attempts, one at the age of nineteen and the other when he was twenty-five, which ended in disappointment, finally in 1833 Ghalib made his first organized effort to make a selection of his Urdu ghazals with a view to making it a distinctive Urdu Divan. But this work was delayed because the person who was supposed to write the preface got late in finishing the job. Therefore, the Urdu Divan was published only in 1841. This volume contained the poetic work that Ghalib had written until 1833. As a result of his Kolkata visit and a conscious drift towards Persian, as hinted above, Ghalib had earned fame as a Persian poet and, therefore, he now wished to be known as an established Persian poet. Consequently, he thought that Persian poetry for him was a mark of prestige and Urdu (for which he is loved and considered great today) was somehow below his stature. In this context, we can appreciate why Ghalib would consider his Urdu verse comparing it with Persian by using labels like *barge dazham* or *auraaq-e pazhmurda*. He said it beautifully in the following couplet:

*niist nuqsaan yak do juzv ast az savaad-e rekhta
kaan dazham barge z nakhlistaan-e farhang-e man ast*

So what if Urdu verse
is a small part of my entire work!
In my blooming garden of poetry,
it is like a few dried-up leaves.

There are several views about how Ghalib made his selection for the print version of his Urdu Divan. According to Azad, this was done by Maulana Fazl-e Haq Khairabadi and Mirza Khani Kotwal of Delhi. Both of them looked at all that was available and made the final selection. In this connection, Hali mentions the names of Fazl-e Haq, Azurda, and Shefta ([Hali 1897: 102](#)). Sheikh Mohammad Ikram, while referring to Ghalib's own statements and the accounts of contemporaries, hypothesizes that the selection was made by Ghalib himself, which in our opinion appears to be a correct assessment. We feel that this process of selecting and polishing continued for a long time. After the initial two attempts, two more handwritten anthologies known as *Nuskha-e Shirani* (1826) and *Gul-e Ra'na* (1828) were completed by Ghalib at the request of his friends who

wanted copies of his verse. This effort continued after his return to Delhi. It is possible that he consulted Fazl-e Haq Khairabadi because of the latter's scholarship, which he held in high esteem. But the final arrangement that was completed in 1833 was largely Ghalib's own endeavour.

It is just possible that all those who offered free advice had something to do with it but the final selection was the result of Ghalib's intellectual effort and determined action. And since the print edition came out several years later, we think that the selection was not a one-time event. This first edition of the Divan was reprinted five times in Ghalib's life, and each time fresh ghazals were added to the Divan.

Among the discoveries in Bhopal were the First Nuskha or Rendition (the manuscript written by Ghalib which contains his verse up to the age of nineteen) and the Second Nuskha or Rendition (includes his verses up to the age of twenty-five) ([Raza 1988: 13, 103](#)). Interestingly, the Second Nuskha was discovered first and was published in Bhopal in 1921 under the title *Nuskha-e Hamidia* ([Haq 1921](#)). The Second Nuskha was discovered almost half a century later at the time of Ghalib's centenary celebrations in 1969 and was published the same year ([Khan 1969](#)). The denunciation of Ghalib's early poetry that started with Hali and Azad was overcome after the publication of Bijnouri's brilliant critique *Mahasin-e Kalam-e Ghalib*, and the discovery of the manuscript of *Nuskha-e Hamidia* almost 50 years after Ghalib's death. This removed many misgivings, and for the first time it was revealed that many ghazals, which by that time had become popular and were considered to be of the later period, were in fact written before he attained the age of twenty-five. This turned the tide of appreciation of Ghalib's poetry and Ghalibian scholarship.

According to [Prigarina \(1997: 86\)](#), Hali's characterizations are sometimes too extreme. Hali's point of view is not fair about someone who wrote, 'Wish you knew how poetry originates and grows from dried stalks'. In Ghalib's own words quoted by Hali,

Fame and wealth are strangers to me. And I am myself an enemy of good standing and good repute. I keep company with useless people. My feet like wandering and my tongue is loose. I'm a master of bringing misfortune to myself and at times I act like my enemy's counsel. My wanderings make the dust to rise from the mosque and the temple, and monastery and tavern fall over one another. ([Prigarina 1997](#))

Hali goes on to say that Mirza spent much of his youth in pursuits with which a well-groomed person would have nothing to do. Among the things

that he found objectionable included his habit of drinking champagne and wine (which euphemistically he refers to as *araq-e taak* or juice of grapes) and his carelessness about religious matters. But he finds it miraculous that during this time of licentiousness and lack of restraint, Mirza devoted his energy to excelling in poetry (1897: 98).

From Hali's narrative about early poetry, it was generally believed that while Ghalib was making the selection, he threw away one-third of the verse because it was too complex and beyond normal comprehension. It is also believed that the first edition of *Divan* contained poetry only of mature years, and nothing was included from what was written in the early years. This misconception gained currency because we had no information about the chronology of Ghalib's work. But, there are now surprising findings which prove that the poet wrote some of the most interesting ghazals in the *nuskhas* when he was under the age of nineteen. He composed some other great ghazals before the age of twenty-five. We shall revert to this theme later.

The problem with the arrangement of a *Divan* is that the ghazals are presented in the order of rhyming alphabet, and not in the order in which they were composed. Abdul Lateef and Sheikh Mohammad Ikram took the first steps in constructing a chronology of the ghazals using internal as well as external sources, such as Ghalib's letters and other recorded documents. Nonetheless, a thorough graph of the evolution of Ghalib's mind was not available. The most comprehensive work in this connection was done by Imtiaz Ali Arshi ([Arshi 1958](#)). But unwittingly, it too was flawed conceptually. He divided his version of *Divan* (called *Nuskha-e Arshi*) in two parts: the first part was named by him as *Ganj-e Ma'ni* (the treasure trove of meaning, comprising early poetry) and the second part *Navaae Surosh* (angel's voice, comprising later poetry). The flawed arrangement of this endeavour was pointed out by Prigarina in that Arshi did not rearrange the whole thing in chronological order, as all those ghazals from the early years that Ghalib had included in the *Divan* were removed from the first part *Ganj-e Ma'ni* where they originally belonged but allowed them to stay in the second part along with the later poetry, as the practise of the printed *Divan* had been. As a result, the prevailing misconception was not rectified and the graph that emerged was inherently flawed. Eventually, the whole thing was redone and the job was accomplished by Kalidas Gupta Raza, who worked painstakingly for years and whose rearranged *Divan* with year-

wise sections (known as *Nuskha-e Raza*) was published for the first time in 1988 ([Raza 1995](#)).

It really goes to Raza's credit that he rearranged Ghalib's entire poetical work in the order it was written (including *Nuskha-e Bhopal b Khatt-e Ghalib* of 1816, *Nuskha-e Bhopal* known as *Nuskha-e Hamidia* of 1821, *Nuskha-e Shirani* of 1826, and *Gule Ra'na* of 1828). Now we can clearly see how Ghalib evolved his magical style and how he made revisions and corrections to his early poetry.

In the following table, we have highlighted some specimens of the changes and revisions that Ghalib made in the verse that he wrote up to the age of nineteen. One conclusion which we can draw from this is that the changes had less to do with the poet's process of thinking or intellectual approach than with the surface structure of language, expression, diction, and grammar. This rectifies many popular myths and conjectures about how the poetical work evolved over the course of time. In fact, Ghalib did not delete all the verse as popularly believed. He revised and retained a substantial part of it, as we shall see and analyse later. Let us first look at the nature of the revisions and corrections he made in the first *Nuskha* (we call it *Rendition One*). The Urdu text is from Raza's comprehensive chronological work and the page numbers to the left are drawn from the *Divan* edited by him.

If we look closely at these changes, we can easily see the poet's motivation as to why he is making the changes. As we shall see later, there is a lot of difference in grammar, usages, and diction between what was written in 1816 compared with what we find in 1821. In the early years, Ghalib was too obsessed with Persian grammar and usages even where they did not go well with the Urdu language. Some elements of Persian usage got absorbed and naturalized in Urdu in the way of milk mixing with honey but there were others that appeared odd and unusual. When languages interact, they accept or reject over a period of time according to their collective genius. This is a naturally evolving cultural process that does not allow wilful impositions. No force would work. Sometimes the poet can mould language with the force of his creative fire but at other times he cannot arbitrarily take some elements from one language and superimpose on the other. This creates oddities and incongruities, giving way to difficulties of reception and comprehension. That is why we had this early

misconception—something is great here but it is unnatural, odd, or incongruous.

Table 7.1 Revisions by Ghalib in the Verse He Wrote Before the Age of Nineteen

Page number	Original text	Revised text
140	<i>aatashiin pa huun gudaaz-e vahshat-e zindaan n puuchh</i>	<i>bas k huun Ghalib asiiri mein bhi aatish zer pa</i>
142	<i>Asad khaak-e dar-e maikhana-ha bar farq paashiidan</i>	<i>Asad khaak-e dar-e maikhana ab sar par uraata huun</i>
151	<i>Asad afsos o dard-e nashanaasi-haaye gumraahyaan</i>	<i>mujhe raah-e sukhan mein khauf-e gumraahi nahien Ghalib</i>
153	<i>Asad tarz aashnaayaan qadardaan-e nukta sanji hain</i>	<i>Asad arbaab-e fitrat qadardaan-e lafz-o ma'ni hain</i>
155	<i>le to luun sote mein uske bosa-haaye pa magar</i>	<i>le to luun sote mein uske paaon ka bosa magar</i>
156	<i>sho'la khas mein misl-e khuun dar rag nihaan ho jaayega</i>	<i>jaise khuun rag mein</i>
161	<i>tapish-e aaiina pardaaz-e tamanna maaluum</i>	<i>tapish-e aaiina pardaaz-e tamanna laayi</i>
162	<i>jaan daadgaan ka hausla fursat gudaaz tar</i>	<i>jaan daadgaan ka hausla fursat gudaaz hai</i>
166	<i>sham'a-ruuyaana ki sar angusht hinaayi dekh kar</i>	<i>sham'a-ruuyon ki sar angusht-e hinaayi dekh kar</i>
167	<i>dil z garmi-e tabaak-e ahl-e duniya jal gaya</i>	<i>dil z tarze-e tapaak-e ahl-e duniya jal gaya</i>
169	<i>hai shafaq az soz-e dil-haa aatish-e afrokhta</i>	<i>hai shafaq soz-e jigar ki aag ki baaliidgi</i>
170	<i>ae uduu-e maslehat chande b zabt afsurda rah kardani hai jama' taab-e shokhi-e diidaar-e dost</i>	The entire couplet was revised as under: <i>ae dil-e na aaqibat andesh zabt-e shauq kar kaun la sakta hai taab-e jalva-e diidaar-e dost</i>
171	<i>hai baqadr-e neza az baalaay-e va afrokhta</i>	<i>hai sava neze p uske qaamat-e naukhez se</i>
174	<i>hai lab-e gul ko rava jumbiidan-e barg ikhtilaaj</i>	<i>Jumbush-e har barg se hai gul ke lab ko ikhtalaaj</i>
189	<i>nikaale hai z paa-e sham'a bar ja manda khar aatish</i>	<i>na nikle sham'a ke pa se nikaale gar n khaar aatish</i>
197	<i>ho gaya dar gulshan aabaad-e jarahat-haay-e dil</i>	<i>gulshan aabaad-e dil-e majruuh mein ho jaaye hai</i>
197	<i>barq zaar-e jalvah hai az khud rabuudan-haaye husn</i>	<i>barq-e saamaan-e nazar hai jalvah-e bebaak-e husn</i>
207	<i>tamiiz bakhshi-e zishti o neko par harf</i>	<i>tamiiz-e zishti o neki mein laakh batein hain</i>
209	<i>hui taqriib-e man'e shauq-e diidan</i>	<i>hui hai maan'-e zauq-e tamaasha khaana viiraani</i>

	<i>khaana viiraani</i>	
211	<i>darushti-e ta-ammul hai fasuun-e pamba dar goshi</i>	<i>hujuum-e saada lauhi pamba-e gosh-e hariifan hai</i>
218	<i>hasad paimana hai dil aalam-e aab-e tamaasha ho</i>	<i>hasad se dil agar afsurdah hai garm-e tamaasha ho</i>
219	<i>agar voh sarv jaan bakhsh-e khiraam-e ehtizaaz aave</i>	<i>agar vo sarv qad garm-e khiraam-e naaz aave</i>
239	<i>chashm-e khuubaan mai farosh-e nashsha zaar-e naaz hai</i>	<i>chashm-e khuubaan khaamushi mein bhi naava pardaaz hai</i>
241	<i>rafta-e dil burdani</i>	<i>iltifaat-e avvaliin</i>
244	<i>aaiina nafs se ho hairaan-e kadoorat ha</i>	<i>aaiina nafs se bhi hota hai kaduurat kash</i>
246	<i>mashq-e yak par-afshaandan</i>	<i>mashq-e par-fishaani bhi</i>
258	<i>baagh-e khaamoshi-e dil se sukhan-e ishq Asad nafas-e sokhta ramz-e chaman iimaayi hai</i>	<i>ug raha hai dar-o deevaar se sabza Ghalib ham bayaabaan mein hain aur ghar mein bahaar aayi hai</i>
		This ghazal was written before he was nineteen. At the time of <i>Nuskha-e Shirani</i> in 1826, Ghalib replaced the old <i>maqt'a</i> with a new one.

Here are some interesting findings and observations about these changes and revisions:

1. Ghalib's experimentation with Persian's undigested, syntactical, grammatical elements and odd phrases ended with the poetry written before the age of nineteen. All the changes that we mentioned above belong to the period of First Rendition.
2. For the poetry written between the ages of nineteen and twenty-five, the undigested or non-naturalized Persian elements are close to being insignificant.
3. From this analysis, it is quite clear that the change took place at the age of nineteen and not twenty-five, as is commonly thought, or stated by Ghalib himself.
4. The change had much to do with the surface structure of language and elements of diction and grammar and not with creative orientation, poetical process, or inventiveness of thought. In Ghalib's own words, 'I wrote *mazaamiin-e khayaali* (intellectually complex and abstruse thoughts which were puzzling or difficult) up to the age of 25 ... when I got to my senses I set aside that poetical work and tore up those pages' ([Ghalib 1920: 204](#)). This statement, however, is not correct in the light of facts. It is true that the change occurred around the 19th

year. The reference to *mazamiin* in this case applies only to the outcome that was the result of linguistic experimentation and wordplay. It had nothing to do with the core of poet's thinking processes. We shall address this issue later in more detail.

5. Among the commentators, only Hameed Ahmed Khan and Sheikh Mohammad Ikram seem to get it right when they sense the change around the nineteenth year, though they fail to point out that this change was more formalistic than substantive. There are also differences between these two commentators about the time periods. Our views about the real nature of this change, as mentioned above, have proven correct.

6. *Mazamiin-e khayaali* continued after the age of twenty-five. The change was limited to the use of language; it had little to do with the creative processes and substance.

7. It is also worth noting that the nineteenth year saw another change, as Ghalib decided to change his nom de plume (*takhallus*) from Asad to Ghalib. The year 1231 h (1816 ^{AD}) also saw, according to Malik Ram, the poet getting a new seal with the inscription 'Asadullah ul-Ghalib 1231 h'. This year is also important because calligraphic work on the *Nuskha-e Awwal* in Ghalib's hand was completed. That is five or six years before the other one that came to be known as *Nuskha-e Hamidia* (1821). Between the nineteenth and the twenty-fifth years, we have found only two instances where the changes are worth noting.

8. After an objective analysis of all the changes, there is irrefutable evidence that all early poetic work was not affected by undigested Persian usages. There is a substantial part that contributed to the beautification of Urdu language. This particular trait for which Ghalib is famous did not show up in a sudden manner. This is something that he nurtured from his early years. Let us see some examples that reinforce this point. Given below are the first lines of some of the famous ghazals that commonly were thought to be of later years but in fact are found in the First Rendition. They belong to the poetry composed before the age of nineteen—the so-called period of waywardness and immaturity:

Table 7.2 Examples of Revisions between Ages Nineteen and Twenty-five

Page number	Original text	Revised text
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320	<i>isharat iijaad ch buue gul v ku duud-e chiraagh</i>	<i>buue gul naala-e dil duud-e chiraagh-e mehfil</i>
327	<i>ab main huun aur khuun-e do aalam mu'amlā</i>	<i>ab main huun aur maatam-e yak shehr-e arzu</i>

These 30 or so ghazals belong to the period before the nineteenth year when Ghalib was too much into the excessive Persian style of writing. In spite of this, we find that these are beautiful creations that enriched the Urdu language, and the ghazals marked N that were included in the Divan proved to be among the most popular.

9. After the nineteenth year, as the influence of undigested Persian grammatical element subsided, we find more combing and chiseling, blending and grafting, and creative beautification by Ghalib in his use of Urdu language. Please see [Table 7.4](#). and [Table 7.5](#).
10. All verses identified with symbols N and Q belong to the years when Ghalib suffered a boycott. There are many myths that surround the poet's early works. The main reason for this was that scholars had not spent enough time on comparative textual analyses of all the Nuskha manuscripts and the published Divan. Some myths were so firmly grounded that even some renowned commentators were not free from their influence. A great scholar like Malik Ram writes:

In the beginning Ghalib focused his attention on Urdu poetry that was coloured by the influence of Bedil, Aseer, and Shaukat. By the time he was 25, there was a complete Divan with nearly two thousand couplets. If he had proceeded on this pathway, there was nothing to stop his literary death. But gratefully ... he turned back from this waywardness and he dumped his earlier Divan. (1964: 42)

Table 7.3 First Lines of Famous Ghalib Ghazals Written Before the Age of Nineteen

Page number	First line of a couplet	Symbol footnote ²
140	<i>naqsh faryaadi hai kis ki shokhi-e tahriir ka ...</i>	<u>N</u>
145	<i>diida go khuun ho tamaashaaye chaman matlab tha ...</i>	N
147	<i>bulbul ke kaarobaar p hain khanda haaye gul ...</i>	<u>N</u>
150	<i>chaman ka jalva baais hai meri rangiin navaayi ka ...</i>	<u>N</u>
153	<i>lataafat be kasaafat jalva paida kar nahien sakti ...</i>	<u>N</u>
158	<i>shab k zauq-e guftaguu se teri dil betaab tha ...</i>	<u>N</u>
161	<i>arz-e niyaaz-e ishq ke qaabil nahien raha ...</i>	<u>N</u>
166	<i>aag is ghar mein lagi aisi k jo tha jal gaya ...</i>	<u>N</u>
174	<i>gulshan mein bandobast b rang-e digar hai aaj ...</i>	<u>N</u>
177	<i>ae tift-e khud mua'amlā qad se asa baland ...</i>	N
186	<i>gul khile ghunche chatakne lage aur sub-h hui ...</i>	N

195	<i>aata hai daagh-e hasrat-e dil ka shumaar yaad ...</i>	<u>N</u>
199	<i>tamaashaaye gulshan tamannaaye chiidan ...</i>	N
201	<i>gham nahien hota hai aazaadon ko besh az yak nafas ...</i>	<u>N</u>
202	<i>jahaan tera naqsh-e qadam dekhte hain ...</i>	<u>N</u>
204	<i>dair-o haram aaiina-e takraar-e tamanna ...</i>	N
204	<i>ae aagahi fareb-e tamaasha kahaan nahien ...</i>	N
205	<i>dil laga kar lag gaya unko bhi tanha baithna ...</i>	<u>N</u>
206	<i>ae nava saaz-e tamaasha sar bakaf jalta huun main ...</i>	N
210	<i>main chashm-e va kushaada o gulshan nazar fareb ...</i>	N
211	<i>main andaleeb-e gulshan-e na-afriida huun ...</i>	N
211	<i>vagarna khwaab ki muzmar hain afsaane mein ta'abiirein</i>	N
218	<i>hasad se dil agar afsurda hai garm-e tamaasha ho</i>	<u>N</u>
237	<i>aarzuu se hai shikast-e aarzu matlab mujhe ...</i>	<u>N</u>
247	<i>vo jalva kar k n main jaanuun aur n tu jaane ...</i>	N
252	<i>k khaamushi ko hai pairaaya-e bayaan tujh se ...</i>	N
253	<i>kis ka dil huun k do aalam se lagaaya hai mujhe ...</i>	N
254	<i>saaya-e shaakh-e gul uf'ii nazar aata hai mujhe ...</i>	<u>N</u>
262	<i>afsuun-e intizaar tamanna kahein jise ...</i>	<u>N</u>
268	<i>libaas-e nazm mein baaliidan-e mazmuun aali hai ...</i>	N
276	<i>Asad band-e qabaaye yaar hai firdaus ka ghuncha ...</i>	N
288	<i>pech-o taab-e dil nasiib-e khaatir-e aagaah hai ...</i>	N

Table 7.4 Explanation of Symbols Used for Identifying Different Aspects of Ghalib's Verse

N First Nuskha or First Rendition (age nineteen)

Q *Nuskha-e Hamidia* or Second Rendition (age twenty-five)

N or Selected for the published Divan

Q

N+ Verse was added later and written on the marginal spaces of the folios of the particular

or Nuskha, maybe after a day, a month, or a year following the Nuskha was actually completed.

Q+

Malik Ram makes two points: (a) influence of poets like Bedil guaranteed a sure literary death; and (b) Ghalib trashed the early work in totality. Assertions such as these have been common and are totally wrong and misleading. Surprisingly, they were triggered by Ghalib's own cursory remarks and Hali's account. But now we know for sure that substantial amount of verses written during the period of 'waywardness' are very much part of the published Divan. We have provided evidence of more than fifty ghazals from that period.

11. There is a prevailing tendency to blame and excoriate Ghalib's *Bediliyat*. We should not forget that the influence of Bedil coupled with Ghalib's fascination for Persian usage did a lot of good to Urdu language. It enriched the art and tradition of writing poetry in Urdu and brought about beautification of the language that was otherwise impossible. This was all the result of Sabke Hindi and Bedil. Together they contributed a lot in the long run to Ghalib's pre-eminence as a poet, his magic touch, and his unique style.

Table 7.5 First Lines of Famous Ghalib Ghazals Written Between the Age of Nineteen and Twenty-five

Page number	The first line of a couplet	Symbol
294	<i>jo y kahe k rekhta kyun ke ho rashk-e faarsi gufta-e Ghalib ek baar parh ke use suna k yuun</i>	<u>N</u> +
294	<i>ghuncha-e na-shagufta ko duur se mat dikha k yun ...</i>	<u>N</u> +
294	<i>vo firaaq aur vo visaal kahaan ...</i>	<u>N</u> +
295	<i>varasta is se hain k muhabbat hi kyun n ho ...</i>	<u>N</u> +
297	<i>dard se mere hai tujh ko beqaraari haaye haaye ...</i>	<u>N</u> +
298	<i>ishq mujh ko nahien vahshat hi sahi ...</i>	<u>N</u> +
299	<i>chaahiye achchchon ko jitna chahiye ...</i>	<u>N</u> +
300	<i>phir usi bevafa p marte hain ...</i>	<u>N</u> +
301	<i>muddat hui hai yaar ko mehmaan kiye huye ...</i>	<u>N</u> +
303	<i>likhte rahe junuun ki hikaayaat-e khuun chakaan ...</i>	<u>N</u> +
304	<i>rone se aur ishq mein bebaak ho gaye ...</i>	<u>N</u> +
312	<i>dahar juz jalva-e yaktaayi-e maashuq nahien ...</i>	Q
319	<i>kahte ho n denge ham dil agar para paaya ...</i>	Q
320	<i>kaarkhaane se junuun ke bhi main uryaan nikla ...</i>	Q
321	<i>dahar mein naqsh-e vafa vajah-e tasalli n hua ...</i>	Q
322	<i>shauq har rang raqiib-e saro saamaan nikla ...</i>	Q
326	<i>gila hai shauq ko dil mein bhi tangi-e ja ka ...</i>	Q
327	<i>bas k dushvaar hai har kaam ka aasaan hona ...</i>	Q
328	<i>phir mujhe diida-e tar yaad aaya ...</i>	Q
329	<i>nafas na anjuman-e aarzu se baahar khiinch ...</i>	Q
330	<i>husn ghamze ki kashaakash se chhuta mere baad ...</i>	Q
332	<i>hariif-e matlab-e mushkil nahien fusuun-e niyaaz ...</i>	Q
332	<i>n gul-e naghma huun n parda-e saaz ...</i>	Q
334	<i>aah ko chaahiye ik umr asar hote tak ...</i>	Q
343	<i>gar khaamushi se faaida ikhfaaye haal hai ...</i>	Q
346	<i>har qadam duuri-e manzil hai numaayaan mujh se ...</i>	Q
347	<i>jab tak dahaan-e zakhm n paida kare koi ...</i>	Q

12. It is commonly stated that as Ghalib reached adulthood, he rejected two-third of his poetic work. We now know that this matter is not as simple. The truth of the matter is that the proportion of rejection is much higher for verse written before the age of nineteen than that written between the age of nineteen and twenty-five.
13. The total number of couplets in the First Rendition was 1,784, of which only 312 were included in the Divan, that is, four-fifth part was left out ([Raza 1995: 29](#)).
14. Here is the other side of the picture. The first edition of Divan (1841) contained in all 1,093 couplets, of which 753 (nearly 70 per cent) can be identified as included from Rendition One and Rendition Two that was written before the age of twenty-five ([Raza 1995](#)).
15. There is another eye-opening fact. Of the First Rendition (N), only 312, that is, one-fifth was selected for publication but 441 couplets from the Second Rendition (Q) out of a total of 801 were selected (that is, nearly 50 per cent). In view of this, we can say that the change started from the age of nineteen and not twenty-five, which is a creative milestone.
16. Although following the immense popularity of Divan-e Ghalib, readers do not pay attention to this, and even generally it is not known but it must however be remembered that the Divan contains 753 couplets from the period that came under fire, not only from Hali or Azad but from one and all.

Based on this analysis, we can say without any reservation that Ghalib's immense popularity as a poet draws nearly 70 per cent from the verse written by him before the age of twenty-five (which is found in Nuskha N and Nuskha Q), and which due to widespread misunderstandings and mis-characterizations is known as *kalaam-e mansuukh* (deleted verse).

A Romantic Interlude and the Earthly Love

After we have corrected the common misunderstandings and myths about the early poetry of Ghalib and elaborated how he was unfairly made to suffer for his adoration of Bedil and writing in his enriched concentrated style, we need to emphasize that this early period also coincided with the time when the poet received a tragic hit, the pain of which was felt by him until the end of his life. The creative markings of this incident can be found

in some ghazals of both early manuscripts (N and Q), and about which Prigarina says, ‘Ghalib’s poetry is known for its luminous and resplendent quality and its beauty is further illuminated by painful emotions associated with unrequited love. The verse from the initial period is filled with “love” as a subject and even the later work in Persian and Urdu has the same subdued fire and flavor’ (1997: 116).

The time Ghalib spent in Agra, while he was growing up, was the time when he experienced material abundance and lavish style of life. He spent quite a bit of his time in licentious activities that appeal to youngsters. Thinking nostalgically of his early years in Agra, Ghalib writes in a letter to Nawab Ziauddin Ahmad Khan:

This ruined and devastated city was once the abode of a distressed person like me and even today in every pore of this land of worthy people there are springs filled with wounded memories. And that was the time when love emanated from each blade of grass and there was not one plant with which you would not fall in love instantaneously. In this garden, the morning breeze brought intoxication with such force that hearts started to beat much faster; drunkards forgot about the concerns of last night’s hangover; and the devout forgot about their routine to say the morning prayers... Each flower laden particle of dust that belongs to this land was a source of great joy to me. And I prayed for each and every petal of this garden. But the times have changed. Looking at you I ask you two questions.... Tell me how does that awesome stone horse near our ancestral home accept my blessings and how does the vast and winding Yamuna river’s graceful waves respond to my salutation?³

Ghalib wrote a qasida in Persian in his early years that describes the colourful and tender bud-like quality of those years. Here is a summary of the poem.

I am like a nightingale that lived on each and every branch of this garden and into each fold of the spring season. The bud of every breath that I took symbolized cheerfulness and was blessed by the morning breeze and the bouquets of flowers. Every move that I made was at the behest of my beloved and it could be compared with flowers in the saddle of the curves of my beloved. Because of the unfaithfulness of my friends my chest was full of words that had to do with the trade of unfaithfulness. Because of the charms and coquettish manners of my beloved, my eyes reflected the feeling that comes about only when you are waiting for her to arrive. All my time was filled with intoxicating joys and cheerfulness of life and I spent most of my time writing poetry, pursuing carnal pleasures, partying, wagering and gambling.

We have little authentic information about the romantic interlude except what Ghalib wrote in a letter addressed to Hatim Ali Beg. He was reminiscing about his days of youth and talked about how a *domni* (a singing, dancing girl) had fallen madly in love with him. He wrote:

We Mughal lads are outrageously passionate. If we fall in love with someone, we really kill her with our love. I am also a Mughal. In my life I too afflicted a *domni* with my love. May God bless the

lovers and the two of us because we have experienced the wound of the loss of loved ones! This happened nearly forty or forty-two years ago. Although I am not into this game anymore and I no longer possess the skill of managing a love affair, I do remember her and her enchanting ways. I will never forget all my life how she died. ([Ghalib 1926: vol. 2, 495](#))

Some biographers think that Mirza fell in love with a *tavaaif*, a sophisticated singing and dancing mistress who had poetic and literary taste. In some of the letters, we find a reference to a *tavaaif* named Mughal Jaan ([Ghalib 1926: vol. 2, 496](#)). But we do not get any confirmation about Ghalib's love affair with this lady from other writings.

Mirza wrote about his impressive height, his purplish complexion, and manly beauty in his letters ([Ghalib 1926: vol. 2, 497](#)). From his poetry, we get the feeling of his narcissistic tendencies. He openly talks about his popularity and how he was a source of inspiration to the opposite sex.

ba man k taab-e naaz-e nikoyaan n daashtam
bad kard bad k jor-o jafa kard rozgaar

Beautiful people felt a sense of pride
by associating themselves with my name.
The world treated me terribly.
It cheated me by taking away what was mine.

In a prominent Persian ghazal, we get a full description of body's pleasures. It is a good representation of the highly intoxicating life that he led. Even with the constraints of the oblique art of ghazal where everything is said figuratively, it is not difficult to guess that the poet lived a passionate sensual life.

baya k qaayeda-e aasmaan bagardaanem
qaza bagardish-e ratl-e garaan bagardaanem

Come, we shall change the ways of heaven
and by putting wine into a large revolving decanter
we can force even death to go away.

We know one thing for sure that when Mirza was 13, he was asked to marry Umrao Begum who was 12 years old. The bride belonged to a prominent family of title holders. It is just possible that during the wedding celebrations, Mirza was attracted to an enticing female singer. But we have not found any written confirmation of this, except for a letter that Mirza himself wrote about his love for an oppressively beautiful courtesan. We do not know anything more about this romance. On the question whether she

was a singer, dancer, or a sophisticated tavaaif, Malik Ram says that the word *domni* lent itself to different interpretations. It appears that she was not an ordinary professional woman because she had a cultivated taste and the knack of poetic appreciation. Unfortunately, this obsessive affair ended tragically when the woman committed suicide ([Malik 1964: 51](#)).

Dancing and singing girls were an integral part of the cultural life of those times. The word *domni* was used for singer-dancers and it was customary for the young boys and men from the rich families to visit courtesans. Ghalib must have been used to visiting *kothas* (dancing quarters) and participated in these kinds of gatherings in Agra and Delhi. It is not altogether clear who was at the centre of Ghalib's affection: a dancing girl, a tavaaif, or some other woman of literary taste. Whoever she was, she was a passionate woman of courage and self-respect. Her suicide is a mystery.

*galiyon mein meri na'ash ko khenche phiro k main
jaan daada-e havaaye sar-e rahguzaar tha*

I deserve to be disgraced;
why not drag my body
through the streets after my death.
I myself earned ill repute and
did what should not have been done.

The following two *maqt'a* couplets also belong to that time.

*tere naukar tere dar par Asad ko zibah karte hain
sitamgar naakhuda tars aashnaa kush maajira kya hai*

How amazing that your guards misbehave
and virtually kill me at your doorsteps.
O cruel, heartless, killer of friendships,
tell me what is the matter with you.

*dilli ke rahne vaalo Asad ko sataao mat
bechaara chand roz ka yaan mehmaan hai*

Listen ye inhabitants of Delhi
do not bother and torture Asad.
The poor soul is an outsider,
staying here for a few days.

These couplets were not included in the Divan. Maybe because they are factual and reveal something that is against the figurative tenor of ghazal genre. Prigarina is of the view that the social barriers and difficulties worked to further ignite Ghalib's fire of love. The following ghazal is representative of the luminous emotion of love that had taken Mirza as its victim. This First Rendition (N) ghazal is retained in the Divan.

*ishq mujh ko nahien vahshat hi sahi
meri vahshat teri shohrat hi sahi*

I'm in passionate love;
call it madness.
My frenzy brings you
unwanted fame and attention.
Let it be.

*qat'a kije n ta'alluq ham se
kuchh nahien hai to adaavat hi sahi*

Do not cut off with me.
If nothing else, let there be animus.
Hatred is also a relationship.
Let it be.

*ham bhi dushman to nahien hain apne
ghair ko tujh se muhabbat hi sahi*

I am not my own enemy,
but my life depends on your love.
I know that my rival loves you too
but his life does not depend
on your love.
Let it be.

*ham koi tark-e vafa karte hain
n sahi ishq musiibat hi sahi*

I am never going to stop loving you.
If you do not return my love,
there will be calamity and ruin.
Let it be.

ham bhi tasliim ki kahu daalenge
beniyaazi teri aadat hi sahi

I will gradually learn from you
the habit of obliviousness
that you have perfected
Let it be.

yaar se chher chali jaaye Asad
gar nahien vasl to hasrat hi sahi

Asad, a little bit of teasing
is always fun among friends.
If there is no union,
there will be longing for union.
Let it be.

The following maqt'a from another ghazal is also from the same period but it was not included in the Divan for obvious reasons.

us jafa mashrab p aashiq huun k samjhe hai Asad
maal-e sunni ko mubaah aur khuun-e sufi ko halaal

How terrible,
Asad is afflicted by a cruel beauty
who believes that the torture of a Sufi is halal
and plundering a Sunni is fair!

It is also possible that the woman in question was secretly a Shia. The following two couplets show how deeply Ghalib felt about this relationship. Notice his use of words *vaarasta-e har mazhab* (free from the constraints of any faith or creed). He was ready to go to any extreme to be with her.

yaad-e roze k nafas dar gir-h-e yaarab tha
naala-e dil b kamar daaman-e qat'e shab tha

How can I forget the days
when I was one
with the fragrance of existence—
my humble requests
and the charm of that magical night.

aakhire kaar giriftaar-e sar-e zulf hua
dil-e diivaana k vaarasta-e har mazhab tha

After all, I was the victim

of the allurements of her curly tresses,
and my mad heart was ready
to give up my faith for the sake of love.

Yusuf Husain Khan writes:

From Ghalib's ghazals, it is quite clear that he uses the word *ishq* (passionate love) neither in the context of man's love of God nor the love that should persist between husband and wife. It is also not a conventional matter to meet the needs of poetry. It is a kind of inner glow or a mysterious force that is governed by the rules which are hidden in itself. ([Khan 1968: 152](#); [Prigara 1997: 117](#))

We can gauge the depth of the shock that Mirza suffered on the poor girl's suicide that he recalled the incident in his letter, previously referred to in this chapter, after a gap of 40 years. That letter was probably written in 1859 or 1860. So if it works backwards, about 40 to 42 years ago, it brings us to the period between 1817 and 1819 when Ghalib's age was between nineteen and twenty-one. This is the time when he had migrated to Delhi from Agra. The following ghazal, which was written at that time, looks like a *marsiya* (an elegy for the dead beloved in this case). We can see that the poet in the last verse, *maqt'a*, refers clearly that the incident happened in Delhi (*meri dilli hi mein honi thi y khwaari haaye haaye*).

dard se mere hai tujh ko beqaraari haaye haaye
kya hui zaalim teri ghaflat shi'aari haaye haaye

My pain is making you restless.
Alas! Alas!
What happened to your obliviousness,
dear oppressor?
Alas! Alas!

tere dil mein gar n tha aashob-e gham ka hausla
tu ne phir kyun ki thi meri ghamgusaari haaye haaye

If your heart was not strong enough
to bear the pain of suffering,
why did you try to console me?
Alas! Alas!

kyun meri ghamkhwaargi ka tujh ko aata tha khayaal
dushmani apni thi meri dost daari haaye haaye

How did you get the idea
that you could console me?

Your friendship with me
was enmity to your own self.
Alas! Alas!

*umr bhar ka tu ne paimaan-e vafa baandha to kya
umr ko bhi to nahien hai paayedaari haaye haaye*

You gave me a vow of love for this life.
So what?
Life itself is not stable and permanent.
Alas! Alas!

*gul fishaani haaye naaz-e jalva ko kya ho gaya
khaak par hoti hai teri laala kaari haaye haaye*

What happened
to your spring flowers like
seductive beauty?
Some flowers are now sprouting
in the dust.
Alas! Alas!

*sharm-e rusvaayi se ja chhupna niqaab-e khaak mein
khatm hai ulfat ki tujh par parda daari haaye haaye*

Afraid of being defamed,
you cover yourself in a veil of dust.
Concealment of love is an art with you.
Alas! Alas!

*khaak mein naamos-e paimaan-e muhabbat mil gayi
uth gayi duniya se raah-o rasm-e yaari haaye haaye*

Our vows of love are now part of the grime.
The world is now nothing but devoid
of love and friendship.
Alas! Alas!

*ishq ne pakra na tha Ghalib abhi vahshat ka rang
rah gaya tha dil mein jo kuchh zauq-e khwaari haaye haaye*

My love had not yet taken the colour
of frenzy, Ghalib.

What was left in the heart
was a desire to be disgraced.
Alas! Alas!

There is another maqt'a written for the same ghazal which did not find place in the Divan.

*gar musiibat thi to ghurbaat mein utha leta Asad
meri dilli hi mein honi thi ye khwaari haaye haaye*

Why did not you kill Asad
when he was living away?
Why did this happen here
in my own city, Dilli?
Alas! Alas!

Ghalib also wrote about this tragic incident in a letter addressed to Muzaffar Husain Khan. The words in this letter reveal how terrible the blow must have been for Ghalib and how he silently suffered for the rest of his life. The wound, if it healed, transformed itself into an inner glow, illuminating his creative self for the rest of his life. In his own words:

I am surprised by love's contradictions that I didn't get a chance to light the candle of union but I am now burning myself in this fire of separation.... The spear of sorrow is slowly piercing my heart. And the blood of my heart is dripping from my eyes. How should I control myself? How can I bring my heart out of this vortex of whirling fluid, my own blood? In my youth my face was darker than my hair and I was totally immersed in the frenzy of running after angelic beauties. Nature has poured this poison in my cup of wine and in the case of bier of my friend, that was carried through the lane where I lived, my patience has been severely tested. In the moonlit nights I cover myself with a black cloak and in the dark nights I am the moth for the dying candle. It is a pity that the loved one whom I could not leave in the care of God, had to be given away to the dust; the beloved whom I could not carry to the garden because narcissus would have killed herself in jealousy, I watched from a distance her body being buried in the graveyard.

*khak khuun baad k dar m'araz-e aasaar-e vajuud
zulf o rukh dar kashad o sumbul o gul baaz dahad*

How unworthy of the earth
that it sucks a whole existence in.
The beauty, the charm,
the tresses all become part of the grime.
It consumes everything deeply within it
and returns only a handful of flowers
reminiscent of all that is gone!

If a hunter has broken his bait and a captive has escaped its cage, what kind of satisfaction and contentment can he look forward to? And think of a flower lover who can't find any flowers because the flowering tree has died. What happiness can he find? Getting to know the uniqueness of the

emotion of love takes a lifetime of suffering. Those who have parted with their heart know the depth from which love comes. We can say bravo to the beloved who has kept her faith and who has given her life in the love of the person whose heart she stole. ([Ghalib 2008](#))

How did this romantic interlude affect Ghalib's creativity, his intellect, and his poetics? Prigarina says:

We know that the intensity of feeling determines how strongly we feel about something. As Zabolotski has mentioned, 'To express deepest and piercing feelings on a piece of paper is only the work of the artist.' Although its intensity decreased over time and the dust of passing days made things a little hazy, the poet's first love never really left his mind. The sorrow of love defined his perception on a life-long basis. The young graceful whirling image became a part of poet's work and we see her in different forms and shapes; as an oppressive lover, and on other occasions a source of temptation, tumult, rhythm, harmony, or melody. (1997: 125)

As we have seen, and on the basis of Ghalib's own letters, we can say that this romantic incident happened during his early years and that it impacted his later poetry where the theme of unrequited love could be easily discerned. It was wrongly believed that most of the poetic work of that period was destroyed. We have proved that this view is based on erroneous assumptions. In fact, nearly 70 per cent of the poetry written during that time was actually saved and is present in the published Divan.

The Molten Heart and the Dialectical Mark

We have seen that the romantic incident of young Ghalib that occurred when he was about nineteen influenced his poetry, especially as we can see from the heart stricken ghazal (*ishq mujh ko nahien vahshat hi sahi*) and his painful marsia (*dard se mere hai tujh ko beqaraari haaye haaye*) that were found almost together written on the margins of the *Nuskha-e Bhopal* (also called the First Rendition) written by Ghalib himself in his own handwriting. All this poetry is overflowing with the feelings of love's failure and the pain of separation. Khurshidul Islam is also of the view that early poetry does not contain traditional themes of ghazal writing but it does contain living images of Ghalib's pulsating earthly love (1979: 240). Other commentators also agree with this view and they have found this especially intriguing that how the poetry of this period is filled with pathos, dejection, and pain that could have been triggered only by an intense personal experience.

We have been hypothesizing in our work about the dialectical mark as a distinguishing feature of Ghalib's poetics, starting with our critique of Hali

in [Chapter 1](#) through our discussions of Sabke Hindi and Bedil and their relationship with Ghalib's creativity. Given the situation of intense emotional experience of a personal tragedy and the pain and pathos associated with it, we need to ask a question: is the hypothesis which we are advancing and testing tenable in this situation? If the nature of that mark is part of a deliberate design, then it should be absent from the spontaneous pieces of poetry quoted above, as they are the product of a molten heart over which one has no control. Let us take a close look at some of the couplets of the two ghazals.

In the first line of the ghazal '*ishq mujh ko nahien vahshat hi sahi*', the rhyming phrase (*radiif*) *hi sahi* is an intensifier but intensifier in a sense where something is lacking and needs to be stressed. 'If you think,' the poet says, 'my love is not true and it is mere madness, then so be it or let it be.' The key words here are *ishq* (love) and *vahshat* (madness). The polarization between the two has its own latent dialectical linkage, as we shall see. There is a contradiction between love (something likeable) and madness (not likeable). The poet's positioning of one against the other creates tension right away. But madness or frenzy is also related to love because where there is love, there is madness. Now look at the second line and see how Ghalib dialectically transforms the conventional meaning of the word *vahshat*. While resolving the tension present in the first line, the poet turns madness into something dignified and a reason for the good repute or fame of the beloved. He writes, 'you say my love is not love, only madness, so let it be (*meri vahshat teri shohrat hi sahi*)', which means because of my madness or frenzy you have earned a lot of public interest. In other words, my ill repute is the cause of your good standing, as people think that you must have something special that has made me go crazy for you. Notice, how with a spontaneous dialectical twist, not only the common meanings of the terms *vahshat* and *shohrat* have been transformed but the tension created in the first line between love and madness too has been poetically resolved. This is the hidden art of Ghalib's poetics where, with the touch of a few figurative turns, the meaning of words is changed. With his open-ended thought process, Ghalib can easily change what looks like a loss into gain. The footsteps of negative dialectics (which became his creative signature as he grew older) are quite discernible in the form of an effortless expression at a moment of crisis or in a gush of emotion, when a deliberate design would not deliver anything meaningful.

The second couplet is no less innovative and spontaneous. The key words are *ta'alluq* (relationship) and *adavat* (enmity). There is polarization between the two. The relationship of love entails absence of enmity, enmity being opposite of love. But Ghalib says, 'if you do not want to be friends with me, so be it, but why not become an enemy because both by nature are *ta'alluq*'. Here, the spin in the second line transforms the conventional meanings of the keyword such as enmity. Since enmity too is a relationship (though a negative one), it serves a purpose because love in essence is a relationship. And *relationship* is the main objective.

It is well known that in ghazal genre, each couplet is a separate and independent entity. But because of the continuity of the end phrase (in this case it is *hi sahi*), the ghazal signifies some sort of continuity or sameness of meaning. The dialectic we saw before is at work here too. The lover eventually turns the argument in his favour. The beloved, turning down the overtures of the lover, advises him not to come to the assembly as people might notice and this might cause disrepute. He offers an alternative. If we cannot meet in assembly, then why not meet in privacy? The choice is between assembly and privacy. Thus, by a little twist, the lover makes his point and turns the situation in his favour.

Rival, known as *ghair* (the other) is the third element of the triangle that is mentioned in the fourth couplet and is a part of the essential terminology of ghazal. The image of the beloved conventionally is that of a non-responsive, carefree, oblivious, and at times a cruel person. 'I know that the other is friends with you,' says the lover, 'so to love you is to invite trouble or to be one's own enemy [*dushman*].' So let it be. The polarization is between *friend* and *enemy*. By turning it upside down, the lover says that since the rival is not a true lover, he cannot afford to be his own enemy, meaning that he will not die for you. But as I am true, I can afford to be my enemy and can go to any extreme for you, meaning I can die for you. Thus, eventually the lover's position will prevail and the so-called (aloofness) will turn into friendship, as the beloved would not like the true lover to die. Hence, '*ham bhi dushman to nahien hain apne*'.

The proposition is that since the speaking voice (lover's) is conventionally truthful; he is not going to give up loving. The other side is that loving her is no less than inviting oneself to be tortured. The polarization in the fifth couplet is between being true in love and opting for torture (*musiibat*). Apparently, loving and torture (suffering) are opposites

but Ghalib's poetics resolves the polarization and transforms opposites as intrinsic to each other so much so that they are two sides of the same coin. Hence, let it be. Torture in love is as welcome as love itself.

The lover says that my beloved is vane and ignores my overtures. Beauty and vanity go together; so let it be. I will learn the art of submitting to vanity or arrogance. The polarization is between ego of love and self-esteem of the lover. By one dialectical turn of innovatively positing submission or resignation opposite vanity, the sting is taken out and the vanity is disarmed. This is *ma'ni aafriini*, ingenuity or spinning and resolving of existential predicaments that are as valid in the present context as they were in the past.

The keywords in the seventh couplet are *vasl* (union) and *hasrat* (longing, desire). The tension between the two is a regular theme of the ghazal and common occurrence of life. Where there is desire, there is fulfilment or non-fulfilment. Nonetheless, the ghazal's themes thrive on non-fulfilment as it ignites the fire of love. In Ghalib's situation, the separation is ordained as love is denied (death has taken the beloved away). So to make the loss bearable, Asad (Ghalib's earlier takhallus) says with characteristic dialectical detachment '*gar nahien vasl to hasrat hi sahi*'. If *vasl* is not possible and *hasrat* is destined, so let it be! Mark the first line of the maqt'a, the last couplet in the backdrop of the tragedy; it ends on an enduring and existential resolution. *Khuubaa*n means beauties or beautiful women. The game of love and teasing the khuubaa'n must go on since there is no *vasl*. Let there be *hasrat*. The nature of existence is such that the truth is not in contradictions but in the wholeness. The concept of *hasrat* does not hold by itself, it brings in the concept of union to make it tenable.

This is Ghalib at the age of nineteen or a little later. Even in the backdrop of emotional spontaneity, the creative footprints of the dialectical bent are clearly discernible. Before we conclude, let us briefly examine the other ghazal too—the so-called marsia of the departed soul. Since generally marsia is a connected narrative composition, we would be mainly concerned with how the theme is approached and how the thought is developed to pay a tribute to the departed, to express one's inner pain at the loss, and to make it bearable for the living. The format is that of the ghazal and not of a poem. Generally, it is not the protagonist but the departed who is the centre of attention. The beauty, charm, intense attachment, inexplicable nature of relationship, her qualities are all mentioned. But here,

the loss is expressed indirectly. It is the poet's existential condition that is highlighted time and again. One may not suspect dialectical mark in the structure of such a poem but as we proceed and closely look at the key images, things start to get clear. The poet says how restless you must have been thinking of my suffering and me being left alone. You had promised to be with me for the whole life but life too cannot be taken for granted. Your springtime beauty, pride, dignity, all have turned into the grime of the grave; gone are the days when you would not set your foot on the ground. There are two sets of parallel but opposing images, one joyful, the other sad, one relating to the past, and the other to the present. The refrain of 'haaye haaye' as the end words of each couplet intensifies the atmosphere of grief. Towards the end, it appears that life and death are interrelated, inseparable, they are cyclical, only images live on, the past cannot be relived, tomorrow never comes, it is only today, reality holds for a moment, the joy is in the act of enjoying life. The ways the couplets are constructed—one line is set against the other, conventional is deconstructed, and the innovative is reinstated in a style that is as unique as it is beautiful.

Needless to say that the dialectical imprint about which we have been hypothesizing, its signs can be seen in poetry even when the poet's mind was in an intense emotional state and the verses would have poured out impulsively without any deliberate design or pattern. The imprint appears to be in the psyche or inherent in the mind. Here we can see the early signs of Ghalib's thought processes that have, with the passage of time, evolved into an art form. These processes were enriched, chiselled, and polished and they were turned into his unique creative signature. In the next chapter, we will follow up on this theme by examining verses from the First Rendition, which include verses that were selected for the Divan and also verses which were deleted for reasons discussed earlier. Some of the deleted verses *kalaam-e mansuukh*, as we shall see later, turned out to be true gems.



shab k barq-e soz-e dil se zohra-e abr aab tha
sho'la-e javvaala har yak halqa-e girdaab tha

Last night
my heart was on fire.
So much so, it melted the clouds.
The whirling vortex was nothing

but a leaping flame.

nagahaan is rang se khuunaaba tapkaane laga
dil k zauq-e kaavish-e nakhun se lazzat yaab tha

In this lonesomeness
all of a sudden
the nails reached the scars
on the stricken heart
and blood started oozing
drip by drip!

¹ Ghalib used the term *dazham barge* (leaves in autumn when they change colour and fall) for his early poetry. Generally it is referred to as *kalaam-e mansuukh* (deleted verse), the poetry that was dropped from further consideration and was not included in the printed Divan.

² Symbol N is used for the verse included in the First Rendition (at age nineteen); N, if this was not deleted and selected for the printed Divan.

³ Translated into English from an Urdu translation of the original text by Osama Faruqui.

8

The First Rendition

Innovative Meaning and the Dialectical Mind



*huun garmi-e nishaat-e tasavvur se naghma sanj
main andaliib-e gulshan-e na-afriida huun*

It is the ecstasy
and joy of awareness
that keeps the song going.
I am the nightingale
of the garden
that is not yet born.

—Ghalib

OUR OBJECTIVE IS NOT TO OFFER a commentary (*sharah*) of Ghalib's Urdu poetry. Several of them are already available and this is the task of the customary commentators and interpreters. We respect their work and contributions. Our journey is of a different kind and the direction of our effort diverges in many respects. This is not to endorse or reject the work that has already been done. In fact, we are grateful to all Ghalib scholars and their works which has raised Ghalib discourse to heights that it has attained today. If this had not happened already, then our task would have been even more daunting. We are not saying that the experts have resolved all the mysteries surrounding Ghalib's life and work. There are facets of Ghalib's creative journey which are still shrouded in mystery, there are unexplored vistas of the complexities of his thinking that need further probing, and there are many questions that have not been satisfactorily answered. There are doors to Ghalib's magical treasure trove of meaning that have not yet been

opened. The sheer strength of Ghalib's layered text has baffled the readers and continues to do so with its potential for inventive meanings. In this situation, no one interpretation can be final; it cannot close the possibility of newer and fresher deliberations. This is something unique about Ghalib. Even when something looks complete, it shows its longing on further probing and more perfect completion. There are many ways to look at the text or to enter Ghalib's intellectual prowess. Our way or our effort has been somewhat different. What is that hidden element in Ghalib's magical inventiveness, his psyche, or his unconscious creativity that makes imagination come alive with new directions of experiencing different facets of reality? With this objective in mind, the next three chapters, including this one, will be devoted to close reading and offering a new textual analyses of Renditions One and Two and the published Divan.

Our starting point is the period that is known as one of perversion, aberration, or immaturity. The poetic work, as already indicated, is contained in two Nuskhas, namely, *Nuskha-e Bhopal Awwal*, also called Rendition One, which was calligraphed in Ghalib's own hand and completed in 1816, and *Nuskha-e Bhopal*, also known as *Nuskha-e Hamidia* or Rendition Two, compiled in 1821. These manuscripts coincide with Ghalib's age between nineteen and twenty-five years. There are also some additions found in the margins of the folios of two Nuskhas, which we have identified with plus (+) sign.

In our analysis, we are going to keep the chronological evolution of Ghalib's work. This, in our view, is important in understanding the evolution of Ghalib's thought processes which is not possible if we look at the ghazals arranged customarily according to alphabetical order of radiif. We shall keep our focus on verses that, for some reason, are worthy of special attention. In the selection of couplets, our preference is based on the time honoured tradition '*pasand apni apni, khayaal apna apna*' (choices vary according to individual preferences and freedom of thought). Literary criticism can make all kinds of claims to be objective but in reality it cannot free itself completely from subjectivity. Text is never innocent as it is subjectively constructed. So is criticism. This is because the creator of the text is a product of a specific historical and sociological context. The literary critic finds himself or herself in a similar situation. Therefore, criticism cannot be totally devoid of subjectivity. Having said this, it is also proper to state that criticism must not be limited to the obvious; it should

rather aim at delving deep and revealing the secrets hidden in the text, showing its invisible and visible structures. It is not essential for such criticism to achieve all its stated objectives. But it has to meet its articulated expectations. It defeats itself if it is based on unsubstantiated expectations. Criticism is also a process, a journey that opens up new possibilities and brightens new vistas with each step that it takes on its exploratory pathway.

Ghalib wrote in a letter addressed to Abdur Razzaq Shakir, 'During my 15th and 25th years I was engrossed in complex intellectual subjects and within 10 years I had a collection worthy of a Divan. But when I looked at my work with a critical eye, then I felt that I was not too happy with this verse' (1920: 159).

Ghalib's first collection of Urdu letters, *Ood-e Hindi* was published in 1868, four months before the death of Ghalib by Matba'-e Mujtabaai. The letters were collected and compiled by disciples and friends of Ghalib. The work was initiated in 1859 by Munshi Shiv Narain and Mirza Har Gopal Tafta, who were Ghalib's close friends. In the beginning, Ghalib was not in favour of publishing his Urdu letters but he was convinced by his disciples and friends and he gave in and started cooperating from 1860 onwards. The letters which Ghalib thought were worthless as they were written casually and without much effort compared with his Persian letters, in fact are in chaste and elegant Delhi Urdu, and set a standard for spontaneity and effortless beautiful racy style which proved to be the first of its kind.

The other principal collection of Urdu letters of Ghalib is *Urdu-e Mu'alla*, initially compiled by Munshi Ghulam Ghaus Bekhabar, and published in March 1869. Ghalib was very fond of seeing this book but he passed away 19 days before the book came out. Original letters still kept pouring in from disciples and friends. The complete *Urdu-e Mu'alla* was published by the same press in April 1899 which contains many more letters compared with the first collection, *Ood-e Hindi*. The third principal collection of Urdu letters of Ghalib is *Makatiib-e Ghalib* (1949). This contains letters written to nawabs of the state of Rampur, Ghalib's patrons and benefactors. Year after year scholars keep discovering more unpublished letters of Ghalib and there are many secondary publications of Ghalib's Urdu letters, some of these are referred to and information may be seen in the references.

The First Rendition, called *Nuskha-e Bhopal Awwal*, written in Ghalib's hand in 1816 covers his age up to nineteen years. There are 1,784 couplets

in this collection. The Second Rendition, titled *Nuskha-e Bhopal (Hamidia)* of 1821 (up to the age of twenty-five) takes the count of couplets to 2,585. Ghalib was right when he wrote that this material was sufficient for the compilation of a Divan. The first Divan, when it was actually published, contained 1,093 couplets. The interesting point to note is that the published Divan had 753 couplets (nearly 70 per cent) that were drawn from the two Nuskhas pertaining to the period when the poet, as per his own testimony, was not too happy with what he had written until then ([Raza 1995](#)). Barring the selected 753 couplets, the rest were rejected with labels like ‘complex’, ‘abstruse’, ‘beyond understanding’, and so on. We shall discuss some of these as we proceed. We do not have any documentary evidence to support the fact whether Maulana Fazl-e Haq Khairabadi or Azurda played any role in this. We have examined this in the last chapter of this book.

In the current chapter, we focus on the poetic work that belongs to the first nineteen years. In the next chapter, we shall deal with the work up to the age of twenty-five years. In addition, we shall take note of what was selected for the first published Divan and what was rejected. For this analysis, we shall choose the same alphabetical symbols for the Nuskhas that Imtiaz Ali Khan Arshi laid down for his *Nushka-e Arshi* and which were reiterated by Kalidas Gupta Raza. We therefore go back to some of the symbols that we have used in the last chapter and they are restated here to refresh the reader’s memory:

N Rendition One, *Nuskha-e Bhopal* in Ghalib’s hand and compiled in 1816, from ten–twelve to nineteen years ([Raza 1995: 139–292](#)).

Q Rendition Two, *Nuskha-e Bhopal* (also known as *Nuskha-e Hamidia*) compiled in 1821, until twenty-five years ([Raza 1995: 293–352](#)).

M The published Divan and verse written later ([Raza 1995: 353–496](#)).

N+ Couplets found on the margins of Rendition One, after the Nuskha was calligraphed.

Q+ Couplets found on the margins of Rendition Two, after the Nuskha was calligraphed.

N Couplets of Rendition One selected for the Divan.

Q Couplets of Rendition Two selected for the Divan.

Signs N and Q without the underscore mark means that these couplets were rejected and dropped and not included in the Divan.

The first Divan was published in October 1841, though its compilation was finished on 16 April 1833 ([Raza 1995: 13–14, 32](#)). For our work, as indicated above, we have selected *Divan-e Ghalib Kaamil* (also known as

Nuskha-e Raza) compiled by Kalidas Gupta Raza. In our opinion, this comprehensive compilation is complete and most accurate. It is really unfortunate that both the earlier original Nuskhas are lost but the credit goes to Raza for having meticulously verified all contents and for taking help from original sources published by pioneering Ghalib scholars, such as Imtiaz Ali Khan Arshi, Akbar Ali Khan Arshi Zaadah, Nisar Ahmed Faruqi, Mufti Muhammad Anwarul Haq, Hameed Ahmed Khan, and all the other available scholarly authorities.

Let us start our journey in which we are going to take frequent breaks to look at some selected couplets and ghazals. The original wording has been Romanized with some cross references. The number on the top left-hand side of the couplet will uniformly refer to page number in Raza's work (1995). This is indicative of the original source (via Raza) and three phases of the chronology from the beginning till the end. Similarly, the information on the top right-hand side of the couplet will uniformly indicate whether the couplet belongs to Rendition One or Rendition Two, or if it is in the main text or added in the marginal space, and whether it is selected for the printed Divan or rejected and dropped, using the symbols as explained above.

140 Q_+

aagahi daam-e shuniidan jis qadar chaahe bichhaaye
mudd'ua anqa hai apne aalam-e taqriir ka

Spread the net of awareness
as much as possible
to unravel the mystery of my words.
You will end up chasing anqa,
which no one has ever seen.

This couplet comes from the very first ghazal, famous for its opening couplet (*naqsh faryaadi hai kis ki shokhi-e tahriir ka*), found in today's published Divans which follow the radiif system of arranging ghazals. Interestingly, Rendition Two also opened with this ghazal and this couplet was found on the margin. Raza thinks that this couplet was written by Ghalib when he was about 15, a time period known for attacks on him for his poetry being unintelligible. But the critics did not realize that Ghalib hated what the run-of-the-mill tradition dictated, and he had no interest in following the crowd. There was a commotion in his world of meaning. He

wanted to talk about the 'garden of tomorrow', which was beyond the comprehension by people who were wedded to maintaining the conventional style of writing poetry. He wanted to go beyond the given or the obvious and create something different, something more beautiful while thinking afresh about the nature of joy and suffering or the mystery of existence. Ghalib charted his own way partially based on his inner experience, non-conventional mental faculty and partially due to the influence of Sabke Hindi, especially Bedil. He understood, early on, that words have to mean more than what appears at the surface. Tradition tends to limit or restrict expression. The traditional or the conventional is already worn out and turned into cliché that cannot lead to the inner journey of unknown pieces of territory, in which case unseen islands never come to light. Ghalib, from his early years, showed courage to stand up against formalistic or traditional ways of expressing thoughts. For this, he had to suffer a lot of criticism. But with the divine gift of deep intelligence and discernment he had realized that common meaning and readily offered meaning could not be the meaning that fall under the category of the unusual or revelatory. Meanings are as much deep and profound as they are intuitively felt and artistically portrayed. There are layers that are beyond customary understanding. The common understanding relies on the routine that conventionally makes sense. Creative understanding is something beyond the mechanical, superficial, or routine. The language we come across in everyday usage normally is the language of the obvious. It has to communicate, to make sense but it has no permanence. What lies in the shadows, in the inner reaches of our emotional lives, requires a different creative protocol to express it. Therefore, unless we forego the conventional or customary, we cannot pay our debt to what is inventive and innovative. One way in which Ghalib addressed this issue was to twist the conventional usage that operated on the surface level. But for this, he had to break the structure of the language and to reject the trite traditional logic. The world of language and signification is like a river whose width is hard to compute. We are standing on one side of the river but the chasm is so wide that we cannot see the other side. What we cannot see is not the proof of the non-existence of the other side. It is also wrong to think that the river has only one side. Where we stand is the domain of the obvious, factual and non-imaginative. For us to reach the other side, we have to free ourselves and break loose from the prison of the common and the routine. The process of

freeing ourselves is the process of the creative, the imaginative, and trying to know the unknown. Language is a powerful force but it also acts like a restrictive watchman for our creative thinking and how we express ourselves imaginatively. To break the grip of the conventional and to free ourselves completely is not easy. There is a danger that this freedom might take us to the domain of the absurd or senselessness, that is, the domain of the unknown. Ghalib takes this risk time and again. The couplet or its expression could be self-reflexive but it has to communicate something to the reader. Therefore, verse has to operate at two levels—being expressive from a customary angle but creative and inventive at the same time. The poet cannot afford to lose the reader. He has to tread a path that requires the ordinary to be presented in an extraordinary manner.

In the path of creativity, language is the biggest boulder. Whatever we have to say, it has to be expressed through words. Even when we are saying something that has been said before, or we are attempting to be totally original, we have to find a way through the words. Ghalib's creative temperament and his quest to reach the unknown pushed him more on the side of what was unsaid or unheard. Therefore, he ended up stretching the seams of the language. We often meet him at the boundary where sound meets silence, where traditional and creative criss-cross each other. This struggle is seen in most verses of both the renditions. Let us look at the next two couplets and a ruba'i.

343 Q.

gar khaamushi se faayeda akhfaaye haal hai
khush huun k meri baat samajhni muhaal hai

If by silence
I hide the real condition
and by saying the unsaid
I am happy
that no one understands
what I am saying.

349 Q.+

na sitaash ki tamanna n sile ki parva
gar nahien hain mere ash'aar mein ma'ni n sahi

I am not looking for
acclaim or admiration.
Nor do I seek a reward.

You can say
there is no meaning
in my couplets.
So be it.

The following ruba'i, quite famous, also belongs to the same period.

352 Q. +

*mushkil hai z bas kalaam mera aye dil
sun sun ke ise sukhan-varaan-e kaamil
aasaan kahne ki karte hain farmaaish
goyam mushkil vagar n goyam mushkil*

My verse is difficult, O my heart!
Even when learned people listen to it,
they request something simple.
But what I want to say is difficult,
and to say what they want me to say—
that too is difficult.
So my dilemma—it is difficult both ways.

It is interesting to note that Ghalib had initially used a strong word in the second line, calling his adversaries *jaahil* (ignorant, uncouth). Later on, probably after settling down in Delhi, he changed it to a euphemistic yet satirical term, *sukhan varaan-e kaamil* (the so-called learned people) ([Raza 1995: 352](#)).

Ghalib treats meaning making like taking a walk up *Koh-e Tuur* (the mountain where Moses saw the divine light), so that meanings coming from the intuitive inner experience shine with the brightness akin to a lightning strike. It is not essential that everyone shall have the same experience. It appears that in his mind, Ghalib had a dimly lit layered world of intuitive meaning. Negative dynamics was one way of dealing with the flatness or conventionality of the everyday language. This entails rejecting surface meaning, traditionally associated with words, and bringing forward new modes of twisting and turning the obvious or the familiar.

One who shocks the world also goes through a shock and turbulence over which he has no control. It is not easy to imagine this painful experience. There is only one small step that separates creative inventiveness from meaninglessness or complete silence. Awareness for the common folks is like chasing the bird that does not exist. All the great minds who have no problem enjoying a visit to the unseen terrain of reality would have no issue

chasing the legendary bird anqa or the silent side of the language, that is, the meanings beyond meaning. It is just possible that it was his urge to reject every commonplace aspect of reality as customarily known or his desire to bring the magic of the hidden treasure into the open. It made Ghalib embrace the dialectic mode, which unconsciously settled in the inner creative recesses of his mind as a pearl settles on the ocean floor, so much so that this mode became a distinctive structural feature of Ghalib's poetics. The ruba'i mentioned above has an undercurrent of tension between the language of saying and language of unsaying. It not only signifies the signature of Ghalib's creativity but also marks a new beginning in the tradition of Urdu poetics.

135 Q_+

*zaalim mere gumaan se mujhe munfa'il n chaah
hai hai khuda n karda tujhe bevafa kahuun*

My oppressive love,
please do not shame me
in front of my doubts.
Alas, alas! God forbid
if I ever called you unfaithful.

This ghazal was written when Ghalib was 15. Its first and third couplets were found on the margins of *Nuskha-e Hamidia* but the second couplet was found in Rendition One. In both lines of the first couplet, we find a negative touch. There are two arguments here. My intuition says that you are guilty of infidelity but that is not what I think. God forbid if you behave so cruelly with me that I may be forced to call you faithless, meaning that I may agree with my shameful intuition, which is the reverse of harbouring bad thoughts or ill will that I did not want.

'A heart-rending voice' and 'not hearing what is being said' obviously reject each other. They lead to a situation that cannot be resolved easily. On one side, there is the lover's heart-rending voice and, on the other, there is the beloved's resolve to not hear what he is saying. Between these two incompatible positions there is a feeling of lack of any solution or aporia, which is an irresolvable internal contradiction or logical disjunction in an argument ('what can I say!'). There are thousands of heartbreaking voices here but on the other side there is complete silence. This kind of tension between the two states of affairs in love opens up new creative directions

and enhances the intensity of what is being said. The two parallel negative statements, chiselled in matchless verbal structures, have their own inventiveness.

141 N +

b faiz-e bedili naummiidi-e javed aasaan hai
kashaayish ko hamaara uqdaa-e mushkil pasand aaya

Hopelessness brightens my day
and makes my life easier for me.
But I do have
a strange way of unravelling
the mysteries of life.

This ghazal is the creation of Ghalib when he was nineteenth. He included only three couplets in the Divan and the remaining were discarded. This whole ghazal had Bedil's style and flavour, ending with the famous maqt'a in which Ghalib pays tribute to the 'spring-like creativity' of his mentor.

141 N +

Asad har ja sukhan ne tarh-e baagh-e taaza daali hai
mujhe rang-e bahaar iijaadi-e Bedil pasand aaya

I am a lover, O Asad!
of Bedil's spring-like creativity.
How fascinating and colourful
is the freshness of his garden!

In these couplets, there is a dual negative. *Naummiidi-e javed* means hopelessness of life, so much so that life is tough to bear. But Ghalib says that his *bedili* (negativity) made it easy! One negative condition cannot resolve another negative condition. Hopelessness is no position to raise expectations. Even if it did, they lead to non-fulfilment of desires and suffering. In the second line of the same couplet, we have a similar negative relationship between *kashaayish* (sustained effort or patience needed for opening or resolving issues) and *uqdaa-e mushkil* (a difficult knot). A knot is a metaphor for the problems of life. The hope depends on patience to resolve a difficult situation. But life is more than simple curiosity. What is the meaning of happiness? Or grief? The traditional interpretation of these words is therefore transcended and the couplet thus metaphorically refers to existential predicament, leading to deep-seated self-reflection.

*bulbul ke karobaar p hain khanda haaye gul
kahte hain jisko ishq khalal hai dimaagh ka*

The nightingale sings
a song of love
and flowers laugh at her.
Love is nothing
but the loss of one's
mental poise.

The love between the nightingale and the rose is a classic theme in poetry, used differently by different poets. Ghalib deconstructs its conventional meaning and draws attention to a novel aspect of their relationship. The second line is a thesis of which the first line is an argument. Roses laugh at a nightingale's song of love but the laughter of the rose is actually its opening or blossoming. This is a miracle of the madness of love. The nightingale shows her love when she sees roses blossoming (which, in other words, means that they are laughing at the nightingale). Ghalib has provided a new dimension to how these three elements in a triangle—love, nightingale, and flower—relate to one another. But this apparently happy relationship, in fact, is rooted in sadness. The nightingale shows love but at this the roses blossom as they are happy. The novel dimension with a twist is that a rose's blossoming is its laughing at the madness of the nightingale, as she does not know that spring is momentary and will end soon. The dual twist is that the rose's laughing at the nightingale is in fact its opening, that is, a step towards withering and dying. This means that the rose too does not know that its beauty is not going to last forever. Brevity is the soul of the art of ghazal, and Ghalib excels at this. Meaning turned upside down with a few words, while the whole narrative is artfully woven in two simple lines. Further, the meaning does not operate on the surface. It reflects on the mystery of existence, or an aspect of reality. Generally, we take things for granted and for which we have lost our sensitivity. Ghalib's compressed and layered discourse sensitizes us afresh. Generally, we take a glance and pass on as the language is deceptively simple. But when we pause and reflect, we discover that the words do not exist at the surface level, the revelatory beauty of the verse breathes at the level of the deep structure. Ghalib is a deceptively creative poet. His simplicity is not simplicity; we have already discussed how even

Hali and Azurda were tricked. Commenting on this, Prigarina remarked that Ghalib's simplicity is his complexity. His art is illusory. By simple reversing or deconstructing the mundane, he opens the pathway to fresh thinking.

151 N

*saraapa rahn-e ishq-o naguziir-e ulfat-e hasti
ibaadat barq ki karta huun aur afsos haasil ka*

I am committed to madness of love
along with love of life.
It is just like praying for lightning
and then lamenting
as the harvest goes up in flames.

This couplet belongs to the nineteenth year, when Ghalib was predominantly under Bedil's influence and immersed in enigmatic constructions. In such couplets, negative parallelism destroys one proposition with the help of another. Loving and praying for lightning to strike you are two opposing thoughts. Loving presupposes existence and, therefore, non-existence is its opposite. If you love existence, then why do you pray for destruction, which is exactly what lightning does. At a deeper level, the fine point is that in Urdu and Persian poetry the climax of love is extreme madness, which is self-destruction. Through such enigmatic yoking of words and leaving behind absences or silences, Ghalib brings out the contradictions of human nature. Human beings engage in activities or actions which are contradictory. They pursue things that they are supposed to avoid. You want to go in one direction but your heart pulls you to another. 'What can you do when the heart is your enemy?' Life is not all simple logic. There are many things for which there is no explanation. Reality is a paradox. Human relationships are known for their criss-cross of wrinkles. The absence of logical grounding in such poetry destroys the conventionality of thought and language.

153 N

*lataafat be kasaafat jalva paida kar nahien sakti
chaman zangaar hai aaiina-e baad-e bahaari ka*

There is no manifestation
of fineness without crudeness.
Garden is like a mirror coating

displaying images of spring breeze.

This couplet finds a place among the master couplets. *Latafat* (fineness, elegance, pleasantness) and *kasaafat* (crudeness, impurity, filth) are hard to imagine together. The poet presents this as a proposition. The argument comes in the second line. There is no plus without a minus. The garden is like a rusted mirror because it goes through various transformative phases in one year. Autumn brings loss of all greenery. Rain makes its soil to erode. But eventually spring comes. The filth and unpleasantness of the garden is, in a way, the messenger of its beautiful flowering. At a somewhat different plane, this also means that there is an intrinsic connection between materiality and spirituality, which is quite similar to the Buddhist thought of *apoha*. We can say that Ghalib imagined what Saussure said many years later, ‘In language there are only differences without positive terms’. The same is true of existence, a continuum of contradictions that makes it whole.

162 Q.+

*va kar diye hain shauq ne band-e niqaab-e husn
ghair az nigaah ab koi haayel nahien raha*

My passion
to look at her beauty
has loosened the ribbons
of all the veils!
There is no barrier now
with the exception
of my own sight.

The couplet shows what intense passion or desire could accomplish at the surface, yet not in a deeper sense. The passion brings all its intensity to bear on one thing: the act of soulful seeing of beauty beyond beauty. The fierceness of desire is such that it loosened the ribbons of all the veils. Which means that there is the force of beauty that has been unleashed, and all around us there is nothing but beauty. This couplet could have been an ordinary couplet but Ghalib’s fine twist made it rather unique. Eye sees the beauty unobstructed but what if the eye becomes the ‘other’ (*ghair*) and the ‘barrier’ inasmuch as what was supposed to be seen is ‘not’ (*nahien*) seen at all. This is how Ghalib turns something usual into unusual. It is not the function of the eye to resist because it belongs to the perceiver. But in this

case, the eye itself has joined the ‘other’, that is, the friend itself has turned into a foe. Not satisfied with this, it turns its own natural function into negative: not seeing what is supposed to be seen. The eye is now an intruder. The couplet has other dimensions too. The eye generates the ‘sight’. The beauty with all its manifestations is before our eyes but the ‘sight’, that is our prejudices and beliefs come between us and the beauty, and we cannot see its true glory and charisma the way we would have liked to see, without any hindrance.

163 N

*b havas dard-e sar-e ahl-e salaamat ta chand
mushkil-e ishq huun matlab nahien aasaan mera*

People think
my love is nothing but lust.
My difficulty—
my love is hard to explain
in words that they will
understand.

It is surprising that this couplet, which is peerless, was not included in the published Divan. The first line of the couplet in the First Rendition had four *izafats* (diacritical marks to indicate conjunction): *havas-e dard-e sar-e ahl-e salaamat*. While revising this line, Ghalib changed the first *izafat* to *b havas*, which improved the couplet’s flow. This is a unique quality of Ghalib’s writing that he can have three *izafats* yoked together in a way that we do not even feel their hard presence and the words flow as pearls.

The first line’s creativity finds completion in the second line. The difficulty of love or loving is not easy to define: ‘there is no way that people can get to the root of the matter’. This negative subverts meaning. The poet says, ‘I have become a headache for people with a customary mind. They think that my love is nothing but lust. But they don’t know that my love is a puzzle for me too.’ There is a tension between love and lust that common people cannot resolve. The poet does not think that it is his job to help people to understand these finer distinctions. He is focused on rejecting the traditional in favour of the inventive through the workings of his dialectical mind.

181 Q+

samjha hua huun ishq mein nuqsaaan ko faaeda

jitna k na-ummiid tar ummiidvaar tar

I expect all loss to be gain in love—
more frustrations come my way
more hopeful I become.

It is strange that this beautiful couplet did not find a place in the published Divan. There is a double negative push in both the lines. Love entails notoriety and disrepute, as is commonly understood. But Ghalib brings forth a new dimension. The loss of respectability is in fact a gain. Not only this, the loss makes the lover think more buoyantly about his future. The more frustration in love, the more it brings hope and expectation. The couplet's uniqueness lies in the fact that it changes failure into success and hopelessness into hopefulness. Most often, Ghalib uses inventive phrases and terms and turns them in such a way that the real beauty of such constructions is untranslatable. It is this kind of poetry that is lost in translation. Just with the touch of one 'na'—*ummiidvaar tar naummiidvaar tar*—the couplet, while retaining its enigmatic spin, is suddenly filled with zest of life.

194 N

gar tujh ko hai yaqiin-e ijaabat d'ua n maang
ya'ani baghair-e yak dil-e be-mudd'ua n maang

Do not pray for small things
if you are convinced
that your prayer will be granted.
Do not ask for anything
except for a heart
that is free of all desires.

There is a negative tie between 'do not pray' and 'prayer's fulfilment'. The same is true of 'do not pray at all' and 'unless your desire is free from desire'. There is a creative tension. If no prayer is ever going to work unless the heart is free, then only legitimate prayer is that which seeks heart's freedom from desire.

194 N

aata hai daagh-e hasrat-e dil ka shumaar yaad
mujh se mere guneh ka hisaab aye khuda n maang

Remembering the wounds
that I suffered in the pursuit

of my heart's desires,
ask me not, O God,
the count of my sins.

The protagonist on the Day of Judgement implores God not to ask about the count of his sins because this would remind him of the scars of non-fulfilment of desires and the sins he did not commit. He prays that this question should not be asked. Why? Because this has happened so many times that the count has been lost. It is a fact that God has not provided enough resources to fulfil all the desires. The code is so restrictive and rigid that a libertine would like to violate it time and again. Mark the power of the dialectical twist that by using one negative, *n maang*, Ghalib turned the argument upside down, creating an interesting theme that provides defence for the helpless man and holds God answerable for man's sins.

In a similar couplet that is reproduced afterwards, the poet creates a binary relationship between the sins committed and the sins not committed. If A is positive when B happens, A should be negative when B does not happen. On the one hand, the poet makes an argument for fairness which is understandable. But he goes on to point out the absurdities of life where things do not happen according to the given plan. By doing this and by turning the argument full circle, Ghalib demolishes the whole structure of conventional sin and virtue. It is given and imposed by the social structure.

202 N

luun vaam bakht-e khufta se yak khwaab-e khush vale
Ghalib y khauf hai k kahaan se ada karuun

I can borrow boundless
happiness in my dreams
from my fate
that is taking a nap.
But, Ghalib, I am afraid
how would I repay
this debt.

Only the maqt'a of this ghazal was included in the published Divan. This belongs to a time when Ghalib used Asad as his nom de plume. The second line was apparently revised later to mention Ghalib in place of Asad. If the fate is taking a nap, it means that the person is not having much luck. It is a negative. On the other hand, dreams are colourful and provide lots of happiness. They even fulfil our wildest desires. Therefore, dreams are the

other pole. Now the poet establishes a relationship between something that is making life empty and something that could be the source of pleasure and fulfilment. But nothing good could be gained from something that is non-existent. So this idea of ‘borrowing’ is in essence an illusion. Even if it becomes a reality, it would mean that good luck (happiness) might be exchanged with bad luck (or lack thereof) but it in turn would create more problems (bad luck) as the ‘debt’ so borrowed cannot be repaid. This kind of tension of thought linking to another thought deepens and refines the main thought (*mazmuun aafriini*), as life is a riddle and the effort to open it goes on.

203 N

*tere sarv-e qaamat se yak qadd-e aadam
qayaamat ke fitne ko kam dekhte hain*

Looking at your cypress-like height,
your lovers cannot fail to reach the conclusion
that your beauty is no less devastating
than the day of *qayaamat*.
Qayaamat may actually be
one human height less awesome
than your ravishing beauty.

Suha Mujaddidi writes, ‘If the beloved is not very tall and graceful, then it means that the cause of Doomsday frenzy is now within your control. This expression is rare and extraordinary’ (1923: n.p.). It sure is rare and extraordinary but he does not say how Ghalib made it extraordinary. The keyword here is *qayaamat*, literally meaning doomsday but the word *qayaamat* has other nuances as well, both destructive and non-destructive. Ghalib, while playing on them, pays a tribute to the graceful height and beauty of the beloved. What can be so daunting and terrible than the *qayaamat* or doomsday but the idiom has it that a person or thing which is absolutely peerless or ravishingly beautiful is also called, ‘Ah, what a *qayaamat*!’ or ‘How awesome!’ Ghalib first paid a compliment to the beloved by using *qayamat* as an epithet, then he downgraded *qayaamat* a little bit to reinforce the compliment and made it doubly effective in the sense that the graceful beauty of the beloved is much more devastating. The layer upon layer artistic play of the negative is obvious.

There is also a touch of playfulness in this couplet. Given Ghalib’s iconoclastic frame of mind, who hardly spares heaven and hell, how can he

spare the so-called qayaamat, the Day of Judgment? Downgrading doomsday and indirectly making fun of it can be seen in keeping with his cheerful temperament, denying all restrictive make-belief concepts, religious or otherwise. This is one of Ghalib's most-quoted couplets.

204 N

*dair o haram aaiina-e takraar-e tamanna
vaamaandagi-e shauq taraashe hai panaahein*

Temples and Mosque are but mirrors
of each other's aspirations.
They are simply resting places
for the tired voyagers
whose search has not succeeded.

This couplet came to notice after the publication of *Nuskha-e Hamidia* and it was confirmed that it belonged to the age before the nineteenth year. It is hard to find a theme that is older than the temple and mosque. This subject was a favourite of the masters of Persian and Urdu language as well as of the poets in the saint and seer tradition. But when Ghalib takes up a topic, he destroys its old associations and with the help of his dialectical flair, he opens space for newer interpretations. We can credit Ghalib's sharp mind for declaring temples and mosques, which are places of worship, as resting places for tired travellers whose quest has ended in nought. Both the mosque and temple are mirrors of each other in this regard. He subverts the real purpose and also the sanctity of these institutions, which is to help human beings to find a way for realization of God. The subversion is not in the beginning of the statement but it seeps in slowly in the second line. Man is looking for a resting place because he is tired and his desire of making a divine connection is not fulfilled. Temple and mosque are mirrors of each other because they exist to serve the same purpose which is not achieved. As a result, they end up being symbols of the failure of man's aspirations. With a single twist, Ghalib subverts the sacred institutions to nothing more than resting places. When the dialectical knot is opened, the couplet reveals its hidden beautification of meaning and its limitless freshness and inventiveness. The couplet, in a subtle manner, also raises an issue: whether God resides in the exterior or in the consciousness of our own inner space?

207 N

zamaana sakht kam-aazaar hai b jaan-e Asad

vagarna ham to tavaqq'o zyaada rakhte hain

The unbearable miseries
inflicted by time on my life,
O Asad, were not enough
Even as I had expected them
to be much worse.

This ghazal, written before the nineteenth year, was deleted from the published Divan with the exception of this maqt'a. It contains no hard words and the idea is stated in a simple language that flows smoothly. The negativity is well-wrapped in the words and the poet introduces an element of intensity by using the word *sakht* with *kam-aazaar* in place of only *kam-aazaar*. The disappointment here is not the miseries unleashed by time but the fact that they were not as severe 'as my forbearance and patience would have expected'. The miseries inflicted by time refer to the injustice of Providence to the dignity and self-esteem of man. There is polarization and spin but in the text a negative is hardly visible, though it is the core of the exquisiteness of the couplet.

210 N

main chashm-e va kushaada o gulshan nazar fareb
lekin abas k shabnam-e khurshiid diida huun

My eyes are wide open and
the garden is so very enchanting,
Alas! The beauty is like a dewdrop,
a flicker, only until the sunrise.

This ghazal, of which four couplets are presented here, is a truly remarkable piece of poetry and it is unfortunate that it remained undiscovered for nearly half a century. The experts consider this as Ghalib's self-assessment as a poet and how he viewed himself: 'a nightingale of a garden that has not yet come into being'. That garden is like *shunya*, meaning non-existent, as everything emerges out of nothingness. There is the nightingale but no garden, no beds of roses, no one to appreciate the song. How can this be? Ghalib was confident that one day the garden will arise out of nothingness, and truly this is what happened.

The above couplet shows the uniqueness of radiif (*huun*) and how it enhances the beauty of the whole composition. The first line is truly extraordinary for its innovative metaphors. 'The eyes wide open' is our way

of seeing the world or reality. 'The garden is so enchanting' captures the beauty that is seen in the world. Not only the beauty of the garden but of the onlooker too. A dewdrop would disappear as the sun rises. So Ghalib, in one move, describes realness and the transitory un-realness of the self and the world around us. There is much to be seen. There is a lot of beauty that surrounds us but unfortunately we cannot see it all because of the transient nature of our own existence, a flicker. A dewdrop vanishes as it faces the sun. The world that we cannot see does not exist for us. Hence, there is a polarity of existence and non-existence. But in fact, what we consider as non-existence, too, is existence.

211 N

*huun gar-mi-e nishaat-e tasavvur se naghma sanj
main andaliib-e gulshan-e na afriida huun*

It is the ecstasy
and joy of awareness
that keeps the song going.
I am the nightingale
of the garden
that is not yet born.

The couplet speaks for itself, as pointed out before. It is unfortunate that this couplet was not included in the Divan. It is considered as one of the most innovative and predictive couplets written by Ghalib.

211 N

*deta huun kushtagaan ko sukhan se sar-e tapish
mizraab-e taar haaye guluuye buriida huun*

My poetry is nothing
but a hearty tribute to the masters.
Like a *mizraab*, of course,
but with strings twisted
and tangled.

In this couplet, the poet extends the image of 'tongues cut off' to twisted and tangled strings of a *mizraab*, like its throat has been cut off. It is a formidable simile that helps in forming a continuum from living to the non-living, and in each case there is the absence of voice or of sound, pointing to the lack of response, lack of appreciation, and absolute silence, as if no song was produced or heard. The twisted and tangled strings of the *mizraab*

as an image also stands for one being heartbroken and in poignant pain. The creative angst and tension between song and silence comes full circle throughout this ghazal.

216 N

ulfat-e gul se ghalat hai da'avaye vaarastagi
sarv hai ba vasf-e aazaadi giraftaar-e chaman

Because of its love for the flower
its declaration of freedom is null and void.
The cypress is considered a symbol of freedom
but is held hostage by its love for the garden.

Only those who are really free can claim full freedom. This is obvious. But Ghalib rejects this claim to freedom. He quotes the example of cypress tree, which is considered free. It stays straight without any support. But at the same time, it is in love with the garden. Love is bondage and it voids freedom. Though, on the surface, cypress is free, in reality it is not. This freedom in essence is the negation of freedom, a paradox that defies definition.

218 N

hasad se dil agar afsurda hai garm-e tamaasha ho
k chashm-e tang shaayad kasrat-e nazzaara se va ho

If the heart is stung by envy,
may be the eyes are shut.
Better open the eyes and look around,
once the eyes are wide open,
the sting of envy is gone.

Jealousy or envy is a metaphor for our inability to see the spectacle of life in all its glory. It is our short-sightedness that leads us to unhappiness. This revelation cannot come without awareness. The more we see, it would open our mind and this would dissipate jealousy or envy. Thus, *garm-e tamaasha* is a sign of Ghalib's mental and creative openness and freedom.

222 N

koi aagaah nahien baatin-e ham diigar se
hai har ik fard jahaan mein varaq-e na khwaandah

We are not aware
what is inside our inner selves.

Each individual in this world
is a page filled with the text
that no one has read.

This couplet is atypical and it is a reflection on the nature of individuality and the mystery that surrounds it. Heart is not the only inner thing that matters. Our individuality has very deep roots and it is filled with secrets that even we are not aware of. The problem is not that x cannot describe y . The 'other' is like a page of text that has not been read. Even the person himself has not read it. The word *fard* also means a sheet of paper. This would change the interpretation to say that one sheet of paper has not read the other. In this couplet Ghalib reaches psychological depths akin to Jacques Lacan (1901–1981), who, in his lecture series called 'Return to Freud', declared conscious mind as unreal, and the unconscious as real. This means that our individuality or our sense of self is perpetually in flux. Why bother about the other? Even the person himself is not fully aware of what is going on inside. As Ghalib said in another of his couplet: *apne se kar n ghair se vahshat hi kyon n ho* (Do it to yourself and not to the other, even if it is done as an expression of craziness).

223 N

az mehr ta b zarra dil-o dil hai aaiina
tuuti ko shash jehat se muqaabil hai aaiina

From sun to the tiniest particles,
mirror is the heart of hearts.
Parrot looks in all six directions
and sees himself in mirror after mirror.¹

From the smallest particles to the sun, our inner self thinks about everything like a mirror that reflects another mirror. The reflection itself is nothing but a world of illusions, an illusory world, like the parrot looks at his own reflection in the mirrors placed all around him and he finds nothing else except himself. Continuous awareness, which is a negation of existence, ends in Ghalib's poetry as a state of total intoxication. It means that the world that we see is an illusion; it is our own reflection in the mirror and not the real world that exists.

247 N

khabar nig-h ko nig-h chashm ko uduu jaane

vo jalva kar k n main jaanuun aur n tu jaane

My knowing should not know my knowing.
My eyes should treat my own sight as if it was not there.
Show me the spectacle of your beauty in such a way
that neither I nor you should know about it.

This couplet presents a dilemma. Display is a presentation. It is something to be seen. The one who sees it is the 'seer'. The poet tells the beloved to show her glory in such a way that neither you (meaning, your power of perception that is presenting the spectacle), nor I, who is the watcher/seer, should know about it. There are three elements here: 'I' as the lover who wants to see the beauty and the one who is filled with a strong desire to see the beloved (the reality); 'you' representing the beauty or the charisma of the beloved (the kernel of reality that wants to be known); and the 'spectacle' which is the act (the reality that brings 'I' and 'you' together). Although these are three different parts of a phenomenon, the poet unifies them through his creative genius. The play of negativity makes it look like a puzzle. It is really surprising that a couplet of such great merit was not included in the Divan.

258 N

kaargaah-e hasti mein laala daagh saamaan hai
barq-e khirman-e raahat khuun-e garm-e dehqaan hai

In the workings of this world,
red tulip's asset is its black spot.
When the farmer raises the crop
with his blood and toil,
lightning gets ready to strike.

ghuncha ta shaguftan ha barg-e aafiyat ma'luum
baavujuud-e diljamii khvaab-e gul pareshaan hai

The bud becomes a flower, happy and secure.
It does not know the nightmare of a dream
that tells its eventual scattering and
the dispersion of its leaves!

Regarding the first couplet, Ghalib wrote in *Ood-e Hindi*, 'Black spot is like a star in an assembly. Think of a man whose only asset is that black spot. The presence of the flower is about the spot. Red colour is found in all

kind of flowers.... The blood of the farmer that he has spent in raising the crop is like the comfort of red flower at the time of the harvest. Black spot is present and it is the source of discomfort and sorrow' (1920: n.p.). What more can we say about negative dynamics? It is in tulip's colour; it is in the scar; it is in the red as well as in the black. Flower's red has to do with farmer's blood, which is subverted by the lightning that destroys the harvest.

Regarding the second couplet, Ghalib wrote in a letter to his disciple Abdur Razzaq Shakir:

We know how secure the flower is; but it is like not knowing a deeper truth. The security of the flower is a matter of pride and satisfaction. But where there is pride there is worry. Both are intrinsic. The dream is worrisome. The flower, though secure, will eventually dry up and scatter all around.... The bud is like the heart. But because it is a heart, it is in the flower's fate to have worrisome dreams. ([Ghalib 1920: 156](#))

Disavowal is present in the construction of the couplet, and the way Ghalib explained it is highly creative.

271 Q_+

*huun main bhi tamaashaayi-e nairang-e tamanna
matlab nahien kuchh is se k matlab hi bar aave*

I am just a spectator to see
the magical unfolding
of unsatisfied yearnings.
I do not care
if those desires really
come to fruition.

This couplet was the only one drawn from a ghazal written in the nineteenth year for inclusion in the Divan, and the rest of the ghazal that ended with *dil farsh-e rah-e naaz hai Bedil agar aave* was rejected. The first line is filled with the intensity of feelings as the world is called 'magical yearning'. The dialectical twist lies in the fact that the poet is a spectator but he is not a part of the spectacle. He looks at the whole thing objectively, keeping his distance. The second line provides additional lift to the couplet. There is indifference to the outcome, meaning whether the purpose is fulfilled or not is one and the same. There is freedom in being the spectator and being indifferent to the outcome.

261 Q_

aaaina kyun n duun k tamaasha kahein jise
aisa kahaan se laauun k tujh sa kahein jise

Maybe I should give you a mirror
for watching the spectacle
and be wonderstruck.
Where can I find another one like you
to show you how beautiful
and magnificent you are?

Ghalib is paying tribute to the beauty of the beloved but his way is not simple and straightforward. He is an artist and his way has its own inventive logic. The mirror is called a house of wonder. Let the beloved look at her own image and be wonderstruck. It will provide an amazing spectacle (tamaasha) to watch. The second line further reinforces the argument by an inventive double twist. Tamaasha or spectacle has two aspects, as artistically entwined in the second couplet. There is a desire but unfulfilled yearning—‘my desire to see you has brought me into your meeting place in my imagination but I’m unable to see you the way I would like to’. This entails tension because there is a gap between the seer and what is not seen. Hence, ‘*aaaina kyun n duun k tamaasha kahein jise!*’

262 Q

yaarab hamein to khwaab mein bhi mat dikhaa-eo
y mahshar-e khayaal k duniya kahein jise

O God! Do not show me,
not even in my dream,
this pandemonium of thoughts
which we call this world.

The fourth couplet was found with the fifth in the margins of Rendition Two. The world signifies life but pandemonium is the other side of life. Life has to do with the existence, while pandemonium belongs to non-existence. We should remember that both non-existence and dreams belong to the same class. When we hate someone we might say, ‘I don’t want to see that person even in my dreams’. The day of reckoning is one thing but the pandemonium of thoughts is even beyond that. There is a certainty that the day of reckoning will come. By equating the world with this terrible chaos of thoughts, the poet says, ‘Ah God, if this is the world please I don’t want to see it even in my dreams’. There is mayhem of thoughts going on all the time. Mind is always polluted by thinking of something or the other and is

never free or clean to concentrate on the inner peace or the reality of existence.

262 Q.

*Ghalib bura n maan jo vaa'iz bura kahe
aisa bhi koi hai k sab acchha kahein jise*

Ghalib, please do not pay attention
to the preacher when he calls you
'not up to scratch'.
Is there anyone
who is universally praised?

The last couplet brings the preacher into the focus because he is fond of talking about right and wrong—the talk which is polarizing. In the first line, the poet dismisses what the preacher is saying. He is living in a world where he sees things in black and white, or good and bad, as the guardian of morality. This talk is meaningless because good and bad cannot be defined in absolute terms without reference to each other. They are inseparable in a sense. The second line brings closure to the argument because this talk makes no sense. People make subjective judgements based on their own sense of morality. So if they call you good or bad, it is really meaningless. Ghalib picks up a major issue regarding our personal morality and simplifies it by saying that it does not matter because it is highly subjective and biased. In other words, the preacher being judgmental and imposing his subjective will is, in fact, oppressive and a denier of personal freedom.

269 N.

*majbuuri v d'avaaye giraftaari-e ulfat
dast-e tah-e sang aamada paimaan-e vafa hai*

When you have made the pledge
to stay in the prison of love
your claim of fidelity
is like your hand
placed under a boulder.

Faiz Ahmad Faiz, a leading Urdu poet, wrote a poem inspired by this couplet and titled it *Dast-e Tah-e Sang* (hand placed under a boulder), the words that appear in the second line. The negative play that Ghalib presented between 'staying in the prison of love' and the claim of 'fidelity' cannot be resolved, as it is a paradox. Faiz sees a connection between the

two through the prism of ideology, while Ghalib, when he talks about ‘a hand placed under a boulder’, is talking about love and fidelity, which signify both unbreakable bondage and freedom. This changes the conventional meaning of the terms and creates a play of signification, which raises the question that love or commitment is, in fact, the denial of freedom.

269 M

*na karda gunaahon ki bhi hasrat ki mile daad
yaarab agar in karda gunahon ki saza hai*

I should get credit
for the sins not committed.
O God, it is a question of fairness.
Because I am punished
for the sins committed.

The dialectical twist is obvious and needs no comment. The tension that Ghalib presented between the ‘sins committed’ and the ‘sins not committed’ is unconventional. It gives a new meaning to the word ‘sin’ itself—an interpretation that is neither recognized by religion nor by the society. The poet places the concept in a grey area, pleading that the concepts of sin and virtue are not as simple as commonly understood. They are imposed by the society and are not absolute. This is in keeping with Ghalib being a free thinker and challenging the code of conduct which, in fact, is preconceived and predetermined.

273 N

*aarzuuye khaana aabaadi ne viiraan tar kiya
kya karuun gar saaya-e diivaar sailaabi kare*

My desire to live in a habitat was futile.
It has given me nothing but desolation.
The walls have sucked moisture
and the shadow of the house itself
increases dampness and bleakness.

Ghalib is fond of using binary oppositions and paradoxical situations in a special way. He wraps one thing in another—two things that apparently contradict each other. Then he brings out a revelation that sensitizes us about the situation and the actual nature of things. For example, habitation inside desolation, goodness inside badness, sins not committed inside the

sins that have been committed, happiness inside suffering, and pleasure inside pain. He twists the opposing words in such a way that they reveal the reality that was hidden from our eyes, and which we routinely tend to ignore and take for granted. For Ghalib, ordinary concepts are not ordinary. There are complexities and contradictions. Let us look at the couplet. The speaking voice's desire to live in habitation gives him desolation, an unusual outcome. He wants to sit under the shadow of a wall for comfort and protection but its increasing dampness gives him the feeling of being in the midst of a flood, meaning his fate is cheating him. 'This world,' he says, 'is a terrible place where your best efforts produce the worst effects, making things more difficult than before.' Such couplets by Ghalib have multiple dimensions. They are not transparent and sometimes cannot be fully resolved.

281 Q. +

*bahut dinon mein taghaaful ne tere paida ki
vo ik nig-h jo bazaahir nigaah se kam hai*

Your indifference has eventually produced
just one outcome—the flicker of a glance
which is less than the full glance.

This couplet belongs to Rendition One and was found written in the margin. There is nothing new about the beloved's indifference. But Ghalib can derive different meanings in different situations. *Taghaaful*, that is, indifference, means to ignore or to not attend someone. The poet artistically uses two words for seeing—*nig-h* and *nigaah*—which, in the normal course, means the same thing but not according to the poet's ingenuity. As noted by Nazm Tabatabai, the addition of one vowel 'a' to *nigah* changes the whole perspective. By creating this distinction, which ordinarily no one would care about, the poet introduces a difference (or differentiation) that makes this couplet playful as well as inventively beautiful. After all, the efforts and entreaties that the lover could get is not even a glance but only the flicker of a glance. The play of love or a fleeting glance has its own story to tell in a *purdah* society, where open love for a stranger is forbidden.

294 N. +

*main ne kaha k bazm-e naaz chaahiye ghair se tahi
sun ke sitam zariif ne mujh ko utha diya k yuun*

I told her that rivals should not be in her assembly.
She listened, and what a cruel joke,
she asked me to get up and leave
'like this'.

From here onwards, we deal with ghazals that were found in the margins of the Rendition One. This was soon after Ghalib was nineteen as it was mentioned earlier. This was also the time when he was getting rid of the unevenness and jaggedness of diction and started to feel proud of perfecting his elegant Urdu, as we can see him declaring in the following couplet:

294 N+

*jo y kahe k rekhta kyunke ho rashk-e Faarsi
gufta-e Ghalib ek baar parh ke use suna k yuun*

For those who say
how could Urdu ghazal be
enviable and better
than the one written in Persian,
just read out Ghalib's verse and say
'like this'.

The above couplet is the maqt'a of the ghazal whose five couplets were reproduced before. What made the Urdu ghazal better and elegant was the beautifully blended fusion of Persian with Urdu. A time will come when Ghalib will once again be drawn to achieving mastery of Persian and be accepted as a master poet of Persian language. But at this point, the poet is rightfully proud of achieving elegance in beautiful Urdu. It is a delightful ghazal and all the couplets are bound like a bouquet of flowers by the ribbon of radiif *kyuun*, 'like this'. The dialectical play is inherent in one line carrying the proposition, and the other the opposition or resolution, generally in favour of the protagonist, the lover. The translation is self-sufficient and the reader will see through the delightful play of love. No further elaboration is necessary. The last couplet, of course, is self-reflective, as allowed by the generic tradition of ghazal.

295 N+

*varasta is se hain k muhabbat hi kyun n ho
kijye hamaare saath adaavat hi kyun n ho*

It could just be that she loves me
but maybe not.

I take this in a carefree manner
and want to keep it that way
even if she behaves like an enemy.

The beauty of this ghazal lies in its radiif, *kyun n ho*. ‘It is not essential that you love me,’ the poet says, ‘and it would be fine if you show enmity toward me. But you have to do something.’ The emphasis is on the word *karna* (action). Ghalib comes back to the same idea in another couplet that we consider later: *qat’a kijye n ta’alluq ham se/kuchh nahien hai to adaavat hi sahi*. Love requires a relationship, whatever be the nature of that relationship. The spin between *muhabbat/adaavat* is the key to the delightful innovative play.

295 N +

hai aadmi bajaaye khud ik mahshar-e khayaal
ham anjuman samajhte hain khilvat hi kyun n ho

Man is like a doomsday
of commotion of thoughts.
Even if he is by himself,
he is never alone—
never only by himself,
he is always the hub of a furore.

Conceptually, this couplet is very special. Ghalib calls man *mahshar-e khayaal*, literally a mayhem of thoughts. Your thoughts never leave the mind peaceful or by itself. They create a commotion, one way or the other. Since the nature of man is to prefer peace, this creates a conflict. An upheaval of thoughts or peaceful solitude, we may think that man is alone but he can never be alone. He is always surrounded by a crowd of thoughts. Ghalib, by a simple negative spin, upturns the meaning of both the opposing positions and also makes the point that man can never be alone even when he is alone.

295 N +

hangaama-e zabuuni-e himmat hai infi’aal
haasil n kijiye dahr se ibrat hi kyun n ho

Taking help from others
when you are in a state of distress
is close to pitiful.
It is against your dignity—
Do not take from the world

even if it is teaching.

Courage or self-esteem, in order to be meaningful, has to arise from one's own strength. There is no courage in weakness. Ghalib calls it pitiful. To approach the world in that state is not going to yield any good result. So, one should not accept it even if it is in the form of a lesson, teaching, or retribution. Ghalib artistically handles the negative in different ways. Here it takes a subtle turn: deal with the world with self-esteem, do not accept a favour, even the teaching; be yourself; find your own truth; do not go the way others go, find your own way.

296 N+

vaarastagi bahaana-e begaangi nahien
apne se kar n ghair se vahshat hi kyun n ho

Freedom does not mean
an excuse to cut off from others.
If we want to abandon the world,
it is better to give up the self.

'Freedom' is Ghalib's favourite theme. Once again, the emphasis is on doing or action (*kar*). Freedom does not mean that we separate ourselves from the others or become oblivious to others. If you claim to be free, then others do not come in the way. All action comes from one's own self. Even choosing madness (*vahshat*) would be based on one's own preference. Freedom, obliviousness, and preoccupation with the self—all three—have a hidden play. The pleasure of this couplet lies in the tension between these three concepts and the pivot is the freedom of self.

299 N+

dosti ka parda hai begaanagi
munh chhupaana ham se chhora chahiye

Indifference can be a veil of friendship.
Stop hiding your face from me
lest people guess the secret of our love.

The relationship that prevails between friendship and indifference is the same relationship between covering the face and not covering the face. These are two opposite positions. The speaking voice tells the beloved: you can show me the indifference so that people do not come to know of our friendship. At the same time, stop covering your face so that I can see you.

This way, the normal equation is changed: affirmation of love but no deceptive indifference or covering of the face. The inherent artistic spin of negativity is what lends the couplet its innovativeness and charm.

300 N +

munhasir marne p ho jis ki ummiid
na-ummiidi uski dekha chahiye

Think of the one who has put
all his hopes on dying but he is still alive.
His disappointment is worth noticing.

We cannot find a commentator who is not impressed by Ghalib's inventive spin here. Notice the negative association between *ummiid* (hope) and *na ummiidi* (loss of hope). There is a formation and rejection of formation. One normally hopes for good things to happen. Hoping to die and then the disappointment of not dying is a predicament that is not easy to resolve.

301 N +

be khudi be sabab nahien Ghalib
kuchh to hai jis ki parda daari hai

Ghalib, this state of rapture
is not without a cause.
There is something
that I am hiding from others.

301 N +

muddat hui hai yaar ko mehmaan kiye huye
josh-e qadah se bazm charaaghaan kiye huye

Once again,
it is time to play host to my beloved.
The wine and goblets got so excited
that they illuminated the place
of our meeting.

This gem of a composition belongs to Rendition One (nineteen years of age). In the beginning, there were 13 couplets of this ghazal that were found written in the margin in Ghalib's hand. The matla and the first two couplets were added at the age of twenty-four. The fourth couplet appeared in what is known as *Nuskha-e Shirani*. Ghalib liked this ghazal so much that he

made additions at different times and included all the 17 couplets in the Divan. The beginning of the ghazal was made around the time when the marsia (elegy) of the beloved was written. Ghalib reminisces about a night when he played host to the beloved. The radiif (*kiye huye*) is indicative of the past events. The beauty of the nostalgic images of love that emerges one by one, depicting the consummate ecstasy and bliss that brightened the night as a magical sparkling flash, disappeared in a moment followed by blankness and emptiness. Ghalib weaves a bewitchingly sad narrative of exquisite beauty. The aesthetic effect is so verbal in nature that it is almost impossible to convey through translation. A few couplets nonetheless are given below that will give some idea of the spell that Ghalib's mind might have gone through while recollecting those magical moments. The words and phrases, artistically chiselled, flow smoothly and shine like beaded pearls. Those who are rooted in the language will enjoy the most.

302 N+

*ik nau bahaar-e naaz ko taake hai phir nigaah
chehra furogh-e mai se gulistan kiye huye*

Once again
I want to see her charming,
spring-like fresh face,
flushed under the influence of wine.

*ji dhuundhta hai phir vahi fursat ke raat din
baithe rahein tasavvur-e jaanaan kiye huye*

Once again
my heart is looking for
the nights and days
of carefree abandon—
just being, doing nothing,
and thinking of her.

302 N+

*teri vafa se kya ho talaafi k dahr mein
tere siva bhi ham p bahut se sitam huye*

Your faithfulness
will not be the remedy
for what is wrong
with this world.

It was not only you,
there was the world too
that acted cruelly.

The world acted cruelly towards the protagonist, and the result again is of hopelessness and disappointment that cannot be undone even if the beloved makes up for the wrongs done, which is not probable. The subtle play between the wrongs committed by the beloved and the wrongs committed by the world is obvious. There is a traditional hierarchy here between the beloved and the world that is cleverly demolished.

303 N +

likhte rahe junuun ki hikaayaat-e khuun chakaan
har chand is mein haath hamaare qalam huye

As a punishment for defiance and disobedience.
my hands were chopped off.
I still kept on writing with blood
and raising the voice of my dissent.

The imagery presented in this couplet is horrifying. Blood is dripping after the hands are chopped off. But what caused the loss of hands? The oppression and tyranny by the authorities. The spin is between tyranny and dissent and between life and death. The dissent cannot be crushed whatever the cost, as that is a metaphor of the freedom of human spirit. The imagery has a trace of what happened to the great Sufi saint Mansoor, who was killed by chopping off his hands and legs by the custodians of society. Let us also not overlook the fact that dissent (no, not) conceptually is shunyata. This couplet was the hallmark of the twentieth-century revolutionary poets, especially Faiz Ahmad Faiz.



¹ This is an example of how speech replicates illusionary speech.

9

The Second Rendition

Innovative Meaning and the Dialectical Mind



*aashuftagi ne naqsh-e suvaida kiya durust
zaahir hua k daagh ka sarmaaya duud tha*

Madness cured
the black spot in my heart
that my yearning and burning
gave it to me.
It made the scar to disappear
just like a cloud of smoke.

*tha khwaab mein khayaal ko tujh se mu'aamla
jab aankh khul gayi n ziyaan tha n suud tha*

I found myself thinking
in a dream
that we met and talked.
When I opened my eyes
there was nothing there.
No loss, no gain.

—Ghalib

IN THIS CHAPTER, we shall look at those couplets that were written by Ghalib after the age of nineteen but before he was twenty-four. This means that they were not found in the *Nuskha-e Bhopal Awwal* written in Ghalib's hand, which we have previously called Rendition One and denoted it by the letter N. Couplets written after these, that is between the ages of nineteen and

twenty-four and found in the second Nuskha of 1821, known as *Nuskha-e Hamidia* (Q), shall be called the Rendition Two.¹

There are seven couplets of the above ghazal of which only four were included in the Divan. Terms like *aashuftagi* (madness), *naqsh-e suvaidda* (mark of a scar of a wound), *daagh* (mark), and *duud* (smoke) have opposing relationships. There is a cause and effect relationship between smoke and the mark of a black spot. It was caused by the madness of love. Look at the dialectical twist. The scars of the wounds on the heart that were the result of the yearning and burning with increasing madness went up in smoke. In other words, when madness augmented all limits, the scars burnt up and vanished. The pain beyond a point becomes its own remedy. In Ghalib's verse, we have seen many times that an initial statement by a simple dialectical twist transforms into its converse. Such examples are the hallmark of innovativeness and beauty. Pain cannot be cured other than by itself. In other couplets too we find this inversive touch, resulting in opposing poetic meanings. Seeing the beloved in a dream was a big gain but when the eyes opened, there was nothing there, meaning gain was converted into loss. But Ghalib reverses the meaning. There was no gain or loss. No loss because the gain was not real gain. Dream is nothing more than a non-real time and space situation occurring between opening and closing of eyes. Dream is gain, its inverse is loss. But Ghalib seems to reject both of these customary states of affairs and says it is no gain no loss.

297 N+

hai baare e'temaad-e vafaadari is qadar
Ghalib ham is mein khush hain k na meharbaan hai

Ghalib, I have put my trust
in her loyalty so much
that even her lack of generosity
appears to be a source of happiness.

If we put our trust in anyone, logically, it would mean that the other person also responds positively but not in terms of Ghalib's dialectical logic. Trust gets distrust and even oppression. But the result is not a disappointment. It is a source of joy because even oppression by the beloved is something that the lover values.

302 N+

*hasti hamaari apni fana par daliil hai
yaan tak mite k aap ham apni qasam huye*

Our existence is a proof of non-existence.
I was diminished to a point
where I became an excuse for myself.

When existence is equated with non-existence, then the traditional difference between the two disappears. Anything that exists is its exact opposite. What this does to an individual is negation of negation. Not only he does not exist, he becomes his own *qasam* (an excuse or a shadow of the real self). No positivity is possible without negativity.

313 Q

*mauj-e khamyaaza-e yak nashsha ch Islam ch kufr
kaji-e yak khatt-e mistar, ch tavahhum ch yaqiin*

What is Islam or *kufr* other than
the act of raising an upper arm
like a wave to overcome a hangover?
Scepticism and belief are simply twisted lines
on the yellow paper for writing.

*qibla o abruuye but yak rah-e khwaabiida-e shauq
ka'ba-o but-kada yak mehmil-e khwaab-e rangiin*

The face and the eyebrows of the beloved
are like sleepy yearning or longing.
Kaba and the temple are colourful dreams
like a decorative *curtained* saddle of a camel.

Many critics treat Ghalib as a poet of doubt (*tashkiik*). These people should seriously look at the above two couplets of this qasida. Ghalib is not a poet of scepticism or indecision; he is the ultimate poet of one rejection after another. We have touched on this aspect in [Chapter 4](#). Doubt is like a dilemma facing a feeling of uncertainty but not rejection of certainty. These couplets reject more than one hypothesis. Religion or denial of religion is like raising an arm to overcome a hangover. Scepticism and belief are like crooked lines on a paper. Kaba and the temple are like the camel's decorative curtained saddle, not revealing the secret if someone is in there. All this amounts to much more than doubt or scepticism. It is rejection after rejection. German philosopher, Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) stated that

the obvious has made us blind. We believe because others believe. We accept the routine without any hesitation. Ghalib looks at the routine and rejects it with one push of his hand. These two couplets were later dropped. The reason is obvious.

318 Q.

*tha khwaab mein khayaal ko tujh se mu'aamla
jab aankh khul gayi n ziyaan tha n suud tha*

I found myself thinking
in a dream
that we met and talked.
When I opened my eyes
there was nothing there.
No loss, no gain.

There was something in the dream but when the eyes opened there was nothing there. The opening of the eye has to be understood as waking up from ignorance and gaining awareness that makes no difference between existence and non-existence. This couplet reaches the very core of shunyata, though it appears existential or Vedantic. There is no existence, no non-existence—it is a continuum.

318 Q.

*teshe baghair mar n saka kohkan Asad
sar gashta-e khumaar-e rusuum o quyuud tha*

When told
that his beloved had died
Farhad killed himself
with an axe.
Asad, lovers die for no reason
and they do not need an axe
to die.

In the above maqt'a also we see the same kind of inverse creativity, whereby the commonplace or received wisdom is rejected. It is against the dignity of man to do what others ordinarily do. In the passion of love, one must go beyond what the legendary lovers Majnun and Farhad did. Farhad killed himself with an axe which is a conventional way of killing self. Ghalib, by his peculiar dialectical thought, repeatedly rejects the conventional or commonplace and comes up with an inventive idea. To

continuously suffer in love is a matter of greater courage and dignity than dying by ordinary means. As he proclaims in one of the couplets, ‘It is very common to follow the way of others, why not take your own way or the way people are afraid to take’. As he proclaims in one of his couplets.

*hain ahl-e khirad kis ravish-e khaas p naazaan
paabastagi-e rasm o rah-e aam bahut hai*

Which particular path
the wise ones are following?
It is common to follow
the way where others go.
It is shame and indignity!

Let us look at three couplets from another very popular ghazal.

319 Q.

*kahte ho n denge ham dil agar para paaya
dil kahaan k gum kijye ham ne mudd’aa paaya*

You will not return my heart
if it fell by the wayside
and you found it?
My heart was destined
to find its home
in your everlasting embrace.

The first and the third couplets of this ghazal were included in the Divan. All three are exceptional. But the second one is particularly emblematic of man’s endeavour and aspiration, keeping his target for achieving anything in life really high and showing determination. Although on the face of it, these three couplets deal with different topics—the first one is about beloved’s haughtiness, the second is about man’s effort, the third one about beauty’s gamesmanship. They are all based on inventive logic that opens up new avenues compared to conventional meaning-making.

In the matl’a, the poet follows an ingenious logic: you can find the heart if it is really lying somewhere to be found. But this situation is rejected. The lover gave his heart to the beloved, which means it is nowhere other than in the possession of the beloved. She could not have found it lying anywhere because it was already with her. She is denying it but that is a matter of cleverness. The couplet’s structure is based on dual negatives. ‘The beloved says that I will not return your heart.’ The lover responds, ‘What else could

I wish! The heart is not lost; it is in the possession of the one who is supposed to have it. The heart has reached its destination.'

319 Q

hai kahaan tamanna ka duusra qadam yaarab
ham ne dasht-e imkaan ko ek naqsh-e pa paaya

O God, where should I take
my desire in my second step?
I covered the entire field of possibilities
just in one step.

The second couplet is really one of a kind and was included in *Nuskha-e Hamidia*. It is one of the most quoted couplets and is easy to comprehend. The idea for a man to cover the entire field of possibilities in a single step clarifies the logic of negative dialectics behind it. The question arises as to why Ghalib or the people in his poetic circle decided to delete such deeply modulated couplet from the Divan. There has been some discussion about this. The best guess is that during those days, the conventional styles of writing poetry had such a stranglehold that there were similar sounding syllables occurring repeatedly (*tanaafur-e sauti*) in the second line (*pa paaya*) or the theme was too abstract. The field of possibilities is infinite and man's aspirations are also infinite. But Ghalib presents this idea differently. He says that man's aspirations are so strong and his dignity so great that the so-called 'field of possibilities' is no bigger than moving one step forward. At the same time, the material reality limits this movement. Where can a man place his second step, when in the single step everything is covered? In this thought process concerning the aspiration of man, we can clearly see the influence of Sabke Hindi and Bedil. It is also true that in India's mythological tradition, such archetypal ideas were commonly shared. Is it possible that an ancient story told in the Puranas about an ordinary-looking avatar named Vaman, who covered the whole creation in one single step and asked the mighty king where could he place his second foot, was an unconscious influence behind this couplet?

319 Q.

saadgi o purkaari bekhudi o hushyaari
husn ko taghaaful mein jurr-at aazma paaya

Simplicity and sophistry

Obliviousness and cunningness.
She was daring in her amnesia.
Was she setting up a snare?

Here, two opposing states have been brought together: if there is simplicity, then there cannot be sophistry; if there is obliviousness or lack of awareness, then there cannot be cunningness. Each state is balanced and reversed by its opposite. That brings us to the second line. The beloved, even in her state of amnesia or forgetfulness, is capable of planning something mischievous. With a twist, the poet concludes that sophistry is actually deception and obliviousness is actually cunningness. This depiction of the beloved in the couplet is consistent with other metaphorical poetic attributes like faithlessness and playful along with the rival mentioned generally in the poetics of the ghazal.

320 Q.

ishq se tabi'yat ne ziist ka maza paya
dard ki dava paayi dard-e be-dava paya

Love made it possible
for me to enjoy life and
it cured my suffering.
But what to do now
with the agony of love
for which there is no cure?

Ghalib liked this rhyming scheme so much that he wrote two ghazals in it in his early years, during the period of the so-called waywardness. The words appear to come out as if they were pearls in a rosary and their flow begs one to recite them. Look at the second line in the matl'a. Love cured the lover's pain, while adding to the pain and suffering which cannot be cured. How can the same thing have seemingly contradictory effects? But think about it. This is the unresolvable contradiction that makes Ghalib unique; the beauty of his poetry lies in rejecting the obvious or the surface meanings and sensitizing us to the contradictions of life to which generally we are oblivious. Love is the core of existence; it is the joy of joys. It causes longing and anxiety that is cured by love but the cure itself is a pain which is irremediable.

320 Q.

ghuncha phir laga khilne aaj ham ne apna dil

khuun kiya hua dekha gum kiya hua paaya

Buds began to blossom again
and I found my heart
full of longing and traces of deep wounds.
Never mind the wounds and the bleeding.
Glad, something lost was regained.

In the second couplet, we once again come across the tension between a heart that is wounded and a heart that is regained after having been lost. Love is a puzzle in which loss is gain.

320 Q.

*haal-e dil nahien ma'aluam lekin is qadar ya'ni
ham ne baarha dhuundha tum ne baarha paaya*

I do not know
the condition of my heart,
though one thing
is quite certain.
I could not find it
how hard I tried
but you have found it
again and again.

The third couplet has a similar situation: the heart does not belong to the lover anymore because it was given to the beloved. This is the usual situation. But what makes the couplet unique is the parallelism between 'I could not find it how hard I tried' and 'you have found it again and again', though the beloved in the ghazal's poetics is often portrayed as the one who is in denial about matters relating to the lover's heart.

320 Q.

*zakhm ne daad n di tangi-e dil ki yaarab
tiir bhi siina-e bismil se par-afshaan nikla*

The wound that you inflicted
did not appreciate
the tightness of my heart.
Your arrow shot through the chest
and gushed out dripping with blood.

When the wound did not appreciate heart's grief, it means, according to Suha Mujaddidi, that it did not do anything to open wide the wound or

showed any sympathy because the grief itself was caused by failure in love. How is it possible that the arrow came out of the chest and the heart did not accommodate the hit it received? The first line refers to a paradoxical condition: the lover's heart had exasperated because his love was not returned, while in ghazal's poetics, the lover's heart is always accommodative. The second line describes the consequence: as the heart was hospitable, it welcomed the hit it received and the arrow gushed through. There is an innovative negative, challenging the commonly held positions in both cases. The awesome imagery too adds to the beauty of the couplet.

320 Q.

buuye gul naala-e dil duud-e chiraagh-e mehfil
jo teri bazm se nikla so pareshan nikla

The fragrance of roses,
 sighs of aching hearts.
 And the swirling smoke of the lamps.
 Whosoever came out of your parlour
 was a bundle of nerves.

A gathering at the *bazm*, the beloved's place, is a time for celebration and amusement but if people come out of this meeting in a miserable state, that is a dejected outcome. The couplet has three images: *buuye gul* (the fragrance of roses), *naala-e dil* (sigh of the aching heart), and *duud-e chiraagh-e mehfil* (smoke of the lamps in the gathering)—all three signify swirling negative connotation and are tied to a single verb *nikalna* (rushing out in an indifferent state). The beauty of the couplet lies in its poetic logic: how multiple causes lead to a single outcome or even a broad generalization that whosoever comes out of the beloved's *bazm* comes out bewildered and restless, although it is a place of joy and happiness. Mark it that the core of the three substantives is *naala-e dil*, the other two are yoked in as associated poetic images to reinforce the feeling of dejection and pain of 'sigh of the aching heart,' which is the main part of deep hurt.

321 Q.

dahr mein naqsh-e vafa vajh-e tasalli n hua
hai y voh lafz k sharminda-e ma'ni n hua

The mark of loyalty
 gave no satisfaction

to anyone in this world.
The word is empty from within,
devoid of any meaning.

Loyalty or faithfulness is generally the mark of good values and respect but Ghalib says they have become empty words because the world is devoid of faithfulness. Hence, the word *vafa* itself has become meaningless. The dialectical tension concerning respectability of loyalty or even the word loyalty, having become empty of meaning, is the point of inventiveness of the couplet.

321 Q.

main ne chaaha tha k andoh-e vafa se chhuutuun
voh sitamgar mere marne p bhi raazi n hua

I wanted to free myself
from the suffering of love.
But my tormentor
was not ready to let me die.

The feeling evoked in the second couplet is carried over to the next one. The lover wanted to free himself from the suffering of love but the beloved, who is a tormentor, did not allow even him the freedom to die. Denial of a request to die is an extreme. The result is a continuation of pain and suffering, which is the inverse of love.

322 Q.

shauq har rang raqiib-e sar-o saamaan nikla
qais tasviir ke parde mein bhi uryaan nikla

Passionate love has dissipated
my fortune.
But it is not me alone.
Look at Majnun in the painting—
trying to cover his nakedness
with rags.

When the poet says that passion in every colour and shape is an enemy of one's well-being, he is pointing to the tension that exists between the two. But the real tension is in the second line. The poet first raises the expectation that painting is a veil to cover Majnun's nakedness. But then he rejects this interpretation and Majnun emerges naked in the painting. The so-called purdah is no purdah at all; it is a metaphor with many nuances. It

is a common knowledge that love can harm one's happiness but the poet illustrates his point with reference to Majnun who gave up everything in love and wandered naked. Showing Majnun in rags in a painting opens new avenues for interpretation. Such poetic exaggerations to reinforce the point and create layered meanings are part of inventive excellence.

322 Q

*shor-e rusvaayi-e dil dekh k yak naala-e shauq
laakh parde mein chhupa par vohi uryaan nikla*

After hearing the noise
about infamy of my heart,
the cry of my desire
surfaced like the lover
who was covered
in hundreds of veils
but came out naked.

This couplet develops on the same theme. The state of madness carries some noise with it; it maybe the mad person creating commotion or others shouting at him. This leads to infamy or disrepute. There is no way to hide it. We can put hundreds of veils on top of this but like Majnun's nakedness the recklessness in love would still be visible. The only way this situation can be remedied is if the lover suppresses the cries of his passion. This means that he has to hide his true state. We can also see an element of inversion in the *veil* and *nakedness*.

322 Q.

*hai nau aamoz-e fana himmat-e dushvaar pasand
sakht mushkil hai k y kaam bhi aasaan nikla*

If you are a novice
in the art of annihilation in love
be ready to hit a snag.
How surprising that a difficult task
turned out to be easy for me!

The last couplet contains Ghalib's favourite theme—man's aspiration and endeavour in the face of difficulties. His thesis presented in the couplet is that love kills and it kills you at the time you fall in love. So any attempt to kill self, due to frustration in love, later is futile. What is already dead or extinct cannot die or become extinct again. If you think on these lines, then

you are clearly a novice in the game of love. The use of the word *fana* with its special connotation in Sufism is significant here. It is not only annihilation or extinction; it is extinction beyond extinction.

327 Q.

bas k dushvaar hai har kaam ka aasaan hona
aadmi ko bhi muyassar nahien insaan hona

It is difficult
for every little thing
to be easy.
Likewise, it is difficult for a man
to be truly a man.

We know this is the *kalaam* written before the age of 24. The last line of the couplet of the previous ghazal, and the first line of the first couplet of this ghazal show some parallelism. One says *sakht mushkil hai k y kaam bhi aasaan nikla*, and the other says *bas k dushvaar hai har kaam ka aasaan hona*. The first one had to do with *fana* (extinction), while the second one relates to the difficulties faced in day-to-day life in a dual sense. Both the senses have an artistic turn of the negative connotation. On the one hand, it is not possible for everything to be simple and easy (tasks are *not* easy or simple), and on the other, it is difficult for every man to be truly a man. The distinction here between the two words *aadmi* (a man or a woman) and *insaan* (human being) is significant. While these words are used interchangeably in Urdu, in Ghalib's poetics there is a distinction because he deals with things not only as they are but also in terms of their inversion, that is, their 'other' in the sense of inclusive manifestation. A man can struggle and fail but nothing is too difficult for a human being, who is symbolic of the full potential or is an ideal man. Ghalib states that the gap between these two attributes is the intrinsic contradistinction of existence. We can see that by little twists and turns in his verse, Ghalib adds beauty and subtle depth to his couplets that appear simple as we read it.

327 Q.

vaaye divaangi-e shauq k har dam mujh ko
aap jaana udhar aur aap hi hairaan hona

Pardon me
for the intensity of my desire
that all this time

I tried to reach you
and then wondered
why I reached where I reached.

The couplet provides a compact description of what a lover does when he is blindly driven by the force of his desire to look for the beloved or to be in her company. There is only one force driving the lover and that is the force of his passion to be with the beloved. He goes in one direction and then he wonders why he went there. In other words, if the lover had better control of his desires, he should not have gone in the direction he chose to go. And he should not have wondered about the decision. But Ghalib says that this happens because love knows no logic. When passion drives behaviour, all bets are off. Going in one direction is driven by the hope of seeing the beloved. When the hoped-for objective is not achieved, the state of wonder defies all logic.

327 Q.

*ishrat-e qatl gah-e ahl-e tamanna mat puuchh
iid-e nazzara hai shamshiir ka uryaan hona*

Do not ask me
about the joy of being taken
to the killing stand.
A naked sword,
a crescent moon,
what a way to celebrate Eid!

The couplet is famous for its strong imagery. Artists and painters who paint canvases on Ghalib's poetry love such couplets because they reflect situations that evoke strong emotions. What could be more gripping and horrifying than a killing stand? Having been killed by the beloved is good fortune for the lover. There is a great joy to be celebrated by such death. Ghalib is not satisfied by just one image of the killing field. He adds a naked sword, which is like a crescent moon, and the celebratory mood of Eid to impart depth to the basic imagery of celebration, and when we look at the total picture it is enough to fill a large canvas. Prigarina was so impressed by the imagery of this couplet that she wrote a whole article about it. She found a connection here with the martyrdom of Sarmad, a Persian mystic, who was tried by Aurangzeb for heresy and put to death by beheading in 1661. Although this happened more than a century before

Ghalib, the incident might have been present as a tragic archetype in the collective unconscious ([Prigarina 2002](#)).

327 Q.

*ki mere qatl ke ba'ad us ne jafa se tauba
haaye us zuud pashemaan ka pashemaan hona*

She promised to be kind
after my slaying.

Alas!

What a repentance
of the repentant!

The couplet is the one that people at the *receiving end* love to recite. The first line presents a situation, that is, murder of the lover at the hands of the beloved. This continues a theme that was started in the last couplet. But what is different here is the ironical thinking and repentance after the act. The beloved who was cruel vows not to be cruel. But it is too late. That explains the ironical ending. The word used here is *zuud pashemaan*, which means quickly realizing the mistake. Thus, two things happened here. First, the beloved now is not only *not* cruel and unfaithful but she took very little time to change her outlook (also meaning that she did *not* take much time to change). This dual negativity lends itself to many interpretations, reminding us of what Derrida said more than a century later: meaning is infinite because context is infinite. This and several other couplets of Ghalib are testimony to the truth in the assertions of theorists.

328 Q.

*phir mujhe diida-e tar yaad aaya
dil jigar tashna-e faryaad aaya*

Once again,
I remembered your eyes
dipped in tears.
My heart and soul
filled with longing and crying
lamenting my lot.

*koi viiraani si viiraani hai
dasht ko dekh ke ghar yaad aaya*

This desolation

is like
no other desolation.
When I was in the wilderness
it reminded me
of my own home.

*main ne Majnun p ladakpan mein Asad
sang uthaaya tha k sar yaad aaya*

I did something
to Majnun
in my boyhood, Asad.
As I picked up a stone,
I remembered
my own head.

Written before the age of twenty-four, this ghazal establishes a place for itself in the reader's heart with its *matl'a* and its *radiif* (*yaad aaya*) adds to the pleasure. Once again, the poet presents his wounded and love-stricken heart and vivid imagery of separation from the beloved. Eyes filled with tears are symptomatic of remorse and incapacity. In the reader's imagination, there appear two eyes full of tears and the silence tells the rest of the story. The second line also presents a picture of helplessness. While the first line does not 'say' anything (it is soundless), the second line speaks about *fariyaad* (prayer) that require words.

The last couplet is a class by itself and has been the subject of much explanatory commentary. In popular imagination, wilderness signifies desolation, barrenness, isolation, or remoteness, and home is associated with life, people, and activity. But the contrary may also be true: that there is life in wilderness and home is barren and lifeless. This means that these two terms negate each other. But Ghalib is not inclined to support what easily comes to the mind. He is not saying that home is barren or wilderness is inhospitable. He is saying *koi viiraani si viiraani hai* (this desolation is like no other). It is clear that between wilderness and home, there is a binary as well as a hierarchical relationship. In terms of meaning, the one defines the other. In Ghalib's dialectical thinking, there is no fundamental difference between the two: home is like wilderness, and wilderness can be home.

The ghazal's *maqt'a* is also a unique example of the poet's skilfulness. When kids see a madman, they are amused by his manners and wildness.

For them, all madmen are alike. That is why they throw stones at everyone who appears to them of unsound mind. The poet remembers that as a kid he did no better than other kids, because he did pick up a stone to hit a mad person. But suddenly, there was an awakening and the hand that carried the stone froze. The young one goes back in time to remember this incident but then he moves forward in time thinking that one day this might happen to me. There are two dialectical negations operating in this couplet. First, there is a negative relationship between childhood (the time of ignorance) and maturity (madness have multiple causes and madness caused by deep passion of love is a class by itself). Second, there is a negative relationship between a stone and Majnun's head. But the poet, by not throwing the stone, negates both negatives and decentres the main idea from the incident that triggered it.

330 Q.

*husn ghamze ki kashaakash se chhuta mere ba'ad
baare aaraam se hain ahl-e jafa mere ba'ad*

When I am gone
beauty will cease its coquettish moves.
Those who oppressed and ignored me
might finally be at peace.

*sham'a bujhti hai to us mein se dhuan utthta hai
sho'la-e ishq siyaah posh hua mere ba'ad*

When I am gone—
the flame of love will die after me.
Smoke rises while the candle dies,
leaving nothing behind,
just a garb of pure blackness.

330 Q

*kaun hota hai hariif-e mai-e mard afgan-e ishq
hai mukarrar lab-e saaqi mein sala mere ba'ad*

When I am gone
Saqi will call out men
and dare them to suffer in love
the way I used to suffer.
But there will be silence in response.

Q

*tha main guldasta-e ahbaab ki bandish ki gyah
mutafarriq huye mere rufaqa mere ba'ad*

When I was gone
my friends dispersed one by one
because I was the tie of grass
that kept the bouquet together.

This ghazal from Rendition Two is a class by itself. The matl'a points to the possibility that after the lover's death, the beloved will be under no pressure to show off her coquettishness. That was a weapon she employed to inflict pain on the lover. Not only will she be free to lead her life as she pleases, all the other beauties who, like her, practised the art of cruelty can also rest in peace. The radiif itself refers to a situation that existed but no more after the lover's death (an inverse condition).

The second couplet, which is among the most loved couplets of Ghalib, presents a tension between the candle which is alive (spreading light) and that which is dead (merging with the surrounding darkness). One represents joy and love that is alive, and the other death of love (when everything goes up in smoke). There is an inverse relationship here. The smoke in this context is the dark shroud of death signifying the mourning of the beloved for a true lover towards whom she was indifferent in her whole life.

The third couplet describes yet another situation after the poet's death. The saqi, who is the beloved in disguise, is calling out to drink the wine of love as the deceased lover did, that is to be steadfast in love and endure suffering. She is inviting people repeatedly. No one answers the call, which is a pointer to the fact that the lover, who is no more, took the passion of love to such heights which is beyond the capacity of anyone else. The beloved mourns the loss but by indirectly challenging those who professed to love. There is no response to the call because none of them were as true.

The last couplet, which unfortunately was not included in the Divan, tells a story that plays out many times in the real life. There are people who act like the grass tie that binds the bouquet, and they have around them other people acting like glue, cementing lasting relationships. In a way, such people are steadfast in love and have no parallel. But when such a person dies, he leaves behind a vacuum, the grass tie is gone, and as a result people disperse; they go in different directions. The grass tie is the most ordinary thing among a bunch of flowers that anyone would hardly notice but this

ordinary thing holds the roses together. In Urdu poetics, there is nothing more humble than the grass, everybody curses it by walking on it; nonetheless, it holds its ground and spreads itself to be trampled by one and all. Only a poet of Ghalib's artistry could capture a hidden truth of life in just two lines of the memorable verse.

332 Q.

*n gul-e naghma huun n parda-e saaz
main huun apni shikast ki aavaaz*

I am neither a delightful melody
nor a musical arrangement.
I am the voice of my own dejection and ruin.

You can find negation in both the lines. A melody or a musical arrangement is a metaphor used to denote happiness, pleasure, and delight. Ghalib rejects both. He says, 'I am neither this nor that'. He goes even a step further and says that, 'I am the voice of my own defeat (non-existence)', and thereby, it is annihilation of one's own self.

334 Q.

*aah ko chaahiye ik umr asar hote tak
kaun jiita hai teri zulf ke sar hote tak*

It takes a lifetime
for my sighs and moans
to show some result.
Maybe I cannot live long enough
to conquer your tresses.

*daam-e har mauj mein hai halqa-e sad kaam nehang
dekhein kya guzre hai qatre p guhar hote tak*

The open mouths
of hundreds of dreadful crocodiles
are ready to trap
every incoming wave.
We have to wait
and see what happens to a drop
before it becomes a pearl.

aashiqi sabr talab aur tamanna betaab

dil ka kya rang karuun khuun-e jigar hote tak

Love demands patience
but desire is intensely restless.
Should I listen to my heart
which is impatient
or go with my self
which is telling me to wait
and keep bleeding until the end.

*ham ne maana k taghaaful n karo ge lekin
khaak ho jayen ge ham tum ko khabar hote tak*

I am not saying
you will not care for me
if malady strikes me.
But at the speed you get the word
I will be a pile of ashes
by the time you know about it.

It is a matter of great surprise that Ghalib's fans and admirers believed, for about a century, that some of the most popular ghazals, like this one, were written by Ghalib in his mature years, whereas the truth is that they all belong to the period before he turned 24. Some of the ghazals are treasures of beautiful meaning, like the one we are commenting on. A sigh or a moan is an expression of an unfulfilled desire that can take a very long time to become a reality. But *kaun jiita hai* (who could live long enough) is the deprivation that stares us in our face, implying that life is short—so short that not all our desires can find their fulfilment. But Ghalib, being an innovative poet, introduces measures that baffle our imagination—we need time that is equal to the time needed for the lover to conquer the beloved's tresses. One might interpret 'tresses' as a code word for 'union'. It could also mean a place that the lover yearns to reach but the beloved, duplicitous as she is, would never allow him to reach.

The second couplet presents strong imagery (one hundred crocodiles with mouths open) to play with the perilous possibilities of how a drop of water becomes a pearl. The drop initially is part of the wave which is received, among others, by the open mouth of crocodiles. What part goes into crocodile's mouth and what part hits the bottom is a matter of chance. Therefore, the drop of water has to negate all remote possibilities before it can become a pearl (or before one reaches excellence in life).

In the third couplet, two twists work in parallel to create the desired effect. The first tension is between love and desire. Love is a long journey. The lover has to suffer and he knows it. There is no use complaining because the lover has willingly chosen this path. Desire, on the other hand, demands immediate gratification. Desire is not ready to wait and see. It is blind to all the constraints that love is aware of. The second negation is between heart and mind. Heart is filled with desires and therefore it is impatient and persistent. Mind, on the other hand, symbolizes patience and rationality. It provides space against the heart's irrationality. *Dil ka kya rang karuun* is about the heart being too restive. The protagonist asks: what could I do to restrain my heart so that it listens to the voice of sanity? Basically, there is a paradoxical situation as two self-contradictory forces are pulling you apart when you are in deep love.

In the last couplet, the lover gives beloved the benefit of doubt. The ghazal's common refrain is that the beloved is heartless and does not care. But now the lover explores another possibility: I agree that you will never ignore me, and you will never be indifferent but since life is short, I will be a pile of dust before you truthfully respond to my love. For the beloved, love is a game. But for the lover it is summum bonum, the highest goal of life. So there is a conflict of expectations that cannot be easily resolved.

344 Q_+

*hasti ke mat fareb mein aa jaa-io Asad
aalam tamaam halqa-e daam-e khayaal hai*

Asad, do not get trapped
in the deception of existence.
This world is a trap
built around the mesh
of our own thinking.

One of the commentators (Khalifa Abdul Hakim) wrote that no Vedantic can portray the truth of Vedanta better than what is embedded in this couplet. Trap or the snare of our own thinking means the same thing. Ghalib does not merely call existence a form of non-existence but he goes a step further. He calls it negation of negation, as the meaning is in flux. The couplet starts with existence but it ends with a distinctive view of the world or universe. There is negation at work in-between. The poet is not concerned with transcendental thought. He is talking about super-

consciousness of which our thinking is a part. Ghalib did not like a more common expression for reality and, therefore, he offers us a very unique metaphoric description.

346 Q.

*har qadam duuri-e manzil hai numaayaan mujh se
meri raftaar se bhaage hai bayaabaan mujh se*

Each step makes it clear
how far away am I
from where I need to arrive.
Watching the speed
at which I am going,
the wilderness is running
farther away from me.

*gardish-e saaghar-e sad jalva-e rangiin tujh se
aaiina daari-e yak diida-e hairaan mujh se*

As for you—
hundreds of wine goblets
are going around
in a rainbow of colours.
As for me—
mirrors are showing me
stunned with wide-open eyes,
spellbound by your awesome beauty.

Ghalib hits the dialectical note at the very beginning. In the normal course, when we walk towards our destination it gets closer and closer. But that is the common view. Ghalib subverts that thought and says that as he walks, his destination is drifting away from him. He can see where he is going but he can never reach there. The destination is like a trickster. It plays tricks with the walker. The second line names the destination—it is wilderness where a lover's journey ends—and this definition enhances the intensity in terms of man's complete helplessness. He cannot reach his goal even when the goal is as unmerciful as wilderness. These two couplets are filled with dynamic energy and verve. The first is a commentary on the lover's fate. The lover has only one goal which is to move closer to the beloved and to constantly be with her. But his fate has determined another outcome for him. No matter how hard he tries, the final destination will move farther away from him. It does not matter what he does, he will

always fail in reaching his goal. Wilderness is the only place that fate has willed to be the lover's final abode (that is where great lovers like Farhad and Majnun finally ended). The second line says something different than what it appears to say on the surface. Wilderness is not running away but getting closer because the lover's speed is meaningless. It says: since you can never get anywhere to the goal you are seeking, you will have no option but to come to me. This is the dilemma of existence, the more you want to get to a point the more it moves away from you since fulfilment, be it in love or life, is an illusion.

The second couplet is a dynamic description of what happens in the beloved's charismatic assembly. Because of her presence, everything is so colourful and even wine cups are going around resembling a dance of colours. The lover is stunned and his wide-open eyes are struck with wonder and awe. As a result, his eyes are no different from the mirror, which is symbolic of the beloved's reflection in a captivating mood. This has a double spin, as the mirror effect further intensifies the magical charisma and colourfulness of the beloved.

347 Q.

jab tak dahaan-e zakhm n paida kare koi
mushkil k tujh se raah-e sukhan va kare koi

Unless the wound
has a mouth to speak,
it is difficult
to communicate with you.

348 Q.

husn-e farogh-e sham'-e sukhan duur hai Asad
pahle dil-e gudaakhta paida kare koi

Asad, the poetry that captures
the beauty of the brightness
of candle is not possible,
unless you have a burning
and melting heart like the candle.

The wound that has a mouth is an old wound, maybe a wound that has not cured and cannot be easily cured. It is essential for the deep communication we seek. The poet does not exactly specify who the other party is with whom we are trying to communicate. It could be the beloved

or God, or the beloved who is almost divine. In all cases, it is the voice of the injured or the wounded soul that will be easily heard. If the person is in that condition, he does not have to speak. His inner condition or his wounded self will speak for him. A similar precondition is described in the next couplet. Poets want to write poetry that cast a spell over their readers. But this objective cannot be achieved without first producing a molten or sweltering heart. Candle has to burn in order to produce the light. In the same manner, an intense heart is the spark that lights up great verse. Creative tension in both cases is discernible.

354 Q+

*jaati hai koi kashmakash andoh-e ishq ki
dil bhi agar gaya to vo hi dil ka dard tha*

The strife over love's anguish
it seems will never end.
The heart is long gone
but the pain still persists.

From here onwards, we shall be dealing with couplets that were added in the margins of *Nuskha-e Hamidia*. Experts identify this period a little later after 1821, which means that these verses were written by Ghalib soon after when the actual manuscript was complete.

The first couplet is like a warning for a true lover, as love is intense suffering. To be a lover is not an easy option. Not everyone has the capacity to go through the anguish, the pain, and the perils that are present in abundance in this path. If you are afraid of agony, then this path is not for you. You should undertake it only if you are a real seeker with tenacious courage.

The statement in the second couplet that the anguish of love never leaves the lover has an obvious negative. But the creativity of expression lies in the second line. The heart is gone or has been given away. Pain was the quality of heart, so when the heart is gone, pain should go too. But the wonder is that though the heart is gone, pain is very much there; as if there was a vacuum and it has been filled by constant pain. This is the lover's predicament: give away the heart and get into torment and pain that never subsides.

354 Q_+

*mehram nahien hai tuu hi navaahaaye raaz ka
yaan varna jo hijaab hai pardah hai saaz ka*

It is not only you who is
not knowing the mystery
of existence.
The sound that is heard
hides a melody
that is difficult to comprehend.

*kaavish ka dil kare hai taqaaza k hai hunuuz
nakhun p qarz us gir-h-e niim baaz ka*

My heart wants to untie
the knot of grief
but ah! Not the nails.
They owe a debt
to the healing wounds.

This ghazal was found on the margins of *Nuskha-e Hamidia*. Its matl'a has a mystical flavour. From the beginning of time, humans have endeavoured to unravel the mystery of existence. This is problematic as we have no clue and the secret of this universe remains hidden from us. But the poet makes the point that the universe is filled with music and if we know how to discern the melody that is hidden in the notes, we can get access to secrets that have remained locked up. There is a play in the words *hijab* and *purdah*.

The key word in the next couplet is *gir-h-e niim baaz*, which means the half-opened knot. Heart can untie the knot of grief but it cannot finish the job. The half-healing wounds are still there, and they crave for scratching. Love is an infliction and the job can never be over. The existential problem could never be fully resolved.

355 Q.+

*ishrat-e qatra hai dariya mein fana ho jaana
dard ka had se guzarna hai dava ho jaana*

A drop of water
falling into the river
finally becomes the river.
When the pain exceeds its limits,
it becomes its own remedy.

A drop eventually merging into the ocean is a common thought. But the poet equates the extinction of a drop of water with ecstatic pleasure (a negation), and from there he derives a dialectical principle: when things reach a certain extreme point, their inherent nature undergoes a transformation. When the identity is gone, the pain can become its own remedy.

*tujh se qismat mein meri surat-e qufl-e abjad
tha likha baat ke bante hi juda ho jaana*

Our relationship,
due to bad luck,
had the appearance
of a coded lock.
What luck!
When the code worked
we separated forever.

*dil hua kashmakash-e chaara-e zahmat mein tamaam
mit gaya ghisne mein is uqde ka va ho jaana*

The poor heart
got crushed
in our struggle
to resolve differences.
The problem got rubbed off
in the effort
to resolve the mystery.

*ab jafa se bhi hain mahroom ham Allah Allah
is qadar dushman-e arbaab-e vafa ho jaana*

Now, she has stopped
being cruel to me,
O God!
Has our enmity reached a point
where even cruelty
has to be denied?

The first three couplets of this ghazal are truly remarkable, being *misaaliya* or *istadlaaliya*. We would recall from our discussions in [Chapter 5](#) that in Sabke Hindi thought patterns, a poetical device that has often been used is that of making an enigmatic statement and its resolution by

ingenious poetic logic. But Ghalib uses this technique in a very subtle way, inasmuch as that the second line flawlessly blends with the first, so that the reader never feels that he is being led to a revelatory resolution. Notice how *dard ka had se guzarna hai dava ho jaana* or *tha likha baat ke bante hi juda ho jaana* are organically blended into the first line. In the last couplet, terms like *jafa* and *vafa* are inversely correlated but Ghalib creates the room for another condition, that is, neither *jafa* or *vafa* but could be considered *ghair-e jafa*—a condition that transcends the traditional notions of loyalty or disloyalty. The beloved is cruel (which means disloyal) but if she even stops being cruel then she reaches a situation that cannot be described based on the traditional lexicon. Such twists are the core of Ghalib's poetics, leading to a paradoxical charm of their own.

357 Q.+

nahien gar sarv barg-e idraak-e ma'ni
tamaashaaye nairang-e suurat salaamat

Even if one cannot make sense
of things as they appear to be,
this deceptively colourful display
of reality is good enough for fun.

Many commentators treat meaning (*ma'ni*) in the sense of exposition of the real (*haqiqat*), and appearance is treated metaphorically as deceptive display. But the couplet says more than that. Bedil addressed the question of meaning in his conversation with Nasir Ali Sirhindi that it can never be exhausted and, in his masnavi Irfan, he equated meaning with *sukhan* (vak). We have already discussed this in [Chapter 6](#). But it is also present at a much broader scale, though we cannot fully comprehend it at that level. Here, Ghalib seems to be saying that when man does not have the means to resolve the mystery of things, then why not enjoy what is out there, may be the deceptive display, as long as we can.

360 Q.+

dekhna qismat k aap apne p rashk aa jaaye hai
main use dekhuun bhala kab mujh se dekha jaaye hai

Look at my luck!
I have become envious
of myself looking at her.
I cannot believe my eyes!

How should I look at her?
Dazzled, I cannot see anything.

*haath dho dil se yahi garmi gar andeshe mein hai
aabgiina tundi-e sehba se pighla jaaye hai*

The heart melts if it is caught up
in the heat of sweltering thought.
The flask melts if the wine is really stiff.

This is one of the definitional couplets of Ghalib. He connects heart and goblet in the sense of how both of them come to represent each other and the ecstasy of creativity. Heart, a living thing, throbs overwhelmingly, while goblet, a non-living thing, melts with the impact of stiff wine of sweltering thoughts. Ghalib makes a subtle reference in the second line to his poetics that melts everything with the heat of his blazing thoughts. Remember, he previously warned that if one keeps going in this rapturous direction, the heart is not going to last too long!

*ghair ko yaarab voh kyunkar man'-e gustaakhi kare
gar haya bhi usko aati hai to sharma jaaye hai*

How can she, O God!
stop the rival from misbehaving,
when she is shy and
bashful to have the courage.

*garche hai tarz-e taghaaful parda daar-e raaz-e ishq
par ham aise khoye jaate hain k voh pa jaaye hai*

She does not pay attention
to the secrets of our love
in her forgetfulness.
But when I appear lost
she gets some clue
how inattentive she is.

*ho ke aashiq vo pari rukh aur naazuk ban gaya
rang khulta jaaye hai jitna k urta jaaye hai*

The fairy face became
ever more tantalizing
after she fell in love.

The colour of her skin brightened
as she got the glow.

*naqsh ko us ke musavvir par bhi kya kya naaz hain
khiinchta hai jis qadar utna hi khinchta jaaye hai*

As the artist paints her,
the canvas gets frisky.
The more he tries to draw
the more tantalizing she gets.

This ghazal is among the few that were added in the manuscript at the last stage, maybe it was written when Ghalib was either twenty-five or twenty-six. Its flow and highly artistic gush is worth noticing. The thought pattern and philosophic complexity is so beautifully blended into the textual threads that we are not consciously aware unless we make an effort to untie them. Bekhud Dehlvi pointed out that the intent of the second line is elaborated in the first. In fact, it is much more than that. The second line points to the intense heat of the language of unsaying and compression of thoughts such as *aabgiina tundi-e sehba se pighla jaaye hai* in the second couplet. The whole ghazal is full of verbal structures of dialectical nature enriching the thought patterns and making the verse appear much more innovative.

366 Q+

*haan khaaiyo mat fareb-e hasti
har chand kahein k hai nahien hai*

Yes, do not be deceived by the existence.
Everyone claims it is real but it is not.

*hasti hai n kuchh adam hai Ghalib
aakhir tu kya hai aye nahien hai*

There is neither existence
nor non-existence.
Who you are?
O Ghalib, you are 'not.'

From poets like Urfi, Faizi, Naziri, Zahuri, and Bedil, there was a tradition in metaphysical thought that recognized the simultaneous existence of the world and human beings and the mutually interdependent

relationship between them. Ghalib benefited from this tradition from his early years but he also subverted it. In this endeavour, he took help from negative dynamics. The first couplet states the supplication but the following two couplets are extraordinary. In the first couplet, there is a hypothesis in the first line that is rejected in the second. Ghalib's spin of positivity as well as his negativity go beyond the limits of the language. This is seen in the second couplet, where there is a word of advice followed by an emphatic rejection. It is the third couplet that really climbs the heights of shunya: when there is nothing visible or invisible, existence or non-existence, then we are left only with one question, the answer to which is both 'yes' and 'no'. This is not just shunya; it is *param* or maha shunya, that is, 'Laaye Azam'. This is a pinnacle of Ghalib's creative act that is driven by his inner white heat and takes his words to new meditative heights—a place normally reached by great rishis, yogis, and auliyas. It makes us speechless. Ghalib was right when he posed a question in one of his letters to a confidante: 'Brother, tell me truthfully, if rekhta (Urdu) reached its most magical and miraculous summit, would it look like this or different?'

362 Q_+

*kabhi neki bhi uske ji mein gar aa jaaye hai mujh se
jafaayein kar ke apni yaad sharma jaaye hai mujh se*

Even when she thinks
of doing something nice,
she is suddenly overcome
with shyness,
remembering her betrayals.

*khudaaya jazba-e dil ki magar taasir ulti hai
k jitna khiinchta huun aur khinchta jaaye hai mujh se*

O God, the longing of my heart
is having an opposite effect.
The more I try to bring her towards me,
the more she moves away from me.

*udhar voh badgumaani hai idhar y naatavaani hai
n puuchha jaaye hai us se n bola jaaye hai mujh se*

Over there, she is mistrustful of me.
Over here, I am physically exhausted.
She is not asking anything and
I can hardly say anything.

363 Q.+

sambhalne de mujhe ae na-ummiidi kya qayaamat hai
k daamaan-e khayaal-e yaar chhuuta jaaye hai mujh se

Let me catch my breath.
O, the feeling of hopelessness!
The edge of the beloved's thought
is slipping away from my hands.

huye hain paaon hi pahle nabard-e ishq mein zakhmi
n bhaaga jaaye hai mujh se n thahra jaaye hai mujh se

The woes of my love life
have already wounded my feet.
I can neither run,
nor stand still,
nor give up chasing her.

qayaamat hai k hove mudda'ii ka ham safar Ghalib
voh kaafir jo khuda ko bhi n saunpa jaaye hai mujh se

What a calamity Ghalib,
that the rival has become
her travel companion—
that kafir I could not leave
even in God's care.

This entire ghazal is filled with dialectically charged structures. The radiif (*jaaye hai mujh se*) adds a distinctive flavour to this youthful composition. The lover appears in every couplet unwittingly placed in a particular situation, and words that describe his dilemma exude fire hidden in them. The second couplet is filled with negative tension between moving closer and moving away. The third couplet contains two pairs of negatives—mistrust and weakness, not asking and not saying anything. In the fourth couplet, we have hopelessness leading to forgetfulness—two negative conditions moving in the same direction. Some commentators mention jealousy as the driving feeling described in the maqt'a. This is a simple

explanation. Actually, the couplet describes two reactions to an undesirable situation. The first is that the poet is not happy to see, maybe incidentally, that the rival is his beloved's travel companion. This feeling is akin to jealousy. But the second reaction is more interesting where the focus of attention shifts to the beloved. She is such an infidel or kafir (in the sense of someone who is extremely beautiful) that she cannot be trusted even in the company of God (metaphorically). If this is jealousy, it is of the highest poetic order and, undoubtedly, the spin is delightful.

363 Q.+

*voh aa ke khwaab mein taskiin-e iztiraab to de
vale mujhe tapish-e dil majaal-e khwaab to de*

I want her to visit me in my dream
and give me some consolation,
if my throbbing heart would let me
get some sleep first.

*kare hai qatl lagaavat mein tera ro dena
teri tarah koi tegh-e nig-h ko aab to de*

It kills me to see you crying
when I make fun of you.
No one can show tears
which are as gashing as a sword,
as you do.

*pila de ok se saaqi jo ham se nafrat hai
pyaala gar nahien deta n de sharaab to de*

O Saqi, your hatred aside,
let me drink
through my cupped hands.
If you cannot give me a cup
that is okay as long as
I get some to drink.

This is among the last ghazals in *Nuskha-e Hamidia*. On the surface, there is no indication that any dialectical design is at work in here. Outwardly, we are also unable to pinpoint the innovativeness at a particulate stage. However, the first seed of artistic inversion is found in the radiif 'to de'. Tabatabai has put his finger on the word 'to' in the radiif that

carries the meaning of expectation. This, of course, is the swivel in the game of liveliness and playfulness.

As we know, Ghalib spent his early years in Agra, a city that is close to the area known as Braj, which is religiously and culturally very important. This region's language is akin to Braj Bhasha, a form of western Hindi. The indigenous flex of its earthy idiom is seen in the entire ghazal.

The last couplet carries a magical expression *ok* (cupped hands) that has cultural connotations. People who were either very poor or those who belonged to lower status had to drink water with cupped hands. The lover yearns for a drink of wine with such intensity that he is ready to lower his status and forego mannerism by stretching his cupped hands if the wine cannot be served in a glass. Ghalib's sense of humour is generally triggered by his dialectical tenor.

This is all for Rendition Two. But before we close this chapter, it would be appropriate to make some brief remarks about Ghalib's power of image making.

Image Making: The Flowery Gleaming Branch Burnt Like a Bright Candle with Flowers Circling Around Like a Moth

Ghalib's poetry has left such an indelible mark on Urdu poetry that it is difficult to find another like him. This is not only due to the range of topics addressed by him in a highly imaginative manner but also on account of the innovativeness and freshness that he brings to bear on the grandeur of phrases and the beauty of metaphors and similes. Ghalib scholars have greatly appreciated these qualities. Maulana Suha has rightly mentioned that the soul of Ghalib's verse can be compared to an exquisitely dressed beloved, and the poetic expressions can be compared to her finest ornamentation. Ghalib was very emphatic in pointing out that his poetry is about ingenious beautification of meaning and not about mechanical parameters or any craftiness of words. In our own interpretation of Ghalib's work, we have consistently tried to keep the focus on the inventiveness of meaning and poetry as art, though we do realize that all this cannot be separated from rhetoric and craft. Yet, we have tried very hard to stay focused on the creation and structure of the ingenious meaning and not the craft per se. When we read Ghalib's verse, sometimes our eyes get stuck at

places where a couplet presents such a strong artistic image that its other attributes and modes take a secondary position. Image making, we should mark, is not separate from meaning making. Every word represents an imaginative form or sensory appearance. Its form could be abstract or sensory but it plays an essential part in innovative meaning making. Sometimes, even before the sensual act is completed, a mental image appears, or it starts to glitter like tiny bulbs of sensory energy that follow an on-off artistic rhythm. But we know that meaning in such cases is solely conveyed through the inventive image or combination of images it generates. The question that we need to answer is: if Ghalib has a special inner urge for dialectical mode of thinking which is mainly responsible for the hidden pearls in his poetic work, then whether the creative act of image making is intrinsic to the same artistic characteristic or is it a separate creative act that produces hidden pearls and which have caught our attention in the previous analyses? We shall try to answer this question while we are wonderstruck at the imagery in a number of couplets which have been carefully drawn from Renditions One and Two.

149 N

*dekh us ke saa'id-e siimiin o dast-e pur nigaar
shaakh-e gul jalti thi misl-e sham'a gul parvaana tha*

After seeing the beauty
of her luminous enchanting arms
and henna-decorated hands,
the flowery branch
burnt brightly like a candle
with flowers circling around it
like a moth.

The sensual formation of this couplet creates an immediate impression in our mind. The poet mentions two things: the bewitching charm of beloved's arms that radiate like silver and the charm of her henna-decorated hands. These images are like a painted canvas that infuses the couplet as it becomes truly exceptional in terms of depiction of the beloved's beauty. Amazingly, it is like a picture within a picture. Henna-decorated hands are like flowers or the glow of a candle. There are so many sensuous linkages and relationships within this couplet that they defy analysis. The flower becomes a moth, meaning that they are ready to die like moths, circling the silvery candle's brightness. We cannot think of a moth without a candle.

The whole image is centred on a flowery branch which is burning brightly like a candle. Burning is sometimes used in the sense of jealousy or envy as well. Both the flowery branch and the candle can easily burn. Candle is a representation of beauty and light. It is made up of wax that is shining like silver. In other words, the candle is burning and due to the beauty of the beloved's arms, it is becoming *paani paani* (melting). We can see negative dynamics at work all over. The moth's image is related to a candle and the flower is presented as an image of a moth. This means that the flower is doing a moth's job by circling around beautiful arms and adorned hands. When the branch burns, the flower also burns in the same way as a candle burns. Both the flower and the candle have fire within them and the fire attracts the moth. One may imagine what the figure must be with such depiction about the beauty of silvery body and decorated hands. One may not forget the restrictions of purdah society. This is not ordinary image making; it is a very high degree of creativity coupled with layered complexity. Its deep structure has dynamic elements hidden in them. Mark that the couplet, in spite of this high degree of beauty and creativity, was dropped and was not included in the Divan.

186 N

gul khile ghunche chatakne lage aur sub-h huui
sarkhosh-e khwaab hai voh nargis-e makhmuur hunuuz

Flowers blossomed.
 Buds made a crackling sound.
 It is morning once again.
 But the sleepy eyes of the beloved
 are dreamy like a drunken narcissus.

This couplet, like the one before it, belongs to the period before Ghalib turned nineteen and it is unique for the depiction of unusual sensuality. Notice three powerful images in the very first line: flowers blossomed; buds made a crackling sound; and it is early morning and the dawn is breaking. Against the backdrop of these things, there is the image of the beloved, which is once again wrapped in two other images—her dream-filled eyes that reminds one of a drunken narcissus. Now imagine a painter capturing all these images on a canvas! Unfortunately, the couplet was not included in the Divan.

195 N

huun b vahshat intizaar aavaara-e dasht-e khayaal
ik safedi maarti hai duur se chashm-e ghazaal

In the wilderness of expectation
I am wandering in the desert of my thoughts.
I am struck by the whiteness of a sparkle
coming from the eyes of a startled gazelle
running away in the distant wilderness.

The beloved has dark eyes. They are like the eyes of a gazelle (a young slender deer with curved horns and yellowish-brown coat). When the poet mentions gazelle, it immediately brings other images like wilderness, wonder, and awe of a slender beauty who shines from a distance but runs away at the slightest sound of a stranger. This idea is validated in the first line where the poet talks about wilderness of expectations and wandering in the desert. Of all the images, the one that stands out is that of the shine (brightness) in a gazelle's eyes. There is the black (colour of the eyes, sign of beauty) and there is the white (brightness of the light)—the inversion is obvious. The gazelle is a poetical image of the scared, slender, and shy beloved who has magical, awestruck, dark black eyes. It shies away from other creatures at the slightest sound as the beloved shies away from the lover. This unique couplet too is not found in the Divan.

199 N

tamaashaaye gulshan tamannaaye chiidan
bahaar aafriina gunahgaar hain ham

The spectacle of the garden
and I am bunching up my desires.
O God, the creator of spring—
we are sinners.

The first line has two images: there is a garden filled with beautiful greenery and flowers that exist in the real world, and then there is the uncontrollable inner desire in our mind to pluck the flowers metaphorically. The second line carries this pull between the beauty and the uncontrollable desire. The poet says bravo to the spring but then shifts our attention to an opposing philosophical idea: helplessness of human beings because of the Creator who creates and then sees the tamasha. Of what use is this beauty when so many of our desires remain unfulfilled? While we look at this

beauty of the creation, we ought to be sinners because the Creator has cast us aside. If man is a sinner, then whose responsibility is this?

204 N

*gul ghunchagi mein gharqa-e dariyaaye rang hai
ae aagahi fareb-e tamaasha kahaan nahien*

Flowers and buds are drowned
in the river of beautiful colours.
O, the awareness of my heart!
Who is not caught
in the deceptive spectacle
of one's own self?

Flowers and buds are not simply colourful; they are drowned in their own river of colour. We know Ghalib does not take anything on the face value. In the second line, the poet extends the metaphor and asks: is there anyone who is not caught in the deception of one's own beauty or self?

206 N

*ae navaa-saaz-e tamaasha sar bakaf jalta huun main
yak taraf jalta hai dil aur yak taraf jalta huun main*

O, the Creator of this spectacle—
I am burning while keeping my head
on the palm of my hand!
On one side, the heart burns,
and on the other, I burn too.

*hai tamaasha gaah-e soz-e taaza har ek uzv-e tan
juun chiraaghaan-e divaali saf b saf jalta huun main*

In this spectacle of light,
my body is filled with new wounds.
I am burning like lights of Diwali
arrayed one after another.

There are five couplets in this ghazal of which two are reproduced here. The dominant image is that of Diwali lights. Ghalib liked seeing lamps arranged in row after row on Diwali night. Also, the dance of sparks plays a prominent role in Ghalib repertoire of poetic imagery. Light being the opposite of darkness, pierces the heart of darkness. Darkness disappears when light appears. While on the one hand light is symbolic of life and joy,

on the other it is closely related to fire. Fire produces light but in a metaphoric sense it also burns the lover's heart. Burning creates a black spot and thus suffering and other afflictions. Within these two couplets, Ghalib looks deep into the celebratory mood of Diwali, which is a festival of light, nonetheless being away from beloved, there is no relief from sorrow, heartache, or indefinite yearning. Although there are lights all around, it is deprivation, lonesomeness, and a burning for the lover.

226 N

*chinaar aasa adam se ba dil-e pur aatish aaya huun
tahi aaghoshi-e dasht-e tamanna ka huun faryaadi*

Like a maple leaf
I have come from the other world
with a heart filled with fire
and empty hands.
I am lamenting, the lot of being
where colours do not live long
and the extinction consumes all.

The image of maple in Urdu poetry is not very common. It reminds one of Kashmir, Iran, and West Asia, where maple trees are commonly seen. Unlike other trees, maple reaches the peak of its beauty during the autumn when leaves change colour. The redness of leaves creates the impression as if trees were on fire. Leaf is a metaphor when Ghalib says that sorrow and agony are not specific to human condition. We are born with a heart on fire. When we bring nothing and get nothing, our hands are empty and they remain so. The imagery is colourful and bright but the destiny is the inverse of it.

229 N

*syaahi jaise gir jaave dam-e tahriir kaaghaz par
meri qismat mein yun tasviir hai shab haaye hijraan ki*

Imagine what happens
when the ink is spilt on paper
at the time of writing!
This is the picture of my condition
in the dark night of separation.

This beautiful couplet found a place in the Divan. Ink spilt on paper is easy to imagine. It is the reverse of writing, as it can make the words

already written messy. What makes this image unforgettable is the linkage that the poet builds between spilt ink and his fate covered in the darkness of the night of separation. In the night of separation, there is nothing other than layers of darkness. The whiteness of paper is weighed against the darkness of the spilt ink, metaphorically pain and mental agony (state of mind). This was the only couplet that was selected for the Divan out of several couplets of this ghazal.

232 N

*rukhsaar-e yaar ki jo khuli jalva gustari
zulf-e syaah bhi shab-e mahtaab ho gayi*

When the splendour
of the beloved's face spread its glow
in the darkness of night,
her black tresses opened up
and her radiant face looked
like the evening's moon.

There is one grand image here but it unfolds in two stages. In the first stage, all the attention is focused on the beloved's face because previously it was covered by her tresses. But the picture changes once the tresses open up and a powerful image takes control: the splendour of the facial beauty is compared to the emergence of moon in the darkness of the night. The two things then merge and the couplet becomes a canvas on which the interplay of darkness and light creates a new way to look at the beloved's magical charm.

234 N

*bahaar shokh o chaman tang o rang-e gul dilchasp
nasiim baagh se pa dar henna nikalti hai*

Mischievous spring, narrow garden,
and colours of flowers are bursting forth.
The breeze walks out of the garden
lifting her feet surreptitiously
as if they were dipped in henna.

This couplet is a strange mixture of intoxicating youth and the miraculous beauty of the beloved. The spring is at its peak in the garden. There is an abundance of light and beauty all around so that the flowers are looking constrained within a narrow space. The playfulness of spring and

the flowers blooming within a constricted space have a close dialectical relationship. The intensity of light and colour has reached a stage that even the breeze's feet have been coloured. The metaphor of henna-coloured feet is, on the one hand, a recognition of inherent beautification, while, on the other, it is walking like a thief without making a sound. When henna is applied, putting the feet on the ground could spoil the decoration. This kind of soft walking is like floating in colour. In place of playfulness, we can also argue that spring is acting shyly behind a veil. The couplet provides a dynamic spin between the narrowness of the flourishing place, on the one hand, and the openness created by the breeze passing through softly producing a panorama of inexpressible beauty, on the other.

253 N

*par-e taauus tamaasha nazar aaya hai mujhe
ek dil tha k basad rang dikhaaya hai mujhe*

I have seen a spectacle
in peacock's dance.
I had one heart
but how wonderfully
it reflected
hundreds of colours.

The visual imagery of the second line—a heart reflecting hundreds of colours—enhances the sensual feeling. Ghalib is fond of the image of the peacock and its magnificent glory while dancing. Heart is commonly associated with suffering and burning but the image of a peacock's open feathers signifies joy and beauty. So, there is a tension here. But the poet resolves the tension by finding colour as a shared motif between these two images that pushes the point regarding the suffering heart aside for the time being. This ghazal shows Bedil's influence through and through, and it is a pity that not even one couplet of this ghazal was selected for the Divan.

268 N

*Asad uthna qayaamat qaamaton ka vaqt-e aaraaish
libaas-e nazm mein baaliidan-e mazmuun-e aali hai*

Asad,
the way the tall one rises
after dressing up
is same as a great theme that

emerges from within the garb
of a poem.

This couplet has the quality of making the reader breathless not only for its imagery but also for the depth of its meaning. What a pity that we cannot find this couplet in the Divan! Poet Ali Sardar Jafri was especially fond of this couplet and he practised the truth of the second line by the way he wrote his poems. When the *progressive* poetry took upon itself the task of making itself relevant to the challenges of contemporary life, not only the words but the social themes too were emphasized. But a theme cannot be imposed from outside; it has to emerge from within.

A beloved dressing-up is a common theme in Urdu poetry. But when Ghalib used the word *uthna* (to rise), he made this a very special and different kind of a couplet. The poet, by using the word *qayaamat* together with *qaamat*, enhanced the intensity of the underlying image. As already mentioned, the word 'qayaamat' has more meanings than just 'doomsday'. It also refers to something that is awesome or without a parallel. The beloved is so beautiful that she has no peers. Therefore, she is a qayaamat. Now when she rises up after getting ready, it is no ordinary rising. It is an emergence, that is, someone who already existed shows herself at a more spectacular level. The comparison in the second line, though an abstraction, is a wonderful example of emergence happening due to its internal algorithm of a poem.

276 N

*Asad band-e qabaaye yaar hai firdaus ka ghuncha
agar va ho to dikhla duun k yak aalam gulistaan hai*

Asad, the top hook
in the beloved's blouse
is like a bud of the paradise.
If it is loosened,
one shall discover a world
full of buds and flowers

This remarkable couplet belongs to Rendition One and we wonder at the literary tastes of those people who decided that it was not fit for publication. It is surprising that even Ghalib never recalled or discussed a single couplet that he had earlier written and then he had dropped or rejected, including such gems. We have to thank the antique seller in Bhopal who, by chance,

saved the Nuskha. The poor soul got a pittance as he did not know its worth. We know the original is lost for good, thank goodness for the copy that we have.

Urdu and Persian poets have used different words of praise and appreciation for the beloved's tight clothing. They even go at length to describe how in the act of opening up the tight blouse covering her chest, the nails got purified by a fragrance coming from a garment that had such intimate contact with her body. To call the blouse a 'bud of the paradise' is the work of creative imagination. The quality of the bud is sustained by the flowering shoot remaining closed up. The same could be said about the blouse. But if it is opened, then a display of myriad colours and beauty will manifest in front of the eyes. There is a hidden dynamic between *band* (closed) and *va* (open) as there is between *ghuncha* and *gulistaan*. The couplet is a masterpiece of sensuous imagery and it cannot be elucidated enough in simple words.

336 Q.

nashsha-e rang se hai va shud-e gul
mast kab band-e qaba baandhte hain

The flowers bloom
in their nakedness
intoxicated by their beauty.
When did you see
the intoxicated ones
covering themselves up?

There are layers of connections between words like *nasha* and *mast*, *rang*, and *gul*, *va shud* and *band-e qaba*. All these point to tightness of beloved's apparel and her indifference to these things. If the blouse is opened, then in her intoxicated forgetfulness she would let it stay open. This entire ghazal has been included in the Divan.

337 Q

Asad bazm-e tamaasha mein taghaafu! parda daari hai
agar dhaanpe to aankhein dhaanp ham tasviir-e uryaan hain

Asad,
in the assembly of merriment
carelessness is like a veil.
If she wants to cover anything,

she should cover her eyes.
I am nothing more than a picture
of nakedness.

This beautiful couplet belongs to the period when Ghalib was around 24 and unfortunately it was discarded. In an assembly, the lover can hide his love only by being careless about it. There is a polarized relationship between ‘covering or hiding something’ and ‘a picture of nakedness’. The beloved’s eyes are open and the lover is carefully avoiding the display of his affection. If she cannot bear to see this, then she must cover her eyes. Even when he is hiding his love, the lover is a picture of nakedness. Since nakedness cannot cover itself, the only alternative is to cover her eyes. The imagery of this couplet has a hint of sensuousness and is filled by a play of affection between the lover and the beloved. There will always be tension between the ones who are socially conscious of their respectability and those who are open sinners and thus avoid sham and deceit.

354 Q.+

rang-e shikasta sub-h-e bahaar-e nazzaara hai
y vaqt hai shaguftan-e gulhaaye naaz ka

The colour of your skin
is soft and tender.
Is this how the dawn breaks?
Or is this the time
when the buds of beauty open,
intoxicated in their own glory?

[Suha Mujaddidi \(1923\)](#) has commented well on this couplet. The poet has tried to capture the feeling that arises from meeting the beloved in the dim light of morning. It is the same feeling that one gets at the beginning of the spring season. The beloved is depicted in all her glory and tenderness, when dawn is breaking and her skin is reflecting the early morning’s soft glow. This is the time when the buds of beauty crackle. The image is evocative. It arises from the very nature of the image, which has different linked feelings colliding to produce an inexplicable but creative outcome.



In this chapter, we presented a broad sample of couplets from Renditions One and Two, which offered a grand testimony to Ghalib’s genius as a poet.

The one thing that stands out is the innovative quality, variety, and depth of images and the creative play of the overt and covert negative dynamics that make Ghalib's poetics unique. It is not to say that there are no other qualities. In Sabke Hindi poetry tradition, one thread is dovetailed with the other—thought with the image, and image with the subject matter. We cannot separate subject matter from examples, and examples from metaphors. Ghalib's poetics is multidimensional, yet an organic whole, where one aspect is intrinsic to the other. When we try to emphasize one aspect, another one comes to the forefront. Criticism can be as fair as possible but it cannot escape the nature of the creativity and the demands of relevance. The question before us is: if Ghalib's poetry is the poetry of philosophic orientation, what is the place in it for image making? In those couplets where Ghalib has emphasized imagery, do we find evidence of dialectical mode and beautification of words and ideas? We have seen that image making beautifies meaning. The form triggered by image making may be hidden under a pile of compounded feelings, dynamical motions, creative awareness, or beautification of appearances but it is always there in one form or another. We see it happen in Ghalib's work, time and again.

Just imagine the start of the second quarter of nineteenth century. By then, Ghalib had lived in Delhi for quite some time. His reputation as a premiere Urdu and Persian poet was now well established. Due to the ingenuity of his thinking and his divinely gifted capabilities, critics and people with refined bent of mind found it difficult to ignore him. In a significant development, Sabke Hindi tradition had scattered in Urdu in two distinctive branches. One branch that represented formal skilfulness and technical craftiness had gone to Nasikh, Shah Naseer, Zauq, Zafar, and many of their disciples. The branch that was deeply engrossed in philosophic thought, unconventional view of reality, and innovative meaning had come to Ghalib via Bedil. As we have seen in the previous chapters, the second branch was the source of inventiveness and beautification of the meaning which was quite different from the common styles of the time. It rejected the beaten track and, in the course of time, revolutionized the creative scenario. As it is customary, mediocrity wins in the short run. Therefore, there was a lot of criticism of Ghalib's style of writing. The period that we identify as the end of *Nuskha-e Hamidia* is the period when Ghalib was able to stand on his own. As opposition grew, Ghalib, because of the innovativeness of his poetry, had secured a literary

place for himself. While he was busy in shaping a unique blend of beauty, thoughts, and imagery, he was not only meeting his critics head-on, he was actually influencing in a subtle way the whole poetic fabric. There was therefore increasing pressure to get the Divan published. Even when he started his preparation for a trip to Kolkata Ghalib was in fact busy in compiling the manuscript of his Divan. This effort, through early nuskhas known as *Nuskha-e Shirani* (1826) and *Gule Ra'na* (1828), eventually got compiled in 1833 and published in 1841 in the form of a Divan which became the cornerstone of Ghalib's fame as a poet. In the next chapter, the published Divan will be the focus of our analysis.



¹ The page number on the top left side of the couplet relates to the page number as in Kalidas Gupta Raza's 1995 book. The alphabetical sign on the right relates to the classification provided in [Chapter 8](#).

10

The Published Divan

Innovative Meaning and the Dialectical Mind



IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTERS, we looked at two of Ghalib's manuscripts that included his verse up to the age of twenty-five. In this chapter, we shall continue our analysis with a focus on the published Divan. In other words, our concern here is with those verses that belong to the later part of his life. Divan-e Ghalib was published five times in the poet's life and each edition saw some additions. Although the first edition was published in 1841, its manuscript was prepared in 1833. It included 1,093 couplets ([Raza 1995: 79, 81–2](#)). When the fifth edition appeared in 1863, the number of couplets had risen to 1,802 ([Raza 1995: 99](#)). Though it did not include some verse written before the age of twenty-five, more than 50 ghazals (comprising more than 750 couplets), which are the most precious part of Ghalib's poetic heritage, were included in the Divan. We have discussed this part in [Chapter 7](#). Let us start our journey with selections from the published Divan.

364

milna tera agar nahien aasaan to sahl hai
dushvaar to yahi hai k dushvaar bhi nahien

Meeting you is not easy,
yet it is easy.
Otherwise, I would have given up
trying to see you.
The challenge is that
there is no challenge.

This couplet is a strange puzzle. Its two lines are paradoxical and each one rejects the other. Commentators have given different interpretations. Ghalib gave his interpretation of the couplet in a letter addressed to Qazi Abdul Jameel Bareilvi as follows:

If meeting you is not easy, then this situation is easy for me. If meeting you is difficult, then so be it. If I can't meet you, then no one else can meet you as well. The difficulty is that meeting you is not difficult. If you wish to meet someone, you can do so easily. We thought that separation was easy but there is no way for us to make jealousy easy for us.

There is no mention or hint, in Ghalib's interpretation, of jealousy in the couplet. This couplet is a miracle of dialectical dynamics. No one interpretation closes the path to another interpretation.¹

365

*is saadgi p kaun n mar jaaye aye khuda
larte hain aur haath mein talvaar bhi nahien*

Who would not kill oneself, O God,
on watching this aura of innocence?
She is engaged in a fierce fight
but there is not even a sword in her hand.

Ghalib turned to writing poetry in Persian in all seriousness around 1826. In fact, the quarter-century period from 1826 to 1850 was the time for more attention towards Persian than Urdu. But interestingly, the quantitatively lower output of Urdu verse was remarkable for its deceptive simplicity yet hidden complexity of thoughts and inventiveness, and gave the reader the finish of a finely cut diamond. There is such flow and interlinking of words that the couplets seem to give the impression of some kind of magic unfolding. A large number of couplets written during this time have become part of the idiomatic expressions used by Urdu speakers in everyday speech to give it depth or make a point. The beauty of this verse is absolutely mesmerizing. As we proceed, we shall quote examples of such poetry—words that appear simple on the surface but are complex deep down. As he wrote, 'Be fair and offer praise if my Urdu reaches the height of magical thrill, or tell me honestly how does my *rekhta* (Urdu poetry) look when it reaches its peak of miraculous excellence' ([Arshi 1949: 12](#)).

The above couplets contain ordinary language but it is exceptional and unusual in its substance. The first couplet speaks of the madness of love and shedding of all covering, as has been the practise in the past with legendary

lovers but in fact it is about the essence and purity of existence which is above all trappings and attachment.

The word *saadgi* (gullible) is the nucleus. It points to a situation where the beloved has nothing in her hand to attack anyone but still she kills with her looks. The word ‘innocence’ is used as a metaphor for her inexplicable charm and how careless she is about it. Let us not forget that this simple metaphorical tone and a slight twist of the satirical make-belief wonder rejects the literal and brings to surface the hidden reality, a poetic tribute to the gullible beauty of the beloved—fighting but without a sword. Both the lines give the appearance of something being said casually in simple prose but the simple words inverse the obvious and bring out the point—how unpretentiously beautiful she is that she hardly needs a weapon to kill. She is armed with such a charm that she can destroy anybody.

365

hua huun ishq ki ghaarat gari se sharminda
sivaaye hasrat-e ta’amiir ghar mein khaak nahien

I have been shamed
by the destructive power of love.
O, my ambition that is driving me
to rebuild my home!
There is nothing to get the job done,
not even dust.

There is a cause in the first line and the consequence is described in the second line. Love leads to an inverse that is destructive outcome. There is a great desire to build a home but there is nothing left to build it with, not even dust, which is a metaphor that destruction is so thorough that nothing is left, not even mud. The dialectic tension can be seen in the relationship between the effort to construct (which is Ghalib’s favourite theme) and nothingness. Animation of abstract thoughts is an old tradition of Sabke Hindi. The desire to construct becomes something that no amount of effort can destroy. Ghalib has expressed the same thought in another couplet: *ghar mein tha kya k tera gham use ghaarat karta / voh jo rakhte the ham ik hasrat-e ta’amiir so hai*.

365

ajab nishaat se jallaad ke chale hain ham aage
k apne saaye se sar paon se hai do qadam aage

I take the pleasure in walking

ahead of my executioner.
Even in the shadow,
my head is seen a couple of steps
ahead of my feet.

As we mentioned before, Prigarina did a full-length scholarly article in which she discussed Ghalib's association with images of some horrible memories that had become a part of the collective unconscious of his time, resulting from Sarmad's execution in Delhi which had assumed mythological proportions ([Prigarina 2002: 154–76](#)). The presence of a dark shadow negates the power of walking in pleasure. The scene described in the couplet lends itself to more than one interpretation. There is a joy in being killed because it is martyrdom for a lover. The shadow could also be seen as a dance of death, the human courage to give the highest sacrifice for an ideal commitment. Shadow also puts one's head ahead of the body that is a state of inexplicable joy and happiness. Walking in front of the executioner belittles his power and diminishes the fear of dying. The couplet becomes a testament to man's desire for freedom and elimination of the fear of dying and the pride in one's ability to decide even when the oppressor has all the power behind him.

369

*meri ta'amiir mein muzmar hai ik surat kharaabi ki
hayuula barq-e khirman ka hai khuun-e garm dehqaan ka*

Within me
there is a seed of destruction
and it invites disasters.
Just like a peasant's hard labour
tempts lightning to strike.

It looks simple but it is not. Things are not what they appear to be. Every 'yes' has a 'no' in it, and conversely every 'no' is intrinsic to 'yes'. What is constructed is necessarily bound for destruction. And destruction has a seed of construction. To get into the depth of things and look at the reality in all its manifestations was a miracle of Ghalib's mind. He says that lightning (which is destructive) that strikes the granary is not separate from the hard labour (which is constructive) to produce granary. In shunyata, because everything is of dependent origin, meaning everything comes into existence because of its connection with what already exists, nothing is independent or unconnected. The granary comes into being after the farmer puts his life

and blood into it. That is why from the very start it had seeds of destruction ingrained in it. If there is no existence, then there will be no non-existence. Yet, man lives by hope and does not give up struggle.

369

*havas ko hai nishaat-e kaar kya kya
n ho marna to jiine ka maza kya*

Desire drives us
to gain much pleasure
before we die.
But if there were no death,
life would not be
as much fun.

This couplet and *milna tera agar nahien aasaan* appeared in *Nuskha-e Shirani* (between 1826 and 1828). This was the time of Ghalib's travel to Kolkata. These couplets are vivid examples of Ghalib's dynamic thought and artistry. Life is full of desire. Who does not wish to live on and avoid death? With a pinch of the negative, Ghalib raises the question whether the pleasures of life are not more valued because of the fact that the lifespan is short and nothing in life is predictable. In the second line, the poet presents living and dying as two intrinsic realities. At the same time, he hypothesizes that dying makes life more enjoyable. If there is no death, then who would value the pleasures of life? The dialectical spin is between living and dying; and desires and their non-fulfilment.

373

*zulmat kade mein mere shab-e gham ka josh hai
ik sham'a hai daliil-e sahar so khamosh hai*

Darkness prevails in my abode
and the night of sorrow
is moving back and forth.
There is only one candle left;
that too is silently squabbling
with the approaching dawn.

374

*ae taaza vaaridaan-e bisaat-e havaaye dil
zinhaar agar tumhein havas-e naaye o nosh hai*

Welcome newcomers
to the land of heart's desires!

Beware if you are simply lusting
for the sham joys of song and wine.

374

*lutf-e khiraam-e saaqi-o zauq-e sadaae chang
y jannat-e nigaah voh firdaus-e gosh hai*

The sheer joy
of saqi's graceful walk
and the melodious music
coming from the harp.
A paradise for the eyes and
a heaven for the ears.

374

*ya shab ko dekhte the k har gosha-e bisaat
daamaan-e baaghbaan-o kaf-e gul farosh hai*

At the night's climax,
every corner of the place,
where the bazm was held,
was like the lap of the gardener
and the palm of the flower seller.

374

*ya sub-h dam jo dekhiye aa kar to bazm mein
nae vo suruur-o sor n josh o kharosh hai*

But if you come to the place
in the morning, you will find
neither magnificence, nor brilliance,
neither cheerfulness, nor commotion.

374

*daagh-e firaag-e sohbat-e shab ki jali hui
ik sham'a rah gayi hai so voh bhi khamosh hai*

Burnt and devastated
from the sorrows and festivities
of the evening,
there is just one candle left.
That too is dead,
without life or sound.

This remarkable ghazal, a well-rhymed, well-chiselled qat'a, was written during the poet's journey to Kolkata. You can hear tragic echoes of the passing away of an era. There is a misconception that this qat'a was a commentary on the tragic happenings during 1857 that finally put to end of what remained of the great Mughal Empire. But the discovery of *Nuskha-e Shirani* disproved this notion. It was written around 1827 when Ghalib was travelling to Kolkata, some 30 years before 1857. Some people guess the place of writing as Baandah or Murshidabad. It is said that Ghalib came to know about the death of Nawab Ahmad Bakhsh Khan of Loharu state while he was in Murshidabad, where he arrived after his sojourn in Lucknow. The complications relating to Ghalib's pension case, administered by the British, heightened after Khwaja Haji's demise in 1825 due to which Ghalib had to visit Ferozepur Jhirka a number of times. It was all because of the mishandling by the nawab of Loharu. Ghalib had personally brought this to the notice of the nawab that great injustice was done to him. But despite promises, the nawab took no action. When his son, Nawab Shamsuddin Khan, succeeded his father, he too showed great indifference, not taking note of Mirza's repeated pleadings. That is why Ghalib commenced his Kolkata trip from Ferozepur Jhirka, because he feared arrest in Delhi on the basis of complaints filed by his lenders. Ghalib hoped that Nawab Ahmad Bakhsh Khan, in his elderly wisdom, would find a fair solution. But preoccupied with safeguarding his selfish interests, the nawab made things even more difficult. Ghalib was greatly hurt by this unhelpful attitude. It is also worth mentioning that Ghalib's father-in-law, Nawab Ilahi Bakhsh, who was Nawab Ahmad Bakhsh Khan's younger brother, also passed away around this time. That killed all hope for the resolution of this problem. To make matters worse, the new nawab was fiercely against his stepbrothers, who were friends with Ghalib. We can now appreciate the tragic circumstances that perhaps provided impetus for writing this soulful piece of poetry.

About this qat'a, Ghalib wrote the following in a letter:

Piir-o-Murshid: *ik sham'a hai daliil-e sahar so khamosh hai*. This is the result. *Zulmat kade mein mere shab-e gham ka josh hai* is the cause. The night of sorrow is at its peak. There is darkness all around. The deep darkness has not allowed the morning to come anywhere near its creation. An argument is being made about the birth of the morning, that is, the death of the glitter of the candle. Candles are burnt out, dead, when the morning appears. The inverse creative part of the argument for the sad onset of morning is that it itself is the cause of darkness. Just imagine the home where the news about the morning comes from darkness! How dark that home would be. ([Anjum 1985: 843](#))

This entire qat'a is a culmination of imagery that is one of a kind. In the images that abound, we can feel the flow of polarized undercurrent. In the sadness of the abode, the images of darkness arise, providing lessons in which the eventual play of nothingness takes precedence. When morning arrives, it brings light with it. But in this case, even the arrival of the morning brings more darkness.

It is worth noting that within the next few years, 1835 to be precise, Nawab Shamsuddin Ahmed Khan was hanged for the murder of William Frazer. In the next two decades, British interference increased in the affairs of the empire. The climax was reached in 1857 when the city of Delhi was drowned in a river of blood. One part after another of the city was destroyed, and the sun finally set over the great Mughal Empire. Times changed but this qat'a remains the testament of sorrow for a terrible saga, when the curtain was finally drawn on a great period of Indian history to which Ghalib was a witness.

375

*saadgi par uski mar jaane ki hasrat dil mein hai
bas nahien chalta k phir khanjar kaf-e qaatil mein hai*

My heart longs to die for her innocence.
I cannot help it but the knife
is once again in the grip of the slayer.

375

*dekhna taqriir ki lazzat k jo us ne kaha
main ne y jaana k goya y bhi mere dil mein hai*

Because of the terrific nature
of how wonderfully she put into words,
I felt that whatever she said
was already in my heart.

The poet is asking for appreciation of his desire to die at his beloved's innocence. When death is happening already, why has she taken up the knife? Why does she want to kill the one who is already killed by her innocence? There are two negatives driving the tension. The first is the desire to perish and the helplessness associated with it. The second pertains to innocence driving her to hold a knife. Why is she holding the knife if she has no intent to harm? Why is the poet ready to die sparing her the unpleasant job of killing? All these elements together make the couplet

inventive in its intent and enjoyable. Many times when there is no problem, a virtual problem is created.

Dekhna taqriir... is among those couplets that actually speak to you. We cannot praise enough the speech that says what is already in our heart. There is parallelism between what she said and what was already in the lover's heart. This is nothing less than the miracle of inventiveness. The poet brings in the negative without using a negative. What she said was eloquent (*goya*, as if) but it did not matter because it was already in the poet's heart. There is an absence here but the reader's focus stays on the delightfulness or eloquence of speech.

381

*mehrbaan ho ke bula lo mujhe chaahe jis vaqt
main gaya vaqt nahien huun k phir aa bhi n sakuun*

Call me back in magnanimity
whenever you are kind.
I am not the time past or departed
that I would fail to show up.

381

*zo'f mein ta'na-e aghyaar ka shikva kya hai
baat kuchh sar to nahien hai k utha bhi n sakuun*

In this state of feebleness
I am not concerned
with the jeers of my rivals.
Their talk is not my head
that I cannot lift any time I want.

381

*zahr milta hi nahien mujh ko sitamgar varna
kya qasam hai tere milne ki k kha bhi n sakuun*

I cannot find poison,
O dear tormentor,
otherwise I swear
in the hope of meeting you
that I would take it gladly.

It appears that the poet was not able to finish the ghazal. There are only three couplets but all three contain the same flavour of the negative twist. This may be due to radiif (*aa bhi n sakuun, utha bhi n sakuun, kha bhi n*

sakuun) where the verbal usage with *n* is obvious. In all the three verses, Ghalib has deconstructed the commonly received meanings of *na* and inverted the situation in favour of the protagonist. The core thought is abstract; Ghalib animates it here and there and, through his inventive logic, astounds the beloved. All these structures are in simple language as if written effortlessly without any conscious ornamentation, then with a magical inversion through an ordinary verb *aa*, *utha*, or *kha*, he upturns the meanings and makes a surprising delightful point, *past time versus self*; *head versus jeers of rivals*; *oath versus poison*. The point to consider is that since the beauty and joy of the couplets depend on the artful upturning of simple, common, core verbs, did Ghalib create it by deliberate design or was it special to the tenor of his poetical art and it came to him spontaneously without any predetermined design? In Urdu prosody, there is a specific term for it—*sehl-e mumtan'a*; that is, the last limit of simplicity, or simpler than which is not possible but which shocks the reader with unexpected aesthetic effect. After going through Ghalib's text thus far, we can say with confidence that this was a part of his creative genius and peculiar nature. There was an inner fire and restive tenor that rejected the given and came up with the innovative or unseen aspect of the reality. Maybe all this occurred instantaneously like lightning, the chiselling, and revision might have come later as is known from his letters.

381

voh aaye ghar mein hamaare khuda ki qudrat hai
kabhi ham unko kabhi apne ghar ko dekhte hain

She came to my home
 and I wondered about the miracle.
 I looked at her
 and then I looked at my home.

There is a strongly held belief that the beloved would not do anything that pleases the lover. So if she comes to his house, it would give him immense joy. There is a negative sly to this thought. But a divine miracle can change this and she might come for a visit. The lover wonders and he cannot believe his eyes. But why would the miracle happen when the lover is not even sure that he has a home? Even if there is one, it is so empty that it would be the cause of great embarrassment. The wonder of wonders is that perhaps it is an illusion which was not possible but has become possible.

382

dil se teri nigaah jigar tak utar gayi
donon ko ik ada mein razamand kar gayi

Your one glance travelled
from my heart
to the inner core of myself.
You won it all
with just one coquettish move.

382

voh baadah-e shabaana ki sarmastiyaan kahaan
uthiye bas ab k lazzat-e khwaab-e sahar gayi

Where are those nights
when we drank ourselves
into a stupor?
Rise and find your way
as the delight
of the morning slumber
is a story which is over.

382

dekho to dilfarebi-e andaaz-e naqsh-e pa
mauj-e khiraam-e yaar bhi kya gul katar gayi

The style of her footprint
steals the heart.
She made waves
as the flowers danced
all around.

382

nazzaare ne bhi kaam kiya vaan niqaab ka
masti se har nig-h tere rukh par bikhar gayi

The unmasking
of your beauty
dazzled everyone and
the glitter served as a veil.
Every intoxicated eye
that reached your face
got refracted.

Ghalib got busy in the preparation of the Divan for publication soon after his return from Kolkata in 1829. This ghazal was penned in 1833 when he was giving final touches to the manuscript. The whole ghazal has the feel of intoxication of nocturnal wine and the delights of early morning dreams. It starts with the beloved's glance piercing both the heart and the soul and follows it up with one beautiful image after another. The maqt'a sums up in two lines the hits that Ghalib had taken during the preceding years, as he remembered the good times that could not be relived.

386

*zindagi apni jab is shakl se guzri Ghalib
ham bhi kya yaad karenge k khuda rakhte the*

Ghalib,
the manner in which
I have lived my life
makes me feel
that I had no God
taking care of me.

The couplet's magic unfolds in its second line just like a pearl coming out of a shell. The poet laments the fact that he had no God taking care of him. This negation defines the context. If there were God, then his life would not have been filled with such misery. The two lines taken together present a blend of events and feelings, sweet and sour. His life filled with pain and suffering is a real thing because it was part of the personal history. The second line is a reaction in the tone of wishful thinking 'how can I forget'. There are two somewhat ironic conceptions of God at play. It is generally believed there is God. If this is so, then why do bad things happen to people? This leads to another question: why God is not seen and why is He not doing what He is supposed to be doing?

389

*voh zinda ham hain k hain ruushanaas-e khalq ae Khizr
n tum k chor bane umr-e jaavidaan ke liye*

O Khizr, we are the living ones
who know other people and the world.
Unlike you, we are not hiding like a thief
to claim an eternal life.

Poets are known to attack what tradition presents at its face value. This also applies to mythological characters. Are they really as virtuous as they

are portrayed to be? The thought that ‘we are not like you’ brings in the other side of the coin. Khizr is known to be blessed with the eternal life. Ghalib challenges this notion. He is not even seen by anyone, whereas ‘we the people’ are real human beings—present and visible. The invisible is also a trickster because Khizr won the gift of immortality through a trick he played with Alexander. The couplet’s inverted theme is that ordinary folks are better than Khizr; what good is eternal life if one has to spend it hiding like a thief?

390

*ki vafa ham se to ghair usko jafa kahte hain
hoti aayi hai k acchhon ko bura kahte hain*

When she was in love with me,
my rival called it a betrayal.
Is there not a tradition of bad mouthing
good people?

390

*aaj ham apni pareshaani-e khaatir un se
kahne jaate to hain par dekhiye kya kahte hain*

Today I am going to level with her.
I am gung-ho but just watch
what I actually end up saying.

Some of Ghalib’s couplets give the feel of ordinariness, as if there was nothing new or special. This is the deception of our way of looking at them because when we understand something at the surface we do not search for deeper meaning. Ghalib never makes a statement that is simple and straight. He gives a twist to every thought. The matl’a itself has these four words—*vafa*, *jafa*, *achha*, *bura*—and they are all subject to dual interpretations. What is *vafa* (fidelity) for the lover is *jafa* (infidelity) for the others; what is *achha* (good) for one is *bura* (bad) for another. It all depends on how you look at such descriptors. Nothing stands on its own, each one is defined by the other. There is some artistic twist in the next couplet as well.

391

*kis munh se shukr kijiye is lutf-e khaas ka
pursish hai aur paaye sukhan darmiyaan nahien*

How can I thank her
for her sweet favour?

She asked me about my well-being
without uttering a single word.

391

*ham ko sitam aziz sitamgar ko ham aziz
na mehrbaan nahien hai agar mehrbaan nahien*

I love my hardship
and my oppressor who causes it
loves me too.
While being not so kind,
she is not unkind.

391

*bosa nahien n dijiye dushnaam hi sahi
aakhir zabaan to rakhte ho tum gar dahaan nahien*

You can give me an earful,
if not a kiss.
You do have a tongue,
if not the lips.

The radiif of this ghazal (*nahien*) prominently displays the contradiction at play: a simple teasing but not a test; asking about well-being without using a word; being totally unkind; not giving a kiss when one was expected. One creative aspect of Ghalib's poetry, namely, how he uses imaginary forms to convey his thoughts, is clearly seen in the structure of this ghazal.

391

*ta phir n intizaar mein niind aaye umr bhar
aane ka ahd kar gaye aaye jo khwaab mein*

So that I never get to sleep
ever again in my life
waiting for her,
she promised to come
when she appeared
in one of my dreams.

392

*mujh tak kab unki bazm mein aata tha daur-e jam
saaqi ne kuchh mila n diya ho sharaab mein*

When was the last time
I got my turn
to be served so quickly?
I suspect saqi served wine
blended with something else.

392

laakhon lagaao ek churaana nigaah ka
laakhon banaao ek bigarna itaab mein

Millions of flattering testimonies,
one stolen glance of her looks.
Millions of beautifications,
one irate motion of her looks.

The matl'a of this ghazal is unique for its thematic quality. The beloved making a promise to come and visit the lover is an unusual event in the normal course but when she appears in the dream and makes a promise to come, it is a marvel of subtle thinking. The fact that the lover attaches more importance to what was said in a dream than in real life is also an inventive statement. The couplet is beautiful like a pearl beaded into a necklace. The second couplet is a devious take on how saqi treats the lover when it comes to serving a drink. Why is she so liberal in her servings today? She must be playing a trick because such generosity is totally unexpected.

Laakhon lagaao... Hali treats this couplet as a miracle of poetic expression. He writes, 'Once Azurda heard this couplet and he went into rapture. He asked the poet's name. When told that it was Mirza's, he said, "What can I say about Mirza's poetry! This is my kind of couplet"' (1897: 134). Prigarina adds, 'To tell you the truth, I find this couplet abstruse and complex. Surprisingly, Hali considers it simple. Azurda was also deceived by it' (1997: 133). Hali further writes, 'This couplet is as unique as the rest of Mirza's poetry. His verse is totally different from the others. As far as I know, this kind of expression I have not seen in the work of any other poet' (1897: 134).

392

rau mein hai rakhsh-e umr kahaan dekhiye thame
ne haath baag par hai n pa hai rakaab mein

Life is like riding a horse,
who will stop we do not know where.
We do not have our hands on the reins

or feet on the stirrups.

392

*asl-e shuhuud o shaahid o mashhuud ek hai
hairan huun phir mushaahida hai kis hisaab mein*

The one who is observing,
the one who is observed,
and the very act of observing
are all one and the same.
I wonder how to make sense
of what we are observing.

392

*aaraish-e jamaal se faarigh nahien hunuuz
pesh-e nazar hai aaiina daaim niqaab mein*

She is not finished
beautifying herself.
Even from behind the veil
she is always looking
at the mirror.

392

*hai ghaib ghaib jis ko samajhte hain ham shuhuud
hain khwaab mein hunuuz jo jaage hain khwaab mein*

The mystery of mysteries
that we witness
is a dream
for those who have been awakened
in their dreams.
They are still in a dream.

In this thoughtful ghazal, Ghalib illuminates different aspects of reality. The matl'a sets the tone by postulating that we have little or no control over our life or destiny. What we take for granted does not even exist. The dual negative in the second line highlights the impact of life events unfolding like streaming floods or storming winds. The same thought reappears in the second couplet. The poet bemoans the fact that solving these mysteries was a much bigger task; he was at a level where he was even losing touch with

the realities of his own life, such as being subjected to jealousy for no fault of his.

Asl-e shuhuud... is among those couplets that reinforce the claim that Ghalib is much more than a romantic poet. It blends thought streams coming from different disciplines and belief systems such as Vedanta, Sufism, and even particle physics. There are three rejections of the traditional worldview in the first line: the observer, what is observed, and the act of observing are not separate entities. They are all one and the same. There is a thread of unity in the universe that binds everything. Just paying attention to only one aspect of reality could be misleading. This message, coming from mystical philosophy, has now been affirmed by the new sciences.

In *aaraish-e jamaal...* there are two ways to look at the mirror—directly and indirectly. The direct way will work for most people but the beloved, who is an epitome of beauty as well as demureness, uses both ways. Her gracefulness makes her find another way of looking at the mirror through her veil because she is never done beautifying herself. On a broader level, the couplet rejects the notion that direct confrontation is the only way to understand reality. Ghalib subtly subverts this notion.

The couplet *hai ghaib ghaib...* again defies the common sense interpretation. In fact, words fail to express it. If the mystery of existence is a dream, then there is no way of solving it using any rational approach. Those who have awakened in a dream and think that they are awakened, in fact, are still in a dream.

396

*main aur bazm-e mai se yuun tashna kaam aayoon
gar mein ne ki thi tauba saaqi ko kya hua tha*

I came back
from your bazm assembly
thirsty and parched.
If I had vowed austerity,
what happened
to the kindness of saqi?

396

*darmaandagi mein Ghalib kuchh ban pare to jaanuun
jab rishta be gir-h tha nakhun gir-h kusha tha*

In my current state
of desperation,
nothing works Ghalib.
When life had no knots,
my nails were there.
But now when life is full of twists,
what makes my nails not to work?

The first couplet talks about the three states of negation. First, he came back from the *bazm* thirsty, which means that he was *not* sufficiently served. Second, it is just possible that he said ‘enough is enough’, meaning he really did not mean it. Third, *saqi*’s job is to serve all the guests to the full, meaning that she did *not* do her duty and did not serve the protagonist well. Mir Taqi Mir had once said that ‘*zulf sa pechdaar hai har sh’er*’ (every couplet is like a curl upon curl of the beloved’s tresses). Ghalib is a perfect symbol of such complexity. There is nothing that comes out as simple or straightforward; all is swirling curl upon curl. In the last couplet, notice the inverse poetic relationship that he builds between knots and the solution.

396
ghar hamaara jo n rote bhi to veeraan hota
bahr gar bahr n hota to bayaabaan hota

My house
would have been devastated,
even if I had not cried
like a lunatic.
If the ocean were not an ocean,
there would have been
a wilderness.

396
tangi-e dil ka gila kya y voh kaafir dil hai
k agar tang n hota to pareshaan hota

Why complain
about narrowing
of the heart?
If it were calm,
it would have been troubled
for sure.

Both the couplets contain statements of an existing condition in the first lines and the poetic rationale (why is it so) in the second. First, the lover has a home which is a ruin. How did it become a ruin? The lover constantly sheds tears because of his failure in love and other frustrations of life. Does this mean that if he had not cried, things would have been better? The answer is no, because in that case it would have been a wilderness. The home was destined to be a ruin, and it turned out to be so. Second, the lover does not wish to complain about the condition of his heart, meaning it is full of sadness. But what do you expect the frustrated lover's heart to be? If it was not sad, it would have been troubled. In each case, there is an inversion of the normal condition (a ruin instead of a normal home, and a distressed heart instead of a normal heart).

397

*tu mujhe bhuul gaya ho to pata batla duun
kabhi fitraak mein tere koi nakhchiir bhi tha*

May I remind you
if you have forgotten to think of me?
Remember the catch
tied to the stirrup
of your saddle?

397

*bijli ek kaund gayi aankhon ke aage to kya
baat karte k main lab tashna-e taqriir bhi tha*

Your wondrous speech
was like the lightning that struck
in front of my eyes.
You should have talked to me
as I was dying to say something.

397

*pakre jaate hain farishton ke likhe par naahaq
aadmi koi hamaara dam-e tahriir bhi tha*

We are unfairly caught
based on the testimony
of angels watching us.
Should we not expect God
to look at the testimony
of a fellow human as well?

Conviction without
valid evidence, is it fair?

This ghazal has a ‘tongue-in-cheek’ flavour. There is playfulness, some disruption, coquetry, cheerfulness, and even verbal molestation. There must be a reason that you are late. But who held you back? You are not the only one responsible for my devastation. My blessed fate played a role too. If you forget me, then think of the catch tied to your saddle.

In *pakre jaate...* the poet subverts the traditional image we have of the role being played by the appointed angels. They are like the modern detectives who report on our misdeeds. But the sinner is not complaining about them as much as he is questioning God’s system of justice. ‘Where is the fairness,’ he asks, ‘since angels comply with the wishes of their employer? Why not take the testimony of humans as well to make the system more equitable and just?’ These twists and turns of negative inversive artistry make the couplets what they are—inventive and delightfully innovative.

397

*y n thi hamaari qismat k visaal-e yaar hota
agar aur jiite rahte yahi intizaar hota*

It was not my good fortune
to realize oneness
with my beloved.
Even if I had lived longer,
I would have suffered
the same wait.

397

*tere va'de par jiye ham to y jaan jhuut jaana
k khushi se mar n jaate agar e'tibaar hota*

If I lived on your promise,
please understand,
I did not believe it.
Had I believed it,
I would have died
of unbearable joy!

398

koi mere dil se puuchhe tere tiir-e niim kash ko

y khalish kahaan se hoti jo jigar ke paar hota

My heart knows the hurt of
of your half-drawn arrows.
There had been no pinch
if the arrow
had gone past my heart.

398

*kahuun kis se main k kya hai shab-e gham buri bala hai
mujhe kya bura tha marna agar ek baar hota*

I need someone to share
the unendurable agony
of the night of separation.
Death was welcome
if that happened just once,
and no more.

These ghazals, on which we are commenting now, were included in the second edition of the *Divan* that was published in 1847, when Ghalib's fame as a poet was at its peak. Several of his Persian manuscripts were also being published. Around this time, he started writing some memorable letters in Urdu to his pupil, Tafta, and a friend named Nabi Baksh Haqeer. In the next few years, 1850 to be precise, Ghalib was to receive a prestigious title from the emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar. Although things appeared to be normal at the surface, a storm was brewing underneath and, as we approached 1857, the storm burst out and there was a river of fire everywhere. As we read the ghazal, we are overcome by the feelings of love's inability, incapacity, or failure coupled with defeat of desire. This impact is enhanced by the *radiif*—*intizaar hota, e'tibaar hota, jigar ke paar hota*. The whole ghazal has echoes of a dialogue centred around dismay and longing.

398

*use kaun dekh sakta k yagaana hai voh yakta
jo duui ki buu bhi hoti to kahien do-chaar hota*

No one can see Him
because He is unlike
anything else.
If there were another,
someone would have
run into Him.

On the face of it, the couplet is a reinforcement of the belief about the oneness of God, the traditional view. But as we look deeper, it is not so simple. The underlying logic rejects a few possibilities. The thesis can be established only with the testimony of a witness. But the very idea of a witness is a rejection of the idea of presence. It is also a denunciation of other possibilities.

398

*n tha kuchh to khuda tha kuchh n hota to khuda hota
duboya mujh ko hone ne n hota main to kya hota*

When there was nothing,
there was God.
Even in the midst of nothingness,
God was still there.
My being has really sunk me.
If I were nothing,
just imagine
what I would have been?

This is a strange couplet. It is among those that look simple on the surface but they are not. The couplet has four parts and all of them are a series of negations. The meaning unfolds in stages. The first one is a broad statement: when there was nothing, there was God. In the second, the initial statement is turned upside down: if there was nothing else, God had to be there. Third, there is a personal element: I suffered because of my being. Fourth, there is a conclusion: if I were nothing, imagine what could a man have been? Since God came out of nothing, the real reservoir of possibilities is the 'nothingness', not the being. Thus, being is restrictive. The couplet has a puzzling construction that raises inexplicable questions about the nature of existence, and if nothingness was really nothing or the source of everything, then even God or being is also nothing. Another interpretation can be: man's existence or being is an add-on, not essential and also problematic because of human circumstances. By separating God's being from that of man's, the poet draws a line. The idea is consistent with Ghalib's view that God is indifferent to the sufferings of His own creations. Humans have not gained anything from being. They would have been better in non-being. Ghalib's dialectics often turns meaning into puzzles.

400

*maut ka ek din m'uaiyyan hai
niind kyun raat bhar nahien aati*

The day of death is fixed.
That being so....
Why cannot I sleep whole night?
That is worse than dying.

401

*marte hain aarzuu main marne ki
maut aati hai par nahien aati*

I die for the wish of dying.
Death comes
but it still does not come.

This ghazal and the next one were written around 1847. Both are infinitely delightful. In both cases, the radiif adds to the beauty and enhances the rhyming scheme. Let us look at two couplets in particular from the above ghazal because of their thematic affinity.

Maut ka... Much has been written about this couplet. Death is akin to sleep or eternal sleep. But it is different from the normal sleep, which is essential for personal well-being. When one cannot sleep because he is worried about another sleep, it is like a slow death. Ghalib subverts this whole notion of sleep by saying that this should not happen because death would come on a day that is predetermined. Therefore, the whole idea of death as a matter of great human concern is absurd.

Marte hain... The fear of mortality is also the theme here. Normally, wishing for anything means that the person is seeking a favourable result. But Ghalib twists the meaning by saying that desire, wish, or longing for death is killing people before time. Living with this wish makes life miserable. It is like dying at a slow rate. Non-fulfilment of desire is the first inversion and the fact of not dying is another.

401

*dil-e naadaan tujhe hua kya hai
aakhir is dard ki dava kya hai*

My most gullible heart,
what is wrong with you?
There are remedies
for all sorts of ailments
but nobody knows
the remedy for you.

401

*ham hain mushtaaq aur voh bezaar
ya ilaahi y maajira kya hai*

I am enthusiastic
but she is disengaged.
O God!
I do not understand
what is going on here.

401

*main ne maana k kuchh nahien Ghalib
muft haath aaye to bura kya hai*

Agreed that Ghalib
does not have much value.
But whatever it is—
if it comes for free
why not take it?

It is one of the most popular ghazals of Ghalib. Each couplet is a thing of beauty. The matl'a starts on a harsh note. The poet rebukes his own heart for being a source of discomfort. The question in the second line is in fact a confession that a lover's ailing heart is an affliction that has no remedy.

Ham hain... This is about the lover's eternal dilemma. He is ardent and intent in getting the beloved's attention but she is indifferent. He cannot figure out a reason. To seek divine intervention is a sign of helplessness. There is no solution to the problem.

Main ne... The maqt'a is self-deprecating. The lover diminishes his own worth, rather obliquely, to make himself acceptable. My nothingness (the act of self-disavowing) should not concern you because I have nowhere else to go. I am all yours in spite of all my shortcomings. So you better accept me for free.

401

*jab k tujh bin nahien koi maujuud
phir y hangaama ai khuda kya hai*

When this world
does not exist without you,
then, O God, what is all this
commotion about?

401

*sabza-o gul kahaan se aaye hain
abr kya chiiz hai hava kya hai*

Tell me the source
from where these flowers
and greenery came?
What are these clouds made of?
What is the air that we breathe?

This is the continuation of the last ghazal. All of these are remarkable couplets written in the style of a qat'a. We shall comment on some of them.

Jab k tujh... There are issues about existence that cannot be resolved because there are no answers to certain questions. Why are we here? Why do we continue to suffer? Why was it necessary to create the universe? When God is omnipresent, what is the need for anything else? Why this tumult, din, noise, mayhem, hullabaloo? In this couplet, Ghalib restates his belief that the existence of humanity without the love and care of a compassionate God was unnecessary.

Sabza-o gul... The poet unleashes great charm by asking a series of very simple questions. From where has this greenery come? What are these clouds made of? What is air? The questions on the face value are simple but there is no definite answer to any of them. They have a puzzle-like effect. Simply because there is no satisfactory answer to a question, it does not mean we should not ask them. Sometimes, asking a question opens the channel for deeper thinking, looking inwards and intuitively.

402

*aur baazaar se le aaye agar tuut gaya
saaghar-e jam se mera jaam-e sifaal achha hai*

If my bowl of clay broke,
I can get another one.
It is better than the bowl of
King Jamshed
That can neither be used
nor replaced.

402

*unke dekhe se jo aa jaati hai munh par raunaq
voh samajhte hain k biimar ka haal acchha hai*

When I see her,

my face radiates
with signs of well-being.
But she misunderstands
and thinks
that the patient
is getting better.

402

*dekhiye paate hain ushshaaq buton se kya faiz
ik brahman ne kaha hai k y saal achha hai*

Let us see
what the lovers gain
from the idols.
A Brahman has said
it is a damn good year
for them.

403

*ham ko ma'luum hai jannat ki haqiqat lekin
dil ke khush rakhne ko Ghalib y khayaal achha hai*

I know the actuality
of the kingdom of heaven
and I will not say more.
Ghalib, it is a fabulous idea
that keeps people happy.

The radiif (*achha hai*) determines that each couplet will have two arguments and that they will cross each other. This tension will keep on deepening the meaning.

Aur baazaar... King Jamshed's wine bowl, in which he could see the future of the world, is compared to an ordinary clay bowl. A typical person would say that this is a lopsided comparison and, with such thinking, King Jamshed's bowl was great. But Ghalib does not look at the given. He brings in an argument (replaceability) that cannot be contested, thereby making an ordinary bowl better than Jamshed's.

Unke dekhe... A sad face is compared with a radiant face. The difference is the arrival of the beloved. The sickness mentioned here is the sickness of love for which the only remedy is a visit of the beloved.

Dekhiye paate... The conventional logic says that lovers cannot get any benediction from the idols because their job is to inflict more pain on the

lovers. But Ghalib, in an unusual twist, brings in the testimony of a Brahman astrologer who says that something different would happen—the coming year is auspicious.

Ham ko ma'luum... Ghalib subverts religious make-belief whenever he gets an opportunity. 'Paradise is a human construction,' he says, 'that makes people comfortable about death and afterlife.'

405

*ibn-e maryam hua kare koi
mere dukh ki dava kare koi*

Jesus may have raised the dead
but my suffering is different.
Who can lessen my pain?
Who will perform this miracle?

405

*jab tavaqq'o hi uth gayi Ghalib
kyun kisi ka gila kare koi*

Ghalib, when all expectation is lost,
what is the use of complaining
about anyone?

This ghazal, written in a simple rhyming scheme, presents a mixture of Urdu and Bhasha (Hindi) words. A pensive mood is reflected in each of the couplets. Also significant is the mythological reference to Jesus. In another couplet (not reproduced here), the poet also refers to Khizr.

Jab tavaqq'o... is one of the most quoted couplets of Ghalib. It is the cry of a very sad heart, someone who has seen great suffering and loss of hope. The connection that the poet makes between expectation and agony is important. More the hope or expectation more is the disappointment. If all expectation is given up, then there is no disappointment. There is an inverse relationship between hope and suffering.

406

*maqduur ho to khaak se puuchhuun k ae layiim
tu ne voh ganj haaye garaan maaya kya kiye*

If I have the command
I will ask the earth,
O penny-pincher,
what did you do

with those invaluable gems
that we buried in your care?

There is a relationship between priceless treasures (people who passed away) and soil (earth). Whatever is buried in the soil is lost forever. That is why the soil is called a miser—takes in precious treasures and gives back nothing in return. This theme has also appeared in other Ghalib's couplets and in his letters.

406

*meri qismat mein gham gar itna tha
dil bhi yaarab kahi diye hote*

If my life was filled
with so much suffering,
dear God,
you should have given me
several hearts as well.

406

*aa hi jaata woh raah par Ghalib
koi din aur bhi jiiye hote*

Ghalib,
she would have seen some merit
in my yearning,
if I had lived a little longer.
Alas!

The flow of these couplets and their openness is remarkable. There is so much sadness in lover's life that only one heart is not sufficient. Negative dialectic is seen in *dil bhi yaarab kahi diye hote*. The second couplet expresses a vain hope linked to an inversion—if I had lived longer, she would have probably returned my love. This goes against the grain of love poetry in Urdu and Persian—there is no fulfilment and the yearning goes on. The yearning denotes hope or love, the fulfilment is death of love.

406

*zikhra us pari vash ka aur phir bayaan apna
ban gaya raqib aakhir tha jo raazdaan apna*

Talking to my confidant
about her angelic beauty
became a threat.
Someone I thought was my friend,

suddenly turned into my rival.

407

*dard-e dil likhuun kab tak jaauun unko dikhlauun
ungliyaan figaar apni khaama khuun chakaan apna*

How long can I go on writing
about the anguish of my heart?
My fingers are wounded
and my pen is dripping
with blood.

407

*ham kahaan ke daana the kis hunar mein yakta the
be sabab hua Ghalib dushman aasmaan apna*

Neither did I have the wisdom
of a philosopher
nor was I proficient
in any other skill.
The heavens
turned against me, Ghalib,
for no reason.

This ghazal is remarkable for its trendy flavour, expressive plasticity, and smooth flow. Words appear as if they are pearls embedded in a garland. Negative dialectic is also imperceptibly at work beneath the surface.

In the opening couplet, the poet talks of an unusual outcome: when I described the charm of that beautiful nymph, and that too in my words, an unusual thing happened. The twist is in the outcome, the description of the charm worked its magic and the confidant turned into a rival.

Dard-e dil... As the beloved is avoiding to meet face-to-face, the lover has to keep on writing letters ceaselessly. But how can he write a letter when the fingers are injured and blood is dripping from the pen? The twist is in the nature of the commitment of love—it goes on even at the cost of life where pain is pleasure and pleasure is pain.

Ham kahaan... There is a common belief that heaven turns against people who are well endowed in terms of acumen and talent. The poet denies that he has any such qualities. So why has the heavens turned against him? The common belief is if you are gifted or blessed, you will attract the evil eye and be hit by misfortune. The upturning is in the questioning that

why am I hit by misfortune and deprivation when I am neither gifted nor blessed? The twist has to be understood against Ghalib's personal conviction that God showed no understanding of his needs as a gifted human being.

409

hairaan huun dil ko rouun k piituun jigar ko main
maqduur ho to saath rakhuun nauhagar ko main

Given my fate, I do not know
whether I should lament
the loss of my heart
or my suffering soul.
I wish I could hire
a professional mourner
to do this job of crying
or beating the chest for me.

409

lo voh bhi kahte hain k y be nang o naam hai
y janta agar to lutaata n ghar ko main

Lo, even she says
that I am nobody
and without a name.
If I had known this
I would have been careful
to not let myself
be plundered and
defamed like this.

410

chalta huun thori duur har ik tez rau ke sath
pahchaanta nahien huun abhi raahbar ko main

I walk for a while with everyone
who claims to lead me.
I still do not know
who is the true guide and
where he is taking me.

410

khwahish ko ahmaqon ne parastish diya qaraar
kya puujta huun us but-e bedaadgar ko main

Foolish see desire
as dedication.
Do I worship that idol
who is without a heart
or compassion?

This ghazal, like the others written in this time period, is a miracle of musicality. The matl'a starts with an interesting dilemma. Having lost both the heart and the self, the poet is at crossroads, not knowing whether to lament for the one or the other. Reality is a puzzle and no answer is the right answer.

Lo voh... Love makes the lover lose everything—his reputation and his honour. He does not care what people say about it. He finds himself let down when the person who caused this devastation says, 'What is your reputation? Where is your honour?' This anticlimax is a real killer.

Chalta huun... Finding a true guide in life is always a challenge. We can run with all those who claim wisdom or leadership. But following someone can never get us to the truth, as truth is not in following anybody or in any teachings; it is in our own quest and self-experience.

Khwahish ko... We are confused when our desires drive us to find someone to worship or to fall in love with. This can lead to a situation where the person so worshipped is found to lack a heart or the feeling of compassion. Ghalib is deconstructing the common hierarchy between idealistic love and banal desire.

410

*daayim para hua tere dar par nahien huun main
khaak aisi zindagi p k patthar nahien huun main*

You will not find me
lying on your doorsteps.
Damned be that life
You know I am not a stone.

410

*yaarab zamaana mujh ko mitaata hai kis liye
lauh-e jahaan p harf-e mukarrar nahien huun main*

O God, why do people
want to wipe me off?
I am not like a letter written
on the world slate

twice as a mistake.

Ghalib's imprisonment on gambling charges in 1847 greatly hurt his reputation. But by 1850, with the efforts of Mian Kale Sahib, he was once again admitted into the Royal Court. He got an award and a monthly honorarium. This memorable ghazal was written around that time.

423

*garche huun diivaana par kyun dost ka khauun fareb
aastiin mein dashna pinhaan haath mein nishtar khula*

I am mad but I am not ready
to be deceived by my friend.
Her guile is like a concealed dagger
and her slyness is like an open knife
in her sleeves.

As we have mentioned before, Ghalib often brightens his poetic work with negative dynamics. He says that although I am madly in love, why should I suffer deception from a friend? But to be accurate, we have to understand the word *diivaana* means intuitive wisdom and not madness or insanity. And the friend is no ordinary person. The beloved is very clever and dangerous, keeping a knife in hand (being coquettish or flirty) and dagger in the sleeves (the delightful thrill of beauty and killing charm). The imagery of what is visible and what is not makes the couplet seem like magic in movement.

424

*hai bas k har ik unke ishaare mein nishaan aur
karte hain muhabbat to guzarta hai gumaan aur*

Her charisma is enigmatic and
it sends conflicting signals.
There are hidden meanings
in every sign of her love.
Whatever she does
has concealed gestures.

424

*yaarab voh n samjhe hain n samjhein ge meri baat
de aur dil unko jo n de mujh ko zabaan aur*

O God!
She does not understand
and will never understand

what I am trying to tell her.
She needs another heart
or I another tongue
to communicate with her.

424

*tum shahr mein ho to hamein kya gham jab uthenge
le aayenge bazaar se jaa kar dil-o jaan aur*

When you are in town
and I am desperate,
there is little for me to worry about.
I can go to the bazaar
and buy another heart
to survive.

Several ghazals in this part of the Divan have radiifs which are verbally open-ended. Radiif is an important factor in creating an atmosphere and conferring outward unity on a ghazal and it also adds to the depth of meaning. We have seen how inversive dynamics is a part of Ghalib's radiifs as well. The same way he is using, consciously or unconsciously, a particular rhyming scheme to enhance the overall beauty of his work.

425

*laazim tha k dekho mera rasta koi din aur
tanha gaye kyun ab raho tanha koi din aur*

I wanted you to wait for me
before you died.
Since you made your choice,
you will now have to live alone
for some days more.

425

*jaate huye kahte ho qayaamat ko milenge
kya khuub qayaamat ka hai goya koi din aur*

You tell me while you leave.
We shall meet again
on the doomsday.
Is there another doomsday
besides this one?

425

*naadaan ho jo kahte ho k kyun jiite hain Ghalib
qismat mein hai marne ki tamanna koi din aur*

You showed your innocence
when you asked Ghalib:
why do you continue to live?
My fate will fulfil my wish to die,
but after living for some days more.

Ghalib had adopted Arif, his wife Umrao Begum's nephew, and he passed away at the peak of his youth in April 1852. Ghalib loved him like his own son. Arif was only 36 at the time of his death. Since Ghalib had lost many of his own children, who died in infancy one after another, this loss was especially traumatic. This ghazal is like Arif's marsiya. Although most couplets record a real event, inversive creative touch is at work here too.

426
*ranj se khuugar hua insaan to mit jaata hai ranj
mushkilein mujh par parin itni k aasaan ho gayein*

Getting used to sorrow
alleviates the pain of sorrow.
Hardships do not bother me anymore.
They are so many
that they have become
easy to live with.

This couplet is very typical of Ghalib's unique style. Every affliction has its own remedy built into it. Sorrow cures the pain of sorrow. Hardships act as a therapy for the impact of more hardships.

429
*nukta chiin hai gham-e dil usko sunaaye n bane
kya bane baat jahaan baat banaaye n bane*

With her critical disposition
I find it hard to make her listen
to the woes of my heart.
It is not a good conversation
when she will not let me say
what she can alleviate.

429
*main bulaata to huun usko magar ae jazba-e dil
us p ban jaaye kuchh aisi k bin aaye n bane*

I am calling her,
but due to the power of my craving heart,
something strange can happen.
And then she may not resist
coming to me.

430

*ishq par zor nahien hai y voh aatish Ghalib
k lagaaye n lage aur bujhaaye n bane*

You cannot do anything
about passionate love.
This is like a fire, Ghalib.
You can neither ignite it at will,
nor extinguish it.

This exceptional ghazal is the gift of the period when Ghalib's spontaneous creativity reached its pinnacle. He made a reference to this ghazal in a letter addressed to Munshi Nabi Baksh Haqeer, whose poetic taste and understanding Ghalib especially admired. Ghalib wrote in a letter to his disciple, Hargopal Tafta, about Haqeer in the following words:

God has kindly introduced me to a person who has brightened my dark night. He lighted a candle in whose brightness I noticed some qualities in my own verse of which I was unaware. I wonder at the scale of this person's wisdom in making sense of my poetic work. I write verse; I know how to write verse but until the time I met this angelic soul I didn't know what constitutes understanding poetry.
([Hali 1897: 82](#))

437

*dil hi to hai n sang o khisht dard se bhar n aaye kyuun
royein ge ham hazaar baar koi hamein sataaye kyuun*

It is just a heart,
not a stone or a brick.
Being drowned in sorrow
is a natural thing.
I may cry a thousand times,
but why should anyone
badger me?

437

*qaid-e hayaat-o band-e gham asl mein donon ek hain
maut se pahle aadmi gham se najaat paaye kyuun*

This bondage of life and
the unending flow of sorrow—
they are really one.
Why should one
expect to be freed
from the grip of sorrow
before one dies?

438

*haan voh nahien khuda parast jao voh bevafa sahi
jis ko ho diin-o dil aziiz us ki gali mein jaaye kyun*

Yes, she is not a believer.
She is not even faithful.
If having faith
and a righteous heart is dear to you,
why should you even
think of going to her alley?

438

*Ghalib-e khasta ke baghair kaun se kaam band hain
roiiye zaar zaar kya kiiye haaye haaye kyun*

Life goes on
without the being
of a dog-tired person like Ghalib.
Why cry or raise wails
at his passing away?

Dil hi to... A lover's plea is to be left alone. The heart is soft; it is not hard like a stone. And it is lover's fate to be disappointed and cry. But why should someone bother and try to stop him from crying?

Qaid-e hayaat-o... Life and sorrow being synonymous, there is no release from sorrow before death. People tend to look upon life and sorrow separately, though they are intrinsic to each other. The poet equates the two and thus, the unusual conclusion.

Haan voh... The beloved is not a believer. She is not even faithful. Therefore, the lover should cut off with her. Ghalib as usual goes against the flow of current. For the lover, faith is not about religion. It is faith in the power of love and the constant battle with the rival who is the cause of infidelity.

Ghalib-e khasta... Ghalib tends to efface himself. This is the flip side of pride. In oriental mannerism if you withdraw and cast yourself off, it means that obliquely you are marking your superiority over others. This is consistent with the Urdu and Persian poetic tradition as well as with the tales of Majnun and Farhad. Ghalib says that he is nobody, if he passes away what difference does it make? Why cry and mourn for nothing?

443

*iimaan mujhe roke hai jo khenche hai mujhe kufr
ka'ba mere piiche hai kaliisa mere aage*

Faith pulls me towards it
though disbelief
is also pulling me
in another direction.
Kaba is behind me
and the Chapel in front of me.

This couplet, written around 1853, came at a time when Ghalib's creativity was cascading like a fountain but times were changing fast: 1857 was only four years away. Ghalib had access to Mughal royalty and its patronage. At the same time, he had formed several friendly associations with British officials who lived in Delhi. The social and political context was such that people felt that anything could happen any time. The British were introducing Western cultural norms into a highly traditional society that had not seen any kind of change for hundreds of years. The new rulers dressed differently, their women moved freely along with their men, their food consisted of items like wine and pork. The British had also turned oppressors because of the resistance. They had plotted the death of the Mughal prince who was to ascend the throne after Bahadur Shah Zafar. This was followed by unexpected deaths by poisoning of two senior British officers. The atmosphere was ripe with intrigues and anything could happen at any time. Ghalib metaphorically delineates the tension in the first line where belief (fidelity to one's own tradition) and kufr, that is, infidelity (acceptance of a different way of life), collide and pull in different directions. The second line is not about making a choice. He, in fact, depicts poetically how one is caught in the midst of turbulence. Standing at the crossroads of history, akin to watching a flow in which big changes occur, one is caught in a dilemma, not knowing which way to go. Kaba is a metaphor for the tradition in which one is brought up, and Chapel for the

new beacon of modern times that had overawed a society that was not ready for it. Ghalib is not a poet of the black and white. His dialectical mind is able to sense the major historical and cultural paradigm shift that was on the horizon when one is torn between conflicting loyalties, not knowing which way to turn. Ghalib's dialectical mind captures the gravity of the critical moment and the impending crisis not only prophetically but also very beautifully.

443

*hazaaron khwaahishen aisi k har khwaahish p dam nikle
bahut nikle mere armaan lekin phir bhi kam nikle*

There are thousands of desires.
Each one is worth dying for.
Many of my wishes
were granted but many remain
unfulfilled.

444

*muhabbat mein nahien hai farq jiine aur marne ka
usi ko dekh kar jiite hain jis kaafir p dam nikle*

When you are in love,
there is no difference
between living and dying.
We live by seeing the idol
who kills us by her beauty.

444

*kahaan maikhaane ka darvaaza Ghalib aur kahaan vaa'iz
par itna jaante hain kal woh jaata tha k ham nikle*

Ghalib, what was vaa'iz doing
near the entry to the tavern?
But I know one thing for sure.
Yesterday, I saw him going in
while I was coming out.

Every word of this ghazal is like magic in motion. The first line contains an observational truth. There are thousands of desires. In love, there is not much difference between living and dying. The second lines give us the experiential truth. Many desires were fulfilled but some were not. We live by seeing the beloved but her looks also kill. There is no connection

between a tavern and a preacher. But the poet says, ‘I saw the preacher going into the tavern while I was on my way out. What duplicity!’ With a little twist, a marvellous piece of poetry depicts how the society is full of sham and deceit.

447

*dard minnat kash-e dava n hua
main n achha hua bura n hua*

My pain refuses to owe
any debt to the medicine.
I did not consume one dose.
Nothing gained, nothing lost.

447

*hai khabar garm unke aane ki
aaj hi ghar mein boriya n hua*

There is a word
about your impending visit.
Just today,
I do not even have
a rag in my home.

447

*jaan di di hui usi ki thi
haq to yuun hai k haq ada n hua*

He gave me life.
I gave it back to Him.
Dying, it seems,
did not repay the debt.

Every couplet in this ghazal is exemplary. Each statement in the first line is poetically negated by the other, revealing a disruption. ‘I did not fully recover but I am not indebted to medicine or anything. What a surprise that today she is coming and I do not even have a rag at my home. I worship you truly but why is my wish not granted? God blessed me with a life. When I die, I give back the life. I paid back what I had owed. How about repaying the debt of the blessing?’

448

*qatre mein dajla dikhaai n de aur juzv mein kul
khel larkon ka hua diida-e biina n hua*

If one cannot see an ocean
in a drop of water
and the whole in a part,
then it is a child's play,
not an insight.

This couplet is in the same league as *ishrat-e qatra hai darya mein fana ho jaana*. It subverts the traditional view of *fana* (extinction). True enlightenment occurs when ego is dropped and one is able to see an ocean in a drop of water, the whole in a part. This is the mystical viewpoint (including that of Vedanta or maya) that rejects the common sense thinking.

449

kisi ko de ke dil koi navaasanj-e fughaan kyun ho
n ho jab dil hi siine mein to phir munh mein zabaan kyun ho

Why complain
when you have willingly
given away your heart?
Once the heart is gone,
why should there be
a tongue in the mouth?

449

vafa kaisi kahaan ka ishq jab sar phorna thahra
to phir ae sang dil tera hi sang-e aastaan kyun ho

What faithfulness?
What love?
I am just smashing my head.
Then, why my stony-hearted beauty,
Should not this be your threshold?

This ghazal was found in a letter (1854) addressed to Nabi Baksh Haqeer. You cannot grumble or whine when you have willingly given your heart to someone else. If the heart is gone, how could words come out of the tongue? In the second couplet, there is a twist between *sang dil* (stony-hearted), *sar phorna*, and *sang-e aastaan* (threshold of stone). When you are not kind-hearted, why should it be your threshold?

450

qafas mein mujh se ruudaad-e chaman kahte n dar hamdam
giri hai jis p kal bijli voh mera aashiyaan kyun ho

While I am here in the cage,

do not be afraid, my friend,
to share with me,
the story of my habitat.
Where the lightning struck yesterday,
I hope, was not my abode.

450

*ghalat hai jazb-e dil ka shikva dekho jurm kis ka hai
n khencho gar tum apne ko kashaakash darmiyaan kyun ho*

It is wrong to complain
about the heart's passion.
Whose fault is this?
Problem between us will end
when you stop pulling
away from me.

450

*y fitna aadmi ki khaana viiraani ko kya kam hai
huuye tum dost jis ke dushman uska aasmaan kyun ho*

Is love simply not good enough
to wreck my life?
If you are someone's friend,
why would the sky be his enemy?

Qafas mein... This is a very beautiful couplet known for its dialogic appeal. You can take this as a conversation between two human beings in prison or two birds in a cage. The old-timer is asking the newcomer about how things are with his home, domain, or habitat. Prison (enslavement) is a negation of home or habitat (freedom). There is a visible irony in the way the question is worded.

Ghalat hai... Tension is caused by the act of moving away. Something that causes a problem is also its own solution. Tension will cease if you stop moving away.

Y fitna... The beloved, as a symbol of love, is the cause of the lover's destruction. The second line, because of its simplicity and directness, has become a part of peoples' speech as an idiomatic expression. Sky is the general metaphor for the destroyer—when one killer is there, another destroyer is not needed.

477

*kyun kar us but se rakkhun jaan aziiz
kya nahien hai mujhe iimaan aziiz*

How can I save my soul
from the one I love and adore?
Since love is like faith,
how could one not sacrifice
one's life for faith?

477

*taab laaye hi banegi Ghalib
vaaqi'a sakht hai aur jaan aziiz*

Ghalib, you need to be patient
and accept what is happening.
The incident of course is severe.
But your life is dear to you.
Is it not?

These couplets are like the light of a candle that is being snuffed. In the next 10 to 12 years following the events of 1857, not much verse that touched the deepest core of the heart was written. In the opening couplet, belief is presented as a negation of idol. But the true belief in this case is not religious; it is a belief in the power of love. Therefore, it is impossible for the lover to save his life from her, or in other words, the purpose is to give life to her. In the maqt'a, incident and life are presented as negations. The incident is severe and there is risk to life. But on the other hand, if one is patient, the suffering is mitigated.



After an in-depth examination of the contents of the published Divan and also the poetry of the early period, there are still a few other things that we need to include in our deliberations. First, the dialectical poetic tradition for centuries has placed spiritual and mystical concerns at its front and centre. But where can we find its non-mystical or non-transcendental down-to-earth roots? Second, what is Ghalib's relationship, given his love of freedom and openness, with the dynamics which we have been calling a 'dialectical creative mode or play or twist'?

These questions need to be answered. Ghalib's mind and personality have layers upon layers of complexities that are very hard to decipher. That is

why the next chapter will be devoted to straightening out Ghalib's poetics, dialectical inventiveness, creative dimensions of shunyata, freedom, and openness, and more importantly to bring a closure to these issues.



mastaana tae karuun huun rah-e vaadi-e khayaal
ta baazgasht se n rahe mudd'ua mujhe

As I traverse the valley
of my own thoughts,
I am in a state of sheer ecstasy.
I am not concerned
with the echoes or anything else.

¹ Given the classification system used in the last two chapters, all couplets included in the Divan will be denoted by the letter M. Since all verses in the chapter fall in the M category, we have not explicitly used this letter to avoid redundancy.

11

Dialectical Mode, Shunyata, and Poetics



*kaar-e ajab uftaada badiin shefta ma ra
momin nabuvad Ghalib o kaafir natvaan guft*

What should I do
with this love-enamoured person?
Ghalib is not a believer and
he cannot be called an infidel either.

*aan raaz k dar siina nihaanast n va'z ast
bar daar tavaan guft o b mimbar natvaan guft*

The hidden secret
is not a sermon
that can be delivered
from the pulpit.
It is for the gallows;
not for a rostrum.

—Ghalib

Dialectical Mode: A Peculiarity of Ghalib's Poetics

WE HAVE JUST COMPLETED a soulful journey in understanding and appreciating the textual quality of the published Divan and the poetry from Renditions One and Two. This also included the verse pertaining to the period when Ghalib's age was less than twenty-four or twenty-five, a period which was condemned as deficient, difficult, complex, and beyond comprehension, and was thus set aside and rejected. We also looked at those couplets and

ghazals that eventually found a place in the Divan and can be considered as antimony of the reader's eye. We have made a conscious effort to take into account all kinds of couplets—rejected as well as the ones included, famous as well as lesser known and difficult to understand, that is all that is in the Divan. We also presented the views and opinions of experts and commentators, wherever necessary. We looked at the text and made a sincere effort to unfold layers upon layers of complexities. We were guided in this endeavour by Hali and Bijnouri, ancient traditions of India, Bodhi thought and philosophy, kernels of negative dialectics, and the combined influences of Bedil and Sabke Hindi. After a detailed analysis that took note of Ghalib's unconscious mental mode and creative dialectical dynamics, we carefully tested our hypothesis, weighed it meticulously, and looked at mutually reinforcing relationships between the known and the hidden structures, and the expressive dexterity. As we have hinted above, in this journey we came across arduous and impenetrable compositions and also what are generally considered to be simple and easy but are neither simple nor easy. Our effort has been aimed at presenting a fairly comprehensive coverage of Ghalib's representative poetry. Whatever Ghalib wrote had something distinctive about it but it will be viewed differently by different persons. Our study has brought forth some conclusions that we would like to present in a succinct manner.

In his early years, Ghalib was driven by the compulsive desire to prove his individuality, his mysterious familiarity, and ease of use with the Persian language, and that is why he adopted a diction that was strange and heavily laden with Persian grammatical constructions. It is generally believed that he softened somewhat later. This did not happen when Ghalib was around twenty-five, as is commonly believed, but his language started relaxing soon after he turned nineteen. His ingenuity chose complex themes and focused on intricate and abstract ideas. The notion of change when Ghalib was twenty-five is based on a false impression, even though sometimes it finds corroboration in Ghalib's own words. The change we talk about happened in unnaturalized Persian syntactic and grammatical structures and not in fashioning the thought processes, dialectical innovative meaning making, improving the appearance of subjects, and the finesse and delicacy of thought in general. The job of beautifying the language and dialectical mode of the inventive creative process continued to evolve and it happened in each segment of time. What he gave up was the use of undigested Persian

syntactic element such as full Persian infinitives, phrases and suffixes, and prefixes that could not be absorbed within the defined usage of Urdu language. That is what Ghalib rejected and this change can be perceived as we move away from the changes happening when Ghalib was nineteen and discover that it found its full fruition towards the close of Rendition One.

Ghalib's poetic work from his early years shows extraordinary artistic blending that attracts attention. It is free flowing, simple yet intricate as well as heart stealing, and it definitely shows the synthesizing and naturalization of Persianized element. Poetry written in his early years is now treated as the peak of his poetic achievement and that is the basis for its popularity. Whether we go back to time when Ghalib was nineteen or move forward when he was twenty-five, early poetry has an artistic blending of beautification, syncretic finesse, and a pleasure generating magical quality. The mastery over day-to-day Urdu's indigenous idiom is also seen towards the close of Rendition One. The brilliant and mesmerizing artistic fusion stayed with Ghalib all his life and, with the passage of time, it became more dazzling and sparkling. In addition, there is evidence of dialectical flair which is an essential ingredient of his mental bent and poetic process.

The spontaneity and simplicity that we associate with Ghalib's poetry did not suddenly become visible after he crossed the age of nineteen. We find marks of this in his early years too. Ghalib's simplicity deceives an ordinary onlooker and has confused some bright minds as well. We can congregate luminaries like Hali, Azurda, and Azad in this. Ghalib's simplicity assumes many deceptive forms and shapes. He is multidimensional in both expression and thought. His Persianized style that adds dialectical thought formation and stylishness of themes sometimes comes across as clear, simple, and easy to comprehend. But this is neither simple nor easy. There are couplets that should be marked as more difficult than what the words denote in the ordinary discourse. The creative soul of this work is unconscious and direct bestowal whose fountains can sometimes be traced and sometimes not. It is not necessary that in poetry everything should show up as intentional and purposefully deliberate.

Ghalib was closely familiar with the local lingo, words, and phrases of daily use. He was born in Agra where Braj Bhasha had a significant influence on the spoken language. We have noted earlier how he loved Persian, the dialectical idiom and inventive mode also came to him with

equal artistic ease. The way he adds sweetness to his words and makes them irresistible shows the clear influence of indigenous roots. We have noted above how he brightens his compositions with Persian elegance but he does the same with the indigenous idiom and creates a magic that is equally powerful—a magic beyond the ordinary conception of magic. He shows great command of the local idiom. This is especially noticeable in the choice of his radiifs and verbal structures inasmuch as there is comeliness—one meaning unfolds behind another in an extremely creative and spontaneous manner. In our analysis, we have especially marked these occurrences. This aspect of Ghalib's poetry has not received the attention that it truly deserves.

Ghalib was temperamentally disgusted, even to the extent of being irritated, by the routine and run-of-the-mill usage. His extreme sense of individuality made him reject everything that was conventional, outdated, trodden, and trampled, and encouraged him to revolt against the habitual and what was in vogue. He could not therefore embrace what was given, commonplace, meaningful, and poetically acceptable, and which had the stamp of the cliché or had a shadow of business as usual.

Ghalib treaded his own path. He was not willing to make a compromise with the commonplace and turned it down with great force. His free spirit was not ready to find a conciliatory ground. He fashioned his own, very distinctive approach to poetics, and above all he wanted to put his unique stamp on whatever he wrote. The application of this exclusive method is seen in his innovativeness of thought processes and their presentation, and this includes an important chunk of his dialectical mental sensibility. It thoroughly masks his conscious as well as unconscious creative processes. On the one hand, we can find traces in his work of Sabke Hindi tradition and of Bedil and, on the other, historical Indian conventions, especially archetypal Bodhi thought and philosophy. Several astonishing traces are found in his entire body of work; sometimes perceptible, at other times imperceptible; sometimes open and at other times, hidden. The negative or zero appears empty from within but in reality it is full. The secret of the strength of any language lies in its invitation to extraordinary creativity and openness, and we shall come back to this in our later discussion. Silence and 'language of unsaying' or 'state of no mind' is one major element of this. In Ghalib's thought patterns, there are many hidden dimensions of this aspect. He rejects meanings that appear at the surface. He likes to spin

around the obvious, and by subverting the known he brings forth the unknown and the unusual. By twisting the simple words, he mysteriously creates an environment of complexity that eventually brightens the whole landscape of meaning. We have documented these traits of his creativity at several places in our analysis.

We have some information about Ghalib's links with India's ancient traditions. We have recognizable links in the case of his mentor Bedil. The experts have documented it and we have discussed this in [Chapter 6](#). We know from Hali that Ghalib was very fond of a book called *Dabistaan-e Mazaahib* and that it formed a part of his regular study. At the start of his Persian history of the Mughals titled *Mehr-e Niimroz*, Ghalib summarized Hindu beliefs about creation of the universe. His masnavi *Chiragh-e Dair*, which was written in Benares on the Ganges, of course, is a masterpiece poetic work overflowing with his love for India and his irresistible pull for its cultural and philosophical traditions. His knowledge about India's belief systems also reflects in his Persian poetry and personal letters. According to Sheikh Muhammad Ikram, 'Mirza's knowledge about Hinduism and local belief systems surpassed even today's Muslims' (n.d.: 317). According to Hali, Mirza was familiar with the common roots of Sanskrit and Persian. This is corroborated in the discussion about the similarity of languages in *Tawaafuq ul Lisaanain* in the second version of *Qaat'e Burhan*, where Ghalib uses the Persian word *Mahi Shor* while talking about Maheshvar, Maheshar, Mahesh (several names used for Shiva). He may not be the best informed about Hindu mythology but he was not unaware about India's deep cultural heritage. With the brilliance of his mind, he was quick to show understanding of civilizational customs and philosophical past. We know with some certainty that meditative and intuitive approaches were part of philosophically oriented poetry of Sabke Hindi. We also know that Ghalib's poetry was enmeshed in that difficult part to understand Sabke Hindi verse and especially that of Bedil. To say that these archetypal influences would not have affected his mind would be to deny the obvious. In addition, we have to give credit to Ghalib for his extraordinary mental and creative faculties. It is not necessary to account for all kind of influences in an explicit manner. A dialectical mode is ingrained in Ghalib's temperament, and its creative undercurrents can be seen in his meaning-making processes. An analysis of Ghalib's poetry that avoids this peculiar creative manner would be subjective and certainly cannot be called fair. We find footprints

of this in Rendition One and Rendition Two and in the published Divan. We have noticed that some of his best couplets that project creative luminosity and light up meanings have a deep association with his dialectical bent of mind and negative dialectics. We start seeing signs of this in his poetry written after he turned 15. It is not wrong to suggest that Ghalib's psyche is part and parcel of his unconscious creative act. The function of negative dialectics mode is hidden in his mental disposition like a precious jewel. In other words, Ghalib's thought formation and its aesthetic beauty wrapped in metaphorical and suggestive manner was, imperceptibly, a part of his dialectical mode. This has a special place from the creative standpoint. Without this, no talk about his illuminating meaning-making and innovativeness can be complete or equitable.

The Language of Silence and Poetics: The Existence is Nothing but the Play of Soundless Speech (*hasti mein nahien shokhi-e iijaad-e sada hiich*)

There is a couplet in *Nuskha-e Hamidia*:

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*yak alif besh nahien saiqal-e aaiina hunuuz
chaak karta huun main jab se k gariibaan samjha*

The line in the mirror during polishing
is simply straight like the first letter *alif*.
I have been trying hard to tear up my clothes
but not a bit of success, all this while.

Ghalib wrote about this couplet in a letter of 1866 addressed to Pyare Lal Ashob:

First understand that the mirror that I talk about is the steel mirror. Otherwise, where is the precious quality in the glass mirrors made in Halab and who would spend time polishing them? When you polish steel, there will be a line at the beginning. That is *alif*, beginning of polishing. If you understand this basic assumption, then you try to get the meaning *chaak karta huun main jab se k gariibaan samjha*. In other words, from the time I gained consciousness, I have been trying hard to polish my creativity but in spite of my best efforts so far I have not achieved a state of perfection. There is just a single line (letter *alif*) like you find in a steel mirror. Tearing up the clothes creates the impression of *alif* which is like not *moving beyond abc* in the journey towards achieving full excellence. (Ghalib in *Urdu-e Mualla*, vol 3. 1970)

From Ghalib's explanation, it is clear that in his work, the art of meaning making is closely aligned with a dialectical intervention. Both are intrinsic to each other. There is another meaning also hidden in the second line. What had to be achieved has not been achieved. Conventionally, the mirror is a metaphor for heart and polishing the mirror means cleaning up the inner self of all conditioning. This diversion adds something new to the couplet. If the mirror is cleaned of its impurities, then it reflects the image of absolute reality in a better way. But this has not happened yet. There is a failure of language too (*yak alif besh nahien*). I am still at the beginning stage. Try hard as we may but the language is not potent enough to capture all dimensions of the mystery of existence.

The incapacity of language as a medium of expression includes its underlying fountainhead of infinite silence. In view of this, we need to pay attention to the characteristics of language and how it emerges from silence. There is no signifier (word) of independent origination; every signifier is of dependent origination. This is important with regard to dialectical interventions which subvert the absolute authority of the language. Most linguistic discourse falls behind. The boundaries of language and silence tend to melt quietly, which is the essence of language. It is essential for understanding meaning and its uniqueness. The language is constructed and limited. It is finite and contains properties that are overused, clichéd, and hackneyed. Silence is the 'other' of the language. *Shunya*, zero, *la*—they all point to fathomless, infinite, and the unknown. Language is limiting, while silence knows no boundaries and is filled with the possibilities of the unknown. Sufi or spiritual poetry, in general, exalts silence to a higher plane compared with ordinary language. In this journey of the known to the unknown, silence illuminates innovative meaning. For example, take the following couplet by Ghalib:

*diida-var aan k ta nahad dil b shumaar-e dilbari
dar dil-e sang bingarad raqs-e butaan-e aazari*

The one who has the eye to see
shall see the dance in the marble
before the sculptor carves the stone
in the shape of a statue.

This means the ability to see something 'before it is manifested and takes shape in the mind' ([Hali 1897: 240](#)). We travel from the known to the unknown. The same thing happens in poetry. Everything is not known in

language. Language hides more than it reveals. But the bright spots of language illuminate those parts that glitter less. When Bedil said that a good couplet has no meaning (*sh'er-e khuub ma'ni nadaarad*), what he meant was that good poetry goes beyond the frontiers of the known in common language. This means that meaning is not limited to what words tend to convey. There is an incident mentioned in *Mirat-ul Khayaal*. In a discussion, Nasir Ali Sirhindi told Bedil that meaning is subordinate to the words. Bedil is said to have responded with a satirical smile, 'The meaning that you think is subordinate to the word, its reality is no more than just a word. The real meaning cannot be contained in words, it may transcend words.'¹

Language is the slave of contradistinctions. At best, we tend to travel from the known to the known and not from the known to the unknown. Language is not free from duality. Night makes sense because of the day. There is no concept of light without darkness. The same logic goes for life and death, good and bad, black and white. In other words, meaning comes out of the differentiation. Language is thus finite and limited in range and scope. You say one word and this leads you to the other.

Language is both word and silence, and presence and absence. Silence frees the language from the conditioning and the rubbish that we carry in our minds. It frees us from what goes around as given and the commonplace. There is a gap in-between the words. This is the space for silence. If there is no silence, the word cannot come into being. The meaning, the absence denoted by silence, is found in-between the words and in-between the lines. If there is no in-between, there is no emergence of text. That is why if the illuminating part is the in-between, the creative expression becomes more potent. The ordinary language disappears after communication has occurred. But the creative language not only communicates, it helps in holding the meaning inside, which shows the durability of the creative text. Because of this it stays alive after the communication. Creativity's main mark is durability. Creativity withstands the test of time. Without this, the durability cannot exist on the axis of time and the difference between the ordinary and creative is lost.

It is seen that language carries out the play of differentiation and deferment of meaning. The reality of meaning, as that of language, is silence. No meaning can exist without silence, as is the case with language in general. Because meaning is a mix of what is present and what is absent,

it is silence or the uncommon use of words that brings innovation to meaning. Words are limiting, silence is unlimited. Silence defies the routine that leads to dialectical tension, which the reader cannot escape. Ghalib was attracted to Bedil because he had an unconscious creative urge for not doing what others did. When some people found fault with young Ghalib's work in Agra, he wrote a ruba'i in an incensed retort, the original of which is saved in a contemporary anthology [Umda-e-Muntakhaba \(1961\)](#).

At that time, Mirza was around 15, and in the ruba'i he clearly called such people *jaahil* (ignorant).

*mushkil hai zabas kalaam mera ae dil
hote hain maluul isko sun kar 'jaahil'
aasaan kahne ki karte hain farmaayish
goyam mushkil vagar n goyam mushkil*

O my heart, my verse is difficult.
Not surprised that the *ignorant* are perplexed.
They ask me why cannot I be simple.
But simple is against my disposition.
I am difficult in both ways, saying it
and not saying it.

Later on, while he was living in Delhi, he changed the word *jaahil* to *sukhanvaraan-e kaamil* (accomplished contemporaries). He replaced the second line to *sun sun ke ise sukhavaraan-e kaamil*. Ghalib's predicament was the need of his dialectical bent of mind. Hali's commentary on this rub' ai makes it clear:

This created a difficult situation. If I say what people like then I have to go against my nature, and if I truly express myself as I want to, then they don't like it. In other words, easy writing reveals the shallowness of the so called accomplished poets. If I don't write the way I want to write, then I feel guilty. The real problem is that it is not easy either way. ([Hali 1897: 154](#))

The way Ghalib is driven by his temperament and tenor is apparent. In this regard, he was ahead of Bedil. There is a great similarity in their disposition. They avoided the ordinary and run-of-the-mill to an extent that they had low regard for the common folks who derided such writing. Bedil wrote:

*z abnaaye jahaan behuuda dard-e sar makash Bedil
agar baare nadaari iltifaatat chiist ba khar ha*

Bedil, why are you wasting your time
with these worthless folks?

You are not carrying any baggage.
So why bother about asses?

Ghalib, too, at one place compared ignorant people to donkeys, meaning they are ignoramus and imbecile ([Khan n.d.: 127](#)). The emergence of Ghalib's innovative and intricate poetry was a big shock to the common people of his times. It is not without reason that the very first couplet in his Divan distinguished him clearly from the common folk of his times.

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*naqsh faryaadi hai kis ki shokhi-e tahriir ka
kaaghazi hai pairahan har paikar-e tasviir ka*

Words are prayerfully complaining
about whose playful writing?
Beautiful images are seen
wrapped in paper clothing.

Three couplets (out of five) of this ghazal were written before the age of fifteen. The remaining two were added at the time of *Nuskha-e Hamidia* (around twenty-five).

This ghazal also includes the following couplet, which is an open declaration of Ghalib's dialectical propensity:

140

*aagahi daam-e shuniidan jis qadar chaahe bichhaaye
mudd'a anqa hai apne aalam-e taqriir ka*

Spread the net of awareness
to unravel the mystery of my words.
You will end up chasing anqa,
a bird no one has ever seen.

As we have mentioned before, Ghalib was so engrossed in the dialectical disquiet of his creativity and the rejection of nondescript poetry, while at the same time consumed by inner fire and confidence in the truth of his way of thinking, that he had had no problem in setting aside what was fashionable in his day and what others were saying. He took pleasure in openly declaring his mental affinity and intellectual density with Bedil. It was evident in his writing. Notice the following lines from his couplets:

141

rang-e bahaar iijaadi-e Bedil

151

asaa-e khizr-e sehra-e sukhan

Such open admiration became somewhat muted in the later years and we have discussed this in [Chapter 6](#) in this book. But we also know, for sure, that Bedil's influence, which was deeply imprinted in the unconscious of Ghalib's creativity, remained with him until the end. The matter was not only of complexity but it had to do with the demands of a tempestuous mental and creative constitution. Even if he wanted to free himself from this, he would have failed to withdraw fully from his inner urge.

The lustrous, spherical mass of Ghalib's double-edged sword-like creativity was fully immersed in inventive dialectics. His words came out with such intense force that they gave the appearance of a lightning strike, rejecting the customary and conventional in its path. Words—clear as well as less clear, bright as well as less bright—brought forth meanings in an attempt to rejuvenate regions of poetic expression in new and disparate fashion. In this effort, Ghalib took full advantage of the dense and intellectually stimulating texts of *Sabke Hindi*. He gained as much knowledge about the use of metaphors and similes, phrase making, and poetic conventions as he could. Ghalib's main challenge lies in using silence to express what is inexpressible and what defies ordinary discourse. To provide dramatic clarification: the central concern is not should I express myself in easy or difficult words but how do I express myself so that what I write depicts the true inner turmoil of my creative fire?

It is important to note that silence resides only a step away from shunyata, meaning stillness, quietude, tranquillity, limitless emptiness, and infinite openness. Without shunya nothing is complete or even exists, whether big or small. This is the greatest treasure of humanity's intellectual heritage. This is a key that opens vistas of new meanings and realities. We have already stated in [Chapter 5](#) of this book that an essential part of Bodhi thinking and Bedil–Ghalib creativity requires that language must always be viewed with suspicion. Language is a human construct and is held hostage by the routine and regimented procedures. It can go far but only so far. It is imprisoned by duality and it can never achieve total consciousness or freedom. The core of absolute reality eludes it. As a medium, it is not

transparent. It pollutes reality. It colours everything in the colours of conditioned subjectivity and duality, polluting what is pure and codifying what is indefinable.

According to shunyata, silence is a dynamic force which is far more powerful than the sound, as we know, and it is filled with myriad possibilities of expressing the mystery of the inner self. If we want to explore the secrets of human destiny, then there is no better apparatus than silence or la—subversion of the obvious and the given. The best manifestation of vaak or sukhan is nothing other than silence. The very first note in music known as sa is equal to silence because it arises from the unmeasurable depths of silence and, thus, it is the sound of the infinite (anhad). The sound that arises from an instrument and opens the path to aesthetic pleasure is actually inaudible. It is a signifier of inner pleasure and self-fulfilment. That is why yogis, rishis, sufis, saints, auliyas centre their attention on the sound that has not yet reached their physical ears. This sound arises from the inner fountains of being where silence reigns. This sound is nothing but super-consciousness. It frees us from the constraints of conventional garbage we carry around while being merely conditioned physical entities.

227

*az khud guzashtagi mein khamoshi p harf hai
mauj-e ghubaar-e surma hui hai sada mujhe*

If the ego departs on its own,
it is something beyond the known.
My speech is gone with antimony
like the wave of a fathomless
sea of silence.

234

*khamoshiyon mein tamaasha ada nikalti hai
nigaah dil se tere surma sa nikalti hai*

The silence has million stories to tell.
Feeling your throbbing heart
has turned me speechless like antimony.

343

*gar khaamushi se faayeda ikhfaaye haal hai
khush huun k meri baat samajhni muhaal hai*

As silence keeps my secrets,
I am happy that
it is difficult for everyone
to understand me.

361

*nashv-o numa hai asl se Ghalib furu'u ko
khaamoshi hi se nikle hai jo baat chaahiye*

Our growth in reality, Ghalib,
radiates from our roots.
The words we cherish
emanate from our silence.

Shunyata is a philosophy of breaking the barriers and moving beyond conditioned subjectivity and duality. This struggle is at the centre of Ghalib's creative style. There has to be some reason why we meet Ghalib at the last frontier of language where its wings are on fire. He is constantly aiming at breaking the conventional regimen of the language, or he is seen trying to bypass these constraints. He talks about 'the goblet becoming molten with the heat of his wine', which alludes to the angst that he is experiencing. What is the unconscious or intuitive need behind this that is not being met?

This matter is more subtle than the exterior. The quest to move from the known to the unknown is not unique to the poets; we have auliyas, sufis, yogis, and rishis in the same region. The inner yearning in both cases to find new sparkly isles of reality is the same. The nature of this adventure is similar but the purposes differ. Ghalib is not concerned with transcendental issues but his desire to know the secrets of the visible and invisible reality is as dire as those who are spiritually focused. Like Bedil, we find Ghalib in the wonderlands of mystery where language is unable to fly with the force of its own wings, or where its inner core is empty of tangible meaning, or where the notes of speech and silence mingle with each other. In other words, silence is the creative fountainhead of the mind and the regions of the mind that Vedanta regards as super-consciousness.

There is one similarity however. Shunyata's path is also non-transcendental or non-spiritual. It aims at rejecting the known and the obvious. It opens new avenues of thinking. Because language is polluted from inside, sukhan earns its pristine value from the gift of silence. Bedil, in

his masnavi Irfan, engaged in this conversation and it is filled with many expressions laced with silence. The same thing is said by Kabir and the sufis as illustrated in [Chapter 4](#). In Ghalib, we see this issue and the struggle to resolve it from day one.

Ghalib is not seeking divine illumination but the depth of his creative quest is similar to those who seek enlightenment. Time and again he raises questions about who he is, or what is the nature of his being. He rejects all that is given and goes to the depths of the self to know its secrets and the nature of suffering, love, or joy. He asks: what is this play of existence? He talks about rapture but his way is not that of deliverance or extinction. He seeks awareness and through it he weaves the magic of his creativity. His main quest is to create new meaning and illuminate the whole universe of meaning. With his dialectical bent of mind, once again he rediscovers the purity of silence that the human kind had forgotten. Ghalib's poetry is a testament to the fact that in order to release the magic of infinite meanings or to know the nature of reality, one has to use a language that says *no* to the routine expressions. He creates a situation where the visible word makes no sound. Language is finite, dictionaries consist of finite number of words but the magic of the infinite can be captured only by the latent creativity or *twilight language* or infinite silence. Its key is this paradoxical language.

The world is full of languages. Where there are so many languages, there is no language of reality. Someone claims that Ishvar speaks only Sanskrit because it is a divine language used by the gods. In ancient times, a low-caste Indian could use Sanskrit only at the risk of his well-being. The god of Jews knows only Hebrew. In the same manner, we have gods that understand and speak only the language of their own religion, be it English, Arabic, German, Mandarin, or Japanese. When even gods cannot understand each other's language, there is no real language. In this situation, the secret of the universe is revealed only by one language, *the language of silence*, which we as human species, cultivated and conditioned as we are, have forgotten. Ghalib rediscovers this lost idiom and inclusive truth. The pollution of language has made us lesser human beings with limited thinking. Man has imprisoned himself in a self-made prison. Ghalib's poetry is a protest against all this prejudice and make-belief. His idiom is not of deliverance but superconscious awareness; it is aimed at reconstructing the beauty of meaning in a multidimensional manner, where language frees itself from platitudes and hackneyed ways of thinking.

During the month of Ramadan, when Azurda found Mirza playing chess while hiding in his attic, he lampooned him, ‘I’ve heard that during the month of Ramazan, the Satan stays locked up in a narrow cell. Maybe this is wrong.’ Mirza replied, ‘Worthy Sir, you are not wrong. This is exactly the place where Satan, the Prince of Darkness is locked up’ ([Hali 1897: 61](#)).

We live in times where people talk about languages that their gods speak but they have forgotten how to communicate with the fellow humans. In all the divisions and differentiations (Hindu–Muslim, Sunni–Shia, Jew–non-Jew, for instance), man has lost touch with his innate humanity. Ghalib’s poetry recuperates and reinstates the lost meanings of life, love, and innocence. It tries to restore the beauty that has been lost. The following couplets deserve to be read with a free mind:

166

*jigar se tuuti hui ho gayi sinaan paida
dahaan-e zakhm mein aakhir hui zabaan paida*

The broken piece of arrow in my heart
left a wide open gash—
good enough as a mouth to raise dissent.

207

*adab ne saunpi hamein surma saayi-e hairat
zabaan-e basta o chashm-e kushaada rakhte hain*

The wonder of creativity
has rendered me speechless.
While the eyes are open,
the tongue is tied.

211

*deta huun kushtagaan ko sukhan se sar-e tapish
mizraab-e taarhaaye guluuye buriida huun*

My poetry is nothing
but a tribute to the masters.
Like a mizraab, plectrum of course,
but with strings twisted

239

*chashm-e khuubaan khaamushi mein bhi nava pardaaz hai
surma to kehve k duud-e sh’ola-e aavaaz hai*

The magical eyes of the beloved
tell a million stories.
Antimony-laced silence glows like a flame.

240

shokhi-e izhaar ghair az vahshat-e Majnun nahien
Laila-e ma'ni Asad mehmil nashiin-e raaz hai

The madness of Majnun is known to all
but Laila, like the meaning of words,
is concealed in mysterious valances.

245

gulzaar-e tamanna huun gulchiin-e tamaasha huun
sad naala Asad bulbul dar band-e zabaan daani

The dance of desires
and the boundless spectacle of beauty.
Only if the nightingale is out of her cage,
O Asad, and she is free to sing.

349

n sitaayish ki tamanna n sile ki parva
gar nahien hain mere ash'aar mein ma'ni n sahi

I look for
neither adornment nor a reward.
Maybe my poetry is devoid of meaning
Let it be!

357

nahien gar sarvbarg-e idraak-e ma'ni
tamaashaaye nairang-e surat salaamat

Even if one cannot make sense
of things as they appear to be,
this deceptively colourful display
of reality is good enough for fun
and festivity.

360

haath dho dil se yahi garmi gar andeshe mein hai
aabgiina tundi-e sehba se pighla jaaye hai

The heart melts if it is caught up
in the heat of sweltering thought
The flask melts if the wine is really stiff.

383

*ganjiina-e ma'ni ka tilism isko samajhiye
jo lafz k Ghalib mere ash'aar mein aave*

Consider it to be
a mystical treasure trove
of meaning, Ghalib.
Each word that shows up
in my couplets.

Ghalib found the secret that ordinary language was like the legendary character Khwaja Sag Parast's puppy that is perpetually engaged in chasing its own tail. The puppy moves in circles unable to achieve the goal. Life is a puzzle that cannot be resolved with day-to-day habitual language. Since language is immersed in polarities—white or black, high or low—it cannot throw light on life's abstruse aspects. Logic or reason, in this context, provides answers which tend to be incomplete and absurd. These approaches are helpful in proving the other party wrong in an argument but they cannot provide answer to the mystery of existence.

There is a story about a young man who went to see Socrates and told him, 'All people who live in Sicily are liars'. Socrates asked him, 'Are you from Sicily?' The man answered in the affirmative. Socrates concluded, 'That means what you are telling is a lie'. If the man is telling the truth, then his generalization about Sicilians is wrong and vice versa. Ordinary intelligence and language is logic based. It can generate arguments, it can prove the other proposition wrong, but it cannot reveal the mystery of the universe. The mystery that surrounds us is much deeper and transcends ordinary thought processes. Ghalib is aware of this. We often meet him at the cross section of thoughts beyond thought, and meanings beyond meaning due to his use of negative dynamics. Non-language or language that is soundless is an example. Ghalib's poetics assert that definitions, divisions, and differentiations of common language are the outcomes of simplistic thinking. There is no essence behind them. Everything is enveloped in something else—day into night, night into day, darkness into light, light into darkness. Straight line changes into a circle; and circle into a line. Things are not as different as they appear to be. The same applies to

beauty and love, intimacy and separation, near and far, happiness and sorrow, relief and pain. These are different facets of life's puzzle and perplexities. One way to resolve this perplexity is to transcend differentiations and dualities that language brings to bear. This is traditionally done by shunyata and its traces are found both in India's ancient super-consciousness-related practises and in aspects of Sabke Hindi. With his earthliness, Ghalib in his humanistic and dialectical poetry achieves a high level of art form. Which means that as a poet Ghalib is deeply concerned with the mystery of life and relationships and he opens pathways to discovering the magic of the universe, of colourful meanings, and of higher stages of the ecstasy of being.

We have examples from different world systems that treat silence as the highest form of language, and it is indeed an essential part of mystical thinking. In the Islamic tradition, we have a 40-day silent meditation, *chilla-kashi*: the practice of verbal or non-verbal repeating the occult word, *zikr-e jali*, *zikr-e khafi*, that is, awareness training, and different stages of concentration and unfoldment. As we have hinted before, the practise of *maun* (silence) is found in India even prior to China and also in the yogic practises or the use of the 'language of unsaying' by saints and seers. This is the way of looking at the reality through the inner eye. Everyday language is a victim of duality such as a viewer and viewed. Existence is unitary, a continuum. You cannot understand unitary by duality. It stays inside the prison cell of contradictions. Any event of enlightenment, whether it is religious or creative, transcends the day-to-day language of contradictions, particularly if it is unique, puzzling, mystical, or unspeakable.

These days, there are many solve-a-puzzle type of games in the marketplace. A person who was an expert in math and logic wanted to buy such a game as a Christmas gift for his child. The salesman showed him different games but the man solved the problem easily and quickly. So he asked the salesman to give him a game that had a difficult puzzle. The salesman, who was irked by the customer's demands, brought a game with a puzzle that the man could not solve even after his best effort. He told the salesman, 'If I cannot solve the puzzle, the child has no chance whatsoever. This is useless.' The salesman replied that the game was not useless; the structure of this game was such that it defies all attempts to solve. The world is such a puzzle for which there is no solution. Bedil had put it

rightly, ‘The world is a puzzle that can’t be solved’ (see [Chapter 6](#) of this book). The world is a mystery and the speech of silence is a theme that often appears in Ghalib’s poetry, and we have given examples of this before. In Sabke Hindi tradition, this theme shows up often and we present below a representative selection of couplets, from the sixteenth century Urfi to Ghalib, to reinforce the points made above.

Urfi

*munkir masho chuu naqsh n biini k ehl-e ramz
lauh o qalam guzaashta tahriir mi kunand*

Even if you do not see the image,
you cannot deny its existence.
Those who want to find the hidden meaning
will set aside ‘Pen and Tablet’
and write elegantly and accurately.

*zabaan z nukta foro maand o raaz-e man baaqiist
bazaa’at-e sukhan aakhir shud o sukhan baaqiist*

The language is unable to explain it
and the secret has not been shared.
The exposition of thought
has come to an end but
what I wanted to say has not been said.

*yak sukhan niist k khaamoshi azaan behtar niist
niist ilme k faraamoshi azaan behtar niist*

Silence is better than any word
that we can say and
there is no knowledge
that is better than forgetfulness.

Mohammad Quli Maili

*saazad khamosh ta man-e hairat fazuuda ra
goyad shunuuda am sukhane-e na-shuniida ra*

As I am wonder struck,
she fell silent.
My beloved says that she heard
what really is unheard.

Zahuri

*tu ada sanj n ii varna tughaaful nig-h ast
tu sukhan sanj n ii varna khamoshi sukhan ast*

You are not proficient enough,
so you do not understand—
negligence is a way of paying attention.
You are not creative enough,
so you do not know—
silence is a form of speech.

Faizi

*kaghaz o kilik ch az soz-e dilam bar taabad
khas o khaashaak bakaf daaram o aatish tez ast*

Pen and paper cannot capture
the burning of my heart.
Dry leaves and trash
are in the palm of my hand
and the fire is at its crest.

Naziri

*jauhar-e biinish-e man dar tah-e zangaar b maand
aan k aaiina-e man saakht n pardaakht daregh*

The pearl of my discernment
remained hidden in the folds of rust.
Pity, the one who made my mirror
did not work hard enough to brighten it.

Nasir Ali Sirhindi

*z gum naami taraazad kaarvaan ha shohrat-e anqa
khamoshi chuun z had beruun shavad shor-e jaras darad*

Because anqa has not been seen,
that is why it is so sought after.
Silence, when it crosses its limits
resonates like the sound of caravan bells.

Bedil

*saaz-e vahshat haqiqat-e saakin niist
zaahir har chand par zanad baatin niist
go har do jahaan b guftaguu khuun gardad
harfe k b khaamushi rasad mumkin niist*

The mysterious sounds
of craziness are not silent.
The exterior, however hard it tries,
can never become the interior.
But they can get bloody
in heated conversation.
The word, how hard it tries,
can never reach silence.

*ba hiich kas hadiis n guftan n guftah am
bar gosh-e khwesh guftah am o man n guftah am*

I did not tell anyone to not say
the story of my afflicted heart.
I uttered this only for my ear to hear it.
And in fact I did not say it.

*aye basa ma'ni k az na mehrami haaye zabaan
ba hama shokhi muqim-e parda haaye raaz maand*

How sad!
Certain incomparable jewels of meaning
remained buried in the veils of secrets
due to the ineptitude of the language.

*niist Bedil ghair az izhaar-e adam andar jahaan
ta khamoshi parda az rukh bar fagnad aavaaz buud*

Bedil, other than non-existence
there is nothing to say
about this world.
When silence lifts its veil,
it turns into sound.

*sukhan agar hama ma'niist niist be kam o beshe
ibaaratest khamoshi k intekhaab n daarad*

When verse is bubbling over with meaning,
there is a possibility of some shortcoming.
But the mode of expression, if it is silence,
is the very best.

Ghalib

*sukhan-e ma z lataafat n paziirad tahriir
n shavad gard numaayaan z ram-e tausan-e ma*

My verse,
the source of beauty,
is hard to put into words.
My creative mount
when it flies
hardly raises dust.

*nabaashadash sukhane kash tavaan b kaaghaz zad
biro k khwaaja guhar haaye ma'adani daarad*

My verse cannot be written
on a piece of paper.
Be aware, that I possess jewels
that need to be mined.

*tuul-e safar-e shauq ch pursi k dariin raah
chuun gard firo rekht sada az jaras-e ma*

What are you asking
about the depth of my yearning?
Sound like dust has fallen off
from the tinkling caravan bells.

The Varieties of Marxist, Buddhist, Sufi Dialectics, and Ghalib's Poetics

Jadaliyaat (Urdu for dialectics) comes from the Arabic *jadal* (fight). The use of dialectics in Urdu literary criticism is not very old. In Western philosophy, the tradition goes back to the Greeks but in the last two centuries it was extensively used by Kant and Hegel. Its real mass popularity can be traced to Marx and Engel's concept of Dialectical Materialism which laid the foundation of socialist thought and steered the focus away from Hegel's more metaphysical viewpoint. In Urdu, the baton was picked by the progressive writers who were sympathetic to the Marxist ideology, and as such Marxist dialectics became the popular form of literary criticism. It was generally said about Marx that he put Hegel's dialectics, which was standing on its head, back on its feet. But the basis of dialectical concept is not new to Indian philosophy. We can trace its origins to the

Vedas and the Upanishads. Its main tool was negative dialectics that was used to establish the fact that the apparent physical world is relative, transitory, simply an illusion. The Vedas call it *maya*, a play, a make-belief. It looks real but it is not real. The true reality is only transcendental called *Brahm*, which is non-transient, omnipresent, and absolute consciousness. (See [Chapter 3](#) of this book for further discussion on this topic.)

Kant and Hegel's conceptions about dialectics came under severe attack from German thinker Theodor Adorno in his seminal work *Negative Dialectics* published in 1966 (English translation, 1973). For Hegel, dialectics was a process of realization that things contain their own negation and through this realization the parts are *sublated* into something greater. Adorno rejected this positive element and argued that dialectics produced something essentially negative. Dialectics, wrote Adorno, is a phrase that flouts tradition. As early as Plato, he mentioned, dialectics meant to achieve something positive by means of negation; the thought figure of the *negation of the negation* later became the succinct term. He sought to free dialectics from such affirmative traits without reducing its determinacy.

But, in fact, a *greater* feat of extraordinary existential consequence was accomplished by Buddha with his radical thinking with regard to the ancient transcendental dialectics of the Vedanta (*maya*, *atman*, *parmatman* related thinking) and developing the purist form of Bodhi thought, *shunyata*. On many vital questions Buddha maintained silence, which is the climax of human consciousness and awareness and according to which we cannot prove that anything has its own essence. Because language is differential and everything exists in relation to the other, the ultimate reality is neither this nor that. Buddha's teachings were later developed by Nagarjuna about five or six hundred years after his death. According to *shunyata*, language is a victim of duality and cannot reach the ultimate truth. Simple knowledge is not enough; what is crucial is to know. The ultimate reality is experiential and can be realized only as inner awareness. This philosophy of negative dialectics gives the feeling of purity and open-endedness. There is no scope here for any kind of limitation or constraint. (See [Chapter 4](#) of this book for details.) In other words, while Hegel's dialectics places mind over matter, Marx believes that human consciousness is shaped by the material conditions of workers and farmers (it is a case of matter over mind). For Vedantists and other mystics, the most important thing was the transcendence of the 'other' world, since this world was an

illusion. Compared to this, the Bodhi thinking attaches importance neither to transcendence nor materialism. It has no belief in differentiation. It is pure, unbiased, and radical and it cuts every postulate with the sharpness of its thinking. It does not close any proposition and stays open-ended. The ideas of Marx and Engels gave impetus to ideas that aimed at changing the social structure. Mystical approaches emphasized spiritual transcendental thought and in issues of personal deliverance. But there is nothing like that in the Buddhist thinking because the reality is multidimensional. Earthliness and mysticism are simply aspects of reality. Reality is paradoxical and its secrets can be revealed only through pure awareness. Shunyata is neither mystical nor non-mystical. It is neither with this position nor that position. It reaches its climax by staying open, pure, free, clear, receptive, detached, and impartial.

We know for sure that dialectical predispositions have been a part of the subcontinent's collective unconscious. These predilections have informed transcendental mystical poetry and compositions that are part of the local folklore. We can see examples of Kabir, Tukaram, Baba Farid, Bulleh Shah, Shah Husain, and Abdul Latif Bhittai, among others (see [Chapter 4](#) of this book). We have observed its glimpses in Sabke Hindi. By its very nature, this predisposition inspires creative thinking in philosophy and poetry. Ghalib's association with this tradition has to be properly understood and placed in a certain context. While Sabke Hindi poets from Urfi, Faizi, Naziri, Zahuri, Asir, Ghani to Bedil exhibit dialectical predisposition which is primarily transcendental, Ghalib is non-transcendental while giving the appearance of being transcendental or mystical. A special quality of Ghalib's thinking is that he cuts through the fog of transcendentalism and brings back his attention to focus on man, the earthy man and his condition in the world. In this context, this is an extraordinary achievement. By avoiding all kinds of conditioning and pollution, he opens new vistas of beautiful meaning with his unconventional revolutionary thinking, and he wrote every ghazal with the feeling of freedom and delight of life. Sometimes, he makes us wonder how he accomplished this feat. Of course, he got some help from Bedil. Although both of them preoccupied themselves with humanistic concerns, Bedil was a practising sufi. Ghalib took a different stance. Just as we stated earlier that Marx put dialectics on its feet through his dialectical materialism, centuries earlier Buddha had rejected Vedanta and Upanishadic transcendentalism by his radical

teaching, which was later philosophically developed by Nagarjuna as shunyata, pure negative dialectics. Ghalib did something similar by putting dialectics on its feet by separating it from 'sufi transcendentalism.' It is quite evident that he was able to do this with his own creative disposition, intuitive effort, and inner awareness.

Shunyata works by centring its attention on the human mind by keeping itself away from conditioned and polluted modes of thought, while expanding choices for human freedom. In other words, shunyata is the core of awareness and freedom of freedoms. That is where Ghalib's disposition unconsciously and creatively keeps its focus. It is similar to shunyata because it is non-transcendental and has man and his concerns as the focal point. Like shunyata again, Ghalib values human freedom and an environment where full awareness is within the reach of human beings. His approach is non-partisan requiring no faith or any belief system. Within the history of philosophy, going back thousands of years, there is no fountainhead of dialectics other than Bodhi thinking that has human being and his condition, his suffering and joy, and his capabilities in the centre. This is unique because most dialectical traditions, Western or Eastern, are focused on resolving an issue or a problem. Dialectical materialism has an end state that is creating a classless society; transcendental thinking aims to take one to a state of enlightenment; sufi thinking leads one to discernment and deliverance, that is, *irfan*, or *ma'rifat*; in Vedanta tradition, one is led to enlightenment or jnana; but shunyata has no goal, no aim other than cleansing the mind from all conditioning and pollution and creating an opportunity for freedom and awareness. In the same manner, Ghalib is not leading his dialectical bent to solve problems. He takes the reader through the magic of his writing to a state of ecstasy where all propositions are rejected and a new spring garden of beauty is revealed with openness all around and a feeling of awareness about one's place in life.

We find that dialectical thinking, from Sabke Hindi to Ghalib, despite its journey through centuries of long turmoil, shows its pearly lustre in the poetic tresses of ghazal writing. It reminds us of its hidden patterns, which are examples of a new and distinctive creativity.

Derridian Trace and Ghalib Poetics

In order to fully understand Ghalib's poetics, we need to keep in view its hidden structures. We know that the Eastern tradition and Saussure, in particular, in the West look upon language as a construct of differentiation and contradistinction. Jacques Derrida, however, goes a step forward with his ideas of 'différance' and 'deferment'. It means that meaning is as much *present* as it is *absent*; it is not created by *presence* at a point in time but rather it stays postponed, one deferment after another. This is the same thing that Bedil told Sheikh Nasir Ali, 'The meaning of a word is another word'. Derrida, through the use of 'deconstruction', defines it as presence and beyond presence. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who translated Derrida's seminal work *Of Grammatology*, explained the significance of another Derridian innovation called 'trace'. Trace is a concept to denote the history that a sign, signifier/signified (word), carries with it is the result of its use through time. A good example is the use of the word 'black'. Trace then reveals the possibility for alternative interpretation of concepts regardless of how carefully articulated they may be, whenever they are expressed in language. It means that in the meaning of each word, there is inevitably the dynamic of a hidden word. Everything that is labelled, *meaning* is, in fact, a dialectical construct.

Poetics, as a functioning entity, has two dimensions: language and mind. Ghalib's mental structure is dialectical. It does not limit itself to one thing or one aspect. At one time, he spontaneously looks at more than one dimension or multiple dimensions. He spins everything around. Language as a tool of poetry is open to 'trace', meaning it is dialectical; it has no one fixed place as there cannot be just one best or definitive interpretation. Ghalib uses one candle to light other candles so that words are put in a fireplace and with the heat, their meanings are melted or changed. This is a magical transformation of words and language, as this is doubly dialectical. Both Bedil and Ghalib are great masters in illuminating meaning through this process.

Shunyata, Meaning, and Poetics

- Shunyata is not about any form of religious enlightenment, moksha, jnana, or, gaining of wisdom, or any other self-illumination. It negates opposing positions and as such opens our mind to new ways of thinking. It is not religious in any way or form. It is not a theory aligned with any school of

thought. It is a pure and simple way of looking at the world, with the realization how each and everything is dependent on each and every *other* thing (the concept of dependent origination), and hence devoid of 'essence'.

- Bodhi thinking has no connection with Hindu tradition and its doctrines like atman, parmatman, or maya. It keeps its distance from religious problems and solutions. It rejects one proposition after another—known as well as unknown. At best, it is a creative tool to empower us, to make us freer and more aware of our options in any given situation.
- Ghalib's objective is to seek beauty, freedom, and openness. He writes poetry that has human being at its centre—pain and suffering, ecstasy and agony, bruises and pangs, all this in an exquisite creative language. His concerns are not transcendental. He is close to shunyata's negative dynamics, because it is a way of nurturing creative thinking that cuts the fog of the given, ordinary, clichéd, and conventional. It is like a whetstone that can polish a sword but cannot cut anything on its own. Poetics is a mode, a convention, a way to fulfil an objective. It is not a poem or a couplet in itself. Poetics can make creative and aesthetic arguments but it cannot create poetry by itself. Ghalib has little interest in mysticism or spiritualism but at times he uses his inspired and visionary creativity to bring out ideas from such depths that he becomes envy of mystics and transcendentalists. But his challenge always remains to create a world that has unsurpassed beauty and contains plurality and uncompromising freedom.
- Ghalib's work is so wide and diverse that it is impossible to draw clear boundaries around it. The creative act, by its very nature, is a world of unknown elements and secrets. The same is true of Ghalib's colourful creative world. It cannot be fully known and analysed but we can feel its essence and beauty in his inventive and precious couplets. Dialectics is limitless and as such it does not respect any demarcation lines. The rules or aphorisms that we are mentioning here are like sutras—pointers and their colourful multidimensional interpretation can be seen only in their moments of creativity.
- In dialectical thinking, it is important to note that the existence or essence of anything is hidden or is latent in its negation. In the absence of negation, any 'thing' is difficult to imagine. We have mentioned before that shunya or zero is at the core of language to such an extent that a

statement—‘every construct is its own contradistinction’—cannot come into being without its negative. Zero is the biggest secret of consciousness, awareness, and meaning. It is a fountainhead because although zero, shunya, or la appears to be nothing, it is not so in reality. We can show by a simple example. If we write a number, say 10, and then start adding zeroes to the right, the underlying value of the initial number will start increasing to hundreds, thousands, millions, billions, and trillions, meaning that it can become infinite. Zero has such power that it is the biggest treasure of all. Although it is empty from within, it is full from here to eternity. Shunya does not seek creativity; it is creativity by itself. It is at the core of existence. Without it, existence has no positive value. Shunya not only adds value, it can decrease it too. Going back to our initial number, 10, if we place a minus sign on the left the values will show dramatic decrease. For example, –10, –100, –1,000, –10,000 until we reach infinity again. The latent power of shunya, makes it maha (*meta*) shunya—the storehouse of all value and creativity. Let us look at some examples of how dialectical creativity finds an expression in Ghalib’s poetry.

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*b rang-e shiisha huun yak gosha-e dil khaali
kabhi pari meri khilvat mein aa nikalti hai*

I am like the colour of goblet
but the nook of my heart is empty.
Sometimes a fairy comes crashing
into my solitude.

Something ‘empty’ is shunya but because it is shunya, it is always filled with numerous possibilities.

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*nafi se karti hai isbaat taraavish goya
di hai jaaye dahan usko dam iijaad ‘nahien’*

Existence is nurtured
by the non-existence.
Looks like in place of mouth to speak
The beloved was given a *no*.

- It is not true to say that other creative world traditions did not notice the dynamics or the power of negative dialectics. For example, Greeks used a rhetorical device known as *apophasis* for things that could not be put into

words. What could not be said in words was then presented as a dilemma or it was wrapped into a language of silence. In Chinese culture, the philosophy of Taoism is based on dialectics. ‘The Tao that can be spoken is not the Tao.’ Reality is supposed to be a combination of two opposing forces—Ying and Yang. Indian philosophy greatly influenced the Chinese philosophy. The origin of Taoism in China and the rise of Buddhism happened nearly in the same time frame but strangely the traffic of ideas was more from India to China than vice versa. Urdu as a language came into being after two thousand years of these developments.

- The problem of Ghalib’s dialectical thinking is not simply the problem of language’s inability. It is an awareness of the absence of meaning as well. If every completion is empty from within, or, in other words, it is the ‘other’ of its own, then this non-transcendental rejection after rejection is a metaphor of the mind’s yearning for freedom—eternal innocence and compassion.
- The use of day-to-day language kills creative sensitivity. Words become banal and empty from within. Routine has the unintended consequence of dulling the human mind and spirit. We end up being insensitive and try to find truth in the language that is ‘given’, instead of finding it or recreating it through our own creative experience. Ghalib’s negative dynamics is non-partisan and like a razor-sharp object of the negative, it opens up new avenues of personal freedom. It not only removes the rust of the triteness but also unshackles the tightness of the traditional metaphysics. On its own, it does not initiate anything. The journey of negative dynamics is the journey of freedom from the routine, towards a feeling of freshness and fullness. Similarly, Ghalib’s journey is from the same worn out or clichéd to something novel, something that has never existed before. He does not settle for something that lacks purity or something that is a compromise with the hackneyed. He creates space to sensitize the mind and empower the human being, and thus leaves no room for hopelessness. Let us recount the ways by which he achieves this objective.
 - Using negative dynamics to subvert the conventional and/or using the same act to reverse the meaning with a view to bringing out something unique or novel.
 - To create or mould new, atypical, and unfamiliar meaning and opening up panoramas of artistry with the help of negative dynamics that is latent, hidden, or that just drops in suddenly.

- To establish two opposing propositions, stressing their inherent tension, and with the help of this dialectical tension creating a new regime of unorthodox and complex meanings, or to spin the whole thing in such a way that meanings become indeterminate.
- To circulate or to whirl the conventional with the help of negative dynamics, as if placing it on an axis; to open new directions and to create a novel state of affairs.
- To create paradoxical, self-contradictory, anomalous, enigmatic, and puzzling situations.
- With the help of the poetic logic, bringing into play a feeling of negative argumentation; subverting the usual and opening up new phases of reality that lead to artistic and intricate meaning-making.
- Creating or constructing new themes and subjects with the help of original functionality of negative dynamics; extracting one theme from another and visioning a new motif as an emergence from the old.
- Using negative dialectics to obstruct the usual interpretation of words; to bring in tension; to twist or loop; to bring in complexity; to 'defamiliarize' meaning; and to rotate the familiar into *recherché*.
- To unfold the meaning slowly as a beautiful damsel unveils herself in a slow and bewitching manner.
- Using negative functionality to rediscover the incongruous, anomalous, baffling, and incomprehensible.
- With the help of negative dialectics, diving into the known and unknown layers of consciousness; to construct new images and imagining new states of self-realization forged by the emergence of new meanings.
- Using the dialectical mode to find new shortcuts to condense meaning; to construct new exemplifications and metaphors; or using their similarities to subvert their meanings.
- Using negative dialectics to bring freshness and charismatic beauty to what is procedural, regimental, programmatic, or habitual.
- Using the tension between two propositions and the space in-between them to illuminate meaning so that the unconscious tightness forces them into two directions with the meaning staying unspecified.
- To challenge the conventional, societal, and didactic values and by twisting them, creating a new poetic reality.

- Rejecting the conventional belief systems and undermining them with dialectical poetical logic.
 - Rejection of religious beliefs, including divisions within the same religion and their traditional justifications.
 - Using negative dialectics to question or to subvert every kind of narrow-mindedness, prejudice, divisive mentality, and emphasis on religious freedom, tolerance, and openness.
 - Using humour, hilarity, absurdity to open new doors and windows; to express unity and love for the new emerging human being; to justify the need for total freedom, including freedom that is identified with craziness à la Majnun or Farhad; using notoriety or ill fame as a matter of pride.
 - Complete rejection of every absolute, rigid, or fixed poetical convention.
 - Rejection of conventional, dialectical, absolute points of view in existential matters and a sustained effort to bring forth earthly, sensory, and humanistic motifs.
 - Rejection after rejection of every known position to reach a point of aporia (an irresolvable internal contradiction or logical disjunction in a text, argument, or theory) which has the essential quality of a meaningful challenge.
 - With negative functionality reaching a state of meaning akin to fluidity so that meaning appears to be in a flux.
 - To wilfully create a grey area in-between two opposing propositions so that no definitive interpretation is possible.
 - To create freshness and intensity and new ways of packaging meaning with negation.
 - Presenting ordinary phenomena in such a way that the known meaning is subverted or it is put into a spin.
 - Conventional meanings are decentred in addition to being subverted.
 - Simplifying meaning at the surface but making the inner construction part of a loop.
- Negative dialectics is also a way of self-assessment or self-examination; to objectively separate self from one's known position, as explained by Urfi: sitting totally detached and hidden from self as an enemy to critically

examine oneself. It is difficult to find a poet other than Ghalib who spent as much time on *riyaazat* (reflecting and meditating on examining one's own writing as a detached self; making corrections and constantly improving). You get the feeling that he was looking at his work with the eye of the detached 'other', who is sitting close by keeping his gaze fixed on each and every word with a critical mind. Ghalib had the courage and capacity to withdraw subjectively and glance at his own creations with an outsider's eye. It is impossible to create great literature without great criticism, even if that criticism comes from within. We can call it alter ego, which casts a critical gaze and continuously polishes the meaning like it is polishing a mirror, and unfolds the secret pathways of '*cheeze digar*', encouraging the inner poet to journey to the unknown. This is a special creative aspect of the dialectical mode in Ghalib's poetics.

- Ghalib's poetry introduces the reader to new modes of gaining awareness and experiencing reality. That is why it is called poetry of the unknown expeditions and voyages. If poetry treads only the known path, then its existence and non-existence is the same. Ghalib's poetry is a voyage to the act of discovery but it is not discovering the conventional; in his case it is a voyage to the unknown. If everything is as predicted, then that is not poetry. A given agenda is the negation of creativity. Dialectical functionality, we can say, saved Ghalib from walking into predetermined trails. We can look at Zauq, Zafar, Nasikh, Shah Naseer, and their disciples who stuck to the tradition and responded to the expectations, while treading the same beaten path which many had already trampled.
- When dialectical poetry communicates the mystery of life, the whole universe seems to go into a rave. Ghalib's poetry is a celebration of life. This feeling of delight and enchantment cannot be described in conventional language. That is why great poets as well as seers use unconventional oppositional metaphors or describe their inner experiences through the language of the unsaying. In these processes, the principles of negative dynamics play an important creative role.
- In creativity, each 'no' is greater than 'yes'. This is not only true about the revolutionaries; it happens in poetics and creativity all the time. The deed of *no* is greater than the deed of *yes*. We can confidently say, 'The power of the negative constitutes an essential moment in the poetics of Ghalib'. Negation is the unavoidable secret of Ghalib's excellence. This is the foundation. The creativity of 'yes' is level and shallow, whereas 'no' is

always deep and unknown. Language plays the game of light and darkness. If there is no darkness, light is meaningless. Light is limited, whereas darkness has no limits and is always filled with mystery. In brief, negative is the fountain of language's innovation and freshness.

- Silence and negative dynamics are like twin sisters of 'the power of no'. When the meaning is quickly revealed, it soon gets exhausted. What is hidden or unknown has unlimited power and possibilities. Negative dynamics is the chess of the known and the unknown, which is played on the surface of silence. Dialectical thought emerges with the tension between the visible lines of the text and what is hidden in-between the lines. In Ghalib's poetics, both aspects are illuminated. It need not be stressed that the direction of meaning, slowly unfolding meaning, and meaning which is like gold dust—all these are revealed in silence and in-between the lines.
- The real power of negative dialectics is that on the poetic plane, it opens new tracks to freshness and things which are uncommon. 'Yes' is a trajectory of worn out, used up, coarse, and vulgar. It is like dressing up words in uniform and making them march towards given directions, blindly following commands, and slavery. All fascist thought emanates from 'yes'. 'No' is the messenger of freedom and free thinking, human dignity, and imagining a being who takes pride and stands tall because of his or her humanness.
- Ghalib's poetry transcends black or white stereotypes and it is found in-between defined colours, defying easy classification.
- We ordinarily believe that things have independent existence. Ghalib makes the point that nothing is independent. Everything that includes meaning, language, and its beautification is subject to dependent origination. This means that everything depends on everything else, and it has no existence on its own. From a dialectical standpoint, meanings are caught up in the constant struggle of presence and absence. Our awareness of this tension brings us freedom and joy. Ghalib's poetry gives us the feeling that freedom and joy are interwoven.
- We can summarize our discussion by quoting a line from a couplet of Mir —'every verse is curled like the tresses of the beloved'. Ghalib's mental mode, in itself, is curled. He is not inclined to say anything in plain words. Everything he says has a knot, a tie, or a hitch that opens up

gradually. Negative dialectics has been a part of India's critical thought and we have seen its shadows in the poetry of Sabke Hindi poets. But it found its full fruition in the most unusual manner in Ghalib's poetry. In our Preface, we have mentioned Mir's couplet to describe this speciality of Ghalib:

*ek do hon to seher-e chashm kahuun
kaarkhaana hai vaan to jadu ka*

If it were one or two—
I would call it wizardry of the eyes
There is a whole world of magic here.

We are dealing with a wonder house of magic. There is a continuous shower of inner experiences, thought making, beautification of themes, subtleness, poetic logicity, exemplification, experimentation, loveliness of expression, and indeed everything is so touched by dialectics that the text opens up in loops and twists and the whole experience reminds us of one of his own couplets:

*Asad band-e qaba-e yaar hai firdaus ka ghuncha
agar va ho to dikhla duun k yak aalam gulistaan hai*

Asad, the top hook
in the beloved's blouse
is like a bud of the paradise.
If it is loosened,
we shall discover a world
full of beauty and flowers

Analysis and interpretation are tools of helplessness in the face of such creativity. But when we are dealing with artistic achievement without any precedent, we can easily bring our hypotheses to a conclusion. In conclusion, we can say that the stiff wine of Ghalib's meaning is found in negative dynamics' colour-swirling decanter.

It is just possible that some of the mentioned points might show similarity or give the feeling of interfering with one another but in reality that is not the case. In each and every point, there is something different and unique. Negative dialectics and Ghalib's poetics form one organic whole. Their constituent elements cannot be separated. Interpretations are no more than pointers. They are neither comprehensive nor inclusive. The creative act is mysterious like a dream, and it is impossible to enclose all its domains

in an absolute and definitive manner. Ghalib's mental make-up and creative act is so mysterious and puzzling that any attempt to account for everything is like swimming against the tide. It is nothing except a magical act that, with the simple touch of a negative, makes mundane words and their linkages fall into a dark abyss where customary language loses its flight. Why does Ghalib talk about 'the stiffness of wine and melting of the decanter'? It is because the inner experience is very dense, impenetrable, intense, complex, abstract, or novel making the whole thing so mysterious or inexplicable that the language fails you or falls short. Our points are like sutras, short pointers (just like look here, look there), which have been derived from our readings, experiences, and analyses. Literary criticism, however hard it might try, cannot capture the magic of creativity. To put forward explanations for all amorous playfulness in Ghalib's poetics is not easy. Every aspect of his work is a window that opens up into newer pastures. Interpretations are not dead ends. They are like forks that lead to new roads and pathways.

The reader, while glancing through Ghalib's poetry will feel, in Iqbal's words, that 'there are still vineyards filled with grapes whose wine has not yet been extracted'. The dynamic dialectic and the charismatic creative outcome is manifestly visible everywhere. Ghalib's poetry is so much immersed into dialectical mode that it creates a blinding effect associated with the drop of lightning from the sky. More illustrations of this type of verse and their analyses were provided in [Chapters 8, 9 and 10](#).

Dialectical Mind and Freedom of Thought: Is There Anyone to Get Me Within the Reach of Openness of India and China's Idol Houses?

Free-thinking people never hide the truth. I am a half-Muslim so that I am free from the pressure of tradition and religious rituals. The same way, I am unencumbered from the fear of disgrace or infamy. (Ghalib [quoted in [Hali 1897: 36-7](#)])

We have been a witness to Ghalib's unique writing style. The problem he faces, as already discussed, is not transcendental but existential or earthly. He is not searching for any form of deliverance. His focus is on human beings and their lives. That is why the feeling of freedom that he displays is targeted against rusted traditions, conventions, and sectarianism that binds

us in bondage. His love for the humanity and openness of belief can be seen in various delightful forms. These kinds of couplets therefore need special attention and that is the objective of this section.

Religion plays a significant role in people's social life. But Ghalib was far ahead of the conventional beliefs. His natural love for freedom found its expression in many ways. In each and every era, we find tension between orthodoxy and liberal thinking. By the time Ghalib appeared on the scene, Sufi thinking had gained a great deal of acceptance. It was not only popular throughout the country, it had gained a special place in poetry as well. The romantic poetry was full of beauty and the joys that it brings, madness of love and self-awareness, a horde of unbounded desires and aspirations, poignancy and sadness, ecstasy and immortality as a source of continuous inspiration and contemplation. It is difficult to argue that the local conditions and syncretic cultural roots did not change things. Even a renowned scholar like Shibli agrees that India and its traditions were the source for the origin of inclusive Sufi thinking. When Sufism came into being, these ideas were not found anywhere else except in India. In Shibli's own words:

Slowly and gradually this thought reached the idea of unity of existence. This means that right from the beginning there was this idea that there is no presence in the universe other than that of God. In other words, whatever exists is a form of God. It is difficult to say how this idea crept into Islam. Contemporary thinkers and scholars are of the opinion that both Greece and India are the source of this idea (*hama ost* or All is He). Historical evidence for this is hard to find. The doubt arises from the fact that the period of the rise of Greek thought and its popularization was the period, meaning the first two or three centuries (Islamic era), when this idea had not seen the light of the day. The start and manifestation of this problem started in the time of Sheikh Mohiuddeen Akbar, who was a contemporary of Sheikh Sa'di and Iraqi (12th–13th century ad) (1921: 144–5)

What is the relationship of sufi thinking with the local thinking and philosophy and how this impacted Urdu ghazal was the subject of our book titled *Urdu Ghazal aur Hindustani Zahn-o Tahziib* ([Narang 2002: 237–94](#)). The author's opinion is not as important as that of leading critics who have written about Ghalib. From Hali to Khurshidul Islam and Zoe Ansari, they all emphasize the fact that Ghalib was a very strong believer in the unity of mankind, which is an important aspect of Sufism. Prigarina makes this point very forcefully when she writes, 'The central idea of this thought is hidden in the paradoxical belief that the universe cannot be imagined without recognizing the essential fact of its oneness' (1997: 345). One thing is quite clear that Ghalib stood miles away from religious dogmatism and

narrow-mindedness. He was respectful of ancient ideas but he never felt shy to criticize their restrictive rustiness. We cannot understand his dialectical mental mode without keeping in forefront his paradoxical belief about oneness and unity. He was proud of his free mind and the manner in which he always freely expressed his thoughts. Since his easy-going ways often came into conflict with his religious obligations, he presented different kinds of justifications. Hali showed his disapproval and, in some indirect ways, he expressed his complaints (1897: 47–53).

Ghalib expressed his opinion about sufi thinking at various places. But the best example of this is found in his Persian letters to Hazrat Ji Ghamgeen Dehlvi. These letters were published by Khwaja Ahmad Faruqi in the special Ghalib issue of his magazine *Urdu-e Mualla* in 1961. In subsequent issues of the magazine, there were scholarly articles on this subject by Shah Maikash Akbarabadi and Shabeer Ahmed Ghouri ([Maikash 1969](#); [Ghouri 1969](#)). A detailed critical analysis about these lengthy articles full of technical terms can be found in the Urdu version of this book. The focal point of this discussion is the interpretation of the popular dictum of the Sufis, *hama ost* (All is He). Ghalib has his peculiar way of accepting what the authorities and the tradition say but he improves dialectically what was said before and makes his point about cosmic vision and the unity of mankind in a lucid manner. He says that he is a true believer but one should be above argumentation in such matters. It is better to have a glass of wine and a good night's sleep. It is also called summum bonum (the highest good, especially as the ultimate goal according to which values and priorities are established in an ethical system).

We have selected some illuminating Urdu and Persian couplets of Ghalib that especially underscore his love of freedom and oneness of mankind.

218

hasad se dil agar afsurda hai garm-e tamaasha ho
k chashm-e tang shaayad kasrat-e nazzaara se va ho

If your heart is overcome with jealousy,
then start looking around.
When you see more of what is happening,
your vision will broaden and
your thinking will expand
by watching things unfold.

355

bakhshe hai jalva-e gul zauq-e tamaasha Ghalib
chashm ko chaahiye har rang mein va ho jaana

The splendour of flowers, Ghalib,
makes us appreciate beauty.
The eye should be able to see reality
in the colours
in which it reveals itself.

There is a connection here between flowers, beauty, and the eye that sees beauty created by the colours of flowers. The eye should stay open at all times but that is not a possibility. The colours created by the flowers are also limited. While the couplet talks about infinite colours and the capacity of the eye to absorb everything, in reality there are no limitations. The creativity is a synonym of freedom. This couplet is a grand celebration of spring. Yes, the colours of flowers are different but these are nuances and gradations of spring which signifies wholeness and unity of existence.

361

masjid ke zer-e saaya kharaabaat chaahiye
bhon paas aankh qibla-e haajaat chaahiye

We need a tavern
under the shadow of the mosque.
Just like eyes need the brow.
We need it, O God!

Ghalib defies convention wherever possible. A tavern is not allowed anywhere near a mosque. But that does not stop him from suggesting that a tavern is needed. Brow (which is like an arch) signifies a mosque. The metaphor of the nearness of the eyes to the brow clinches the argument. These two are inseparable and they serve a shared purpose. What is common between a mosque and a tavern? Well, they both provide intoxication. The precise nature of the intoxication is different but it is intoxication all the same. The couplet has a peculiar Sufi flavour and emphasizes the point that human freedom cannot be limited by the traditional notions of right and wrong.

380

zunnaar baandh sub-ha-e sad daana tor daal
rahrau chale hai raah ko hamvaar dekh kar

Tie up the holy string

that hangs around the shoulder.
Break the circular rosary
of one hundred beads.
A traveller can walk smoothly
when the path is even.

Religious beliefs separate people. Hindus wear a sacred thread around their body and Muslims use a rosary with beads that helps in counting. Ghalib looks beyond these traditional rituals of having a binding relationship with God and finds a commonality that most people miss. There is really no difference in the sacred thread and the thread used for making a rosary if the beads are removed (or rejected), making the hand's movement free and even. Two very distinctive sacred objects are thus brought together with one touch of subversion.

Although a severe critic of divine indifference to human suffering, Ghalib finds something praiseworthy in human capacity—proportionality. Moses could not withstand the revelation, hence all was burnt up. Since drink is given proportionally to the one who can withstand it, if the poet was chosen for the great moment, he would have withstood the lightning since he had the capacity to bear it. Mark the poetic logic of inversion and a touch of humour in favour of the human being and his capacity.

399

*jab maikada chhuta to phir ab kya jagah ki qaid
masjid ho madrasa ho koi khaanqaah ho*

When the tavern
was taken away,
I was freed.
Now, it does not matter
whether it is a mosque,
a madrasa, or a monastery.

The mosque and tavern have an oppositional relationship. When the tavern was taken away, it conferred complete freedom where the liberated could have his drink. Tradition says you cannot drink in a mosque, madrasa, or monastery, which are all pious places but Ghalib has no traditional inhibitions. Anything that comes in the way of freedom is poetically subverted.

407

*manzar ik bulandi par aur ham bana sakte
arsh se udhar hota kaash ke makaan apna*

I wanted to build
my house at a great height,
visible from far away.
But my ambition placed it
higher than the heavens.

This is a beautiful couplet in a lighter vein but very meaningful about human capacity and ambition. There is nothing that we cannot plan or do and our ambition always stretches things further from reality. When you place something higher than heaven, there is an implicit idea of rejection of the conventional view of heaven as something limitless.

410

*chalta huun thori duur har ik tez rau ke saath
pahchaanta nahien huun abhi raah bar ko main*

Though I am able to walk
with those who walk really fast,
I still do not know
who my true guide is and
where he is taking me.

It is a sarcastic comment on human tendency to blindly follow others, simply because they are able to display one attribute, that is, speed. This kind of followership negates freedom. Ghalib is not making an argument against having a patron or a guide. His point is that this desire should come from one's inner self. When there is an inner fire, it becomes easy to find a true teacher or a guide. This couplet reaffirms an old saying. 'A teacher appears when you are ready', that is, when your inner self is ready.

412

*go vaan nahien p vaan ke nikaale huye to hain
ka'be se in buton ko bhi nisbat hai duur ki*

There are no idols in Kaba
though they were once there.
Idols have thus some connection
with the holy place.

412

*kya farz hai k sab ko mile ek sa javaab
aao n ham bhi sair karein koh-e tuur ki*

God does not give
one and the same answer

to every questioner.
If in doubt,
take a hike up Mount Sinai
and know it for yourself.

Ghalib talks about history and a negative relationship between Kaba and the idols. Idols existed in the sacred place before the birth of Islam. But when the new faith gained a foothold, idols were expelled, as Islam specifically prohibits idol worship. Ghalib goes behind this in his peculiar innovative way with a touch of wit and finds a thread that says that the sacred place and the idols did exist together at a certain point in time. Therefore, there is a relationship between the two, though an absent one. The second couplet tackles another historical topic which is also traditional in nature. When Moses went up the mountain to speak to God, lightning struck and everything was reduced to ashes. Ghalib looks at another possibility: We should not be carried away by Moses's example. Maybe God has a different answer for others. The underlying theme here is freedom, about doing things that tradition disallows. When you act freely, there are no limits to what one could do and get.

419
dekhiyo Ghalib se gar uljha koi
hai vali poshiida aur kaafir khula

Be aware
if you got ugly with Ghalib!
He is a hidden vali
and an open kafir.

Ghalib's poetry is existential, though he sometimes confuses the reader who senses mystical elements in his verse and comes to the conclusion that he is a mystical poet. In this definitional couplet, Ghalib hints about the complete freedom of his mind: he is one person in appearance but another inside. The fact of the matter is that he is neither a seer nor a non-believer. He is a free man.

426
ham muuvahhid hain hamaara kiish hai tark-e rusuum
millatein jab mit gayiin ajzaaye iimaan ho gayiin

I believe in one God and my way of life
is to discard traditions and rituals.
If factional differences are removed,
belief in oneness of God will be affirmed.

All religions preach unity but they are also instruments of discord. In this couplet, Ghalib confronts the believers: If there is one God, then why do you separate one man from the others?

427

*nahien kuchh sub-h-o zunnaar ke phande mein giiraayi
vafaadaari mein sheikh o barhaman ki aazmaayish hai*

The infinite loop of the rosary
or the sacred thread
cannot impress anyone; it is just a show.
The real test of a Sheikh and a Brahman
is how true are they to their faith.

The loop of the rosary or of the sacred thread is infinite because you are always moving in a circle. Going through it is a matter of tradition. This is neither the true measure of a Sheikh, nor of a Brahman. The truth lies hidden inside. Religious customs just scratch the surface.

439

*vafaadaari bashart-e ustavaari asl iimaan hai
mare butkhaane mein to ka'be mein gaaro brahman ko*

Fidelity, if stable,
is the essence of belief.
Bury the Brahman in the Kaba
even if he dies
in the house of idols.

This is yet another fierce attack on the way the religious rituals are practised. If the essence of belief is all in one's fidelity, meaning faithfulness, loyalty, constancy, trustworthiness, and dependability, then it does not matter if a Brahman is buried in the Kaba. Most conservative believers would find the suggestion outrageous but Ghalib's free thinking exposes what is not true and stresses on what is true; faithfulness to what you truly believe is the faith of faiths.

443

*iimaan mujhe roke hai jo khiinche hai mujhe kufr
ka'ba mere piichhe hai kaliisa mere aage*

My faith pulls me towards it
though kufr is also pulling me
in another direction.
Kaba is behind me
and the Chapel in front of me.

448

*bandagi mein bhi voh aazaadah o khudbiin hain k ham
ulte phir aaye dar-e ka'ba agar vaa n hua*

Even in bondage,
I am free and demanding.
I would turn back
if I find the door to the Kaba
shut.

There is a polarization between bondage and freedom. When there is one, the other does not exist. Ghalib refutes this because he finds freedom even in his bondage. He is so proud of his free ways of acting that he would even turn back from the Kaba if the door was not opened for him, though going on this sacred pilgrimage is the highest ambition of every true believer.

459

*taa'at mein ta rahe n maye o aangabiin ki laag
dozakh mein daal do koi le kar bahisht ko*

People pray to gain
heaven's comforts of wine and honey.
I say better take that heaven
and throw it into the hell.

The couplet is a total rejection of the traditional notions of heaven and hell, honey and *houris*, and all that is promised. When hell is thrown into heaven, the whole thing is hell. Where is the scope of reward or greed? True faith had to be above material expectations. The poet is unconcerned because he cannot walk the righteous way of deception and duplicity just to ensure the pleasures of heaven in life after death.

Freedom of Thought: Persian Couplets

While we are talking about Ghalib's dialectical mind and his love of freedom, it is appropriate to also look at some of his Persian couplets in the same vein. Both Urdu and Persian have their distinctive levels of aesthetic beauty. But the nature of creativity and freedom of mind is the same.

*muzhda-e sub-h dariin tiira shabaanam daadand
sham'a kushtand z khurshiid nishaanam daadand*

After many dark nights
I was greeted by the morning.

The candle was snuffed
and I received the sun's glad tidings.

*maqsuud-e ma z dair o haram juz habiib niist
har ja kunem sajda badaan aastaan rasad*

My purpose with the temple and the mosque
is nothing but the pursuit of the beloved.
Wherever I bow my head in prayer,
my entreaty goes to the same shrine.

*reg dar baadiya-e ishq ravaan ast hunuuz
ta cheha paaye dariin raah b-farsuudan raft*

In the love's desert
the sand still shines like a wave,
though innumerable four-footers
have been trying to subdue it
for centuries.

*juz dar aaiina nadiidam asar-e sa'ii-e khayaal
har qadar behr-e talabgaari-e insaan raftam*

I have found nothing more
than the shadows in the mirror
of my own thoughts.
I tried my best, looking for the man
but I got nothing more than that.

*n bedar jasta sharaar o n baja maandah ramaad
sokhtam lek n-daanam b ch unvaanam sokht*

There was neither a spark
nor any remnants of ashes.
I got totally burnt but
do not know how.

*beya k qaa'eda-e aasmaan begardaanem
qaza z gardish ratl-e garaan begardaanem*

Come, the two of us can change
the heaven's rulebook
and by whirling a big cup of wine

make death itself retreat.

*khuuye aadam daaram aadam-zaada am
aashkaara dam z isyaan mi zanam*

I am the son of Adam
and I have inherited his nature,
and therefore I commit sin
and commit it openly.

*raazdaan-e khuuye dehram karda and
khanda bar daana-o naadaan mi zanam*

Nature has shared with me
the secrets of the world.
Now I can laugh at the wise
and the foolish alike.

*aavaara-e ghurbat natavaan diid sanam ra
baashad k digar butkada saazand haram ra*

The idol thrown out of the sanctuary
cannot be seen wandering
in hardship and destitution.
It is better if we build another house
for refuge in the sanctuary.

*dilam dar ka'ba az tangi girافت aavaara-e khvaaham
k baaman vus'at-e butkhaana haaye hind o chiin goyad*

My heart is rattled
by the stiffness of canons and edicts.
It seeks wandering and freedom.
Is there someone who can get me
within the reach of openness
of India's and China's idol houses?

Ghalib's Poetics: A Twenty-first Century Perspective

Before we close this chapter, we would like to quickly survey the contemporary human state of affairs, keeping in view Ghalib's poetic disposition. It is well-known that today's epistemology forces us to use

paradoxical grammar in our discourse. Dialectical mode seems to have gained close affinity with the modern paradigmatic shift. In order to fully appreciate this, we shall have to step back a little to acquire full understanding of the situation.

It is said that humanity has been living for the past two thousand years in Plato's cave. There is a polarity between poetry and logic. The same polarity exists between religion and science. The world of logic is really the world of science, mathematics, and knowledge, whereas the world of religion is largely the world of spirituality, wonder, mystery, and creativity. While one is overly concerned with intellect, reason, and consciousness, the other attaches importance to unconditional love, mysticism, and unconscious. They stand apart on different planes. Science cannot become poetry and poetry cannot be science. But the aesthetic pleasure that we derive from fine arts or poetry is like the satisfaction we get from solving a scientific theorem. This means that these boundaries can mysteriously overlap in some places, though the challenges of poetry are different from that of science and philosophy. In some instances, they are not very different either, and their intuitive and unconscious or superconscious functionality overlaps. Life and death, day and night are polar opposites. These paradoxes act like contradictions and it is logically not possible to remove these contradictions. Our conscious, rational mind tells us that A is A, and it cannot be B. But if we look deeper, there is a relationship between these contradictions and this relationship is based on a subtle continuity. Life turns into death and death is followed by birth. Day becomes night and night turns into day. In all of this, there is a deep relationship of wholeness, continuity, a deeper unity. It is a loop that never breaks. It goes on unfolding endlessly. These are two sides of the existence. One cannot be imagined without the other. Life is a mysterious puzzle made up of contradictions. These are two faces of the same coin. Contradictions have ingrained within them certain complementarities. It means that one face is incomplete without the other. They become whole when they are taken together. Life is a mystery or a paradox. Science and Aristotelian logic cannot solve it. Given today's situation, we can say that Ghalib's mind captured this truth centuries ago.

The world of science is the world of absoluteness and objectivity. The world of insight, creativity, or poetry is the world of emotion, intuition, meditation, and going deeper into one's unconscious. This is a world of

freedom and paradox, and not counting that two plus two equals four. Poetry seeks release from perfunctory inhibitions and loves fresh air. Poetry demands engrossment, love and inebriation, beauty and delight, intoxication and intemperance, freedom and boundarylessness.

We know one thing that kept the East alive is its spirituality. For the West, it is science that has helped it to advance materially. Spirituality, obviously, has been pushed back in the West. All great world religions and their founders were born in the East. The dominant view in the East for the past several thousands of years has been that things are not what they appear to be. Reality is not matter; it is beyond reason, it is beyond the visible, it is energy, it is the absolute consciousness. Thankfully, now science is also picking up this vocabulary.

It is said about Einstein that during the last few years of his life, his mind was torn between science that he knew well and the mysteries of life that were a source of wonder. He said that science had succeeded in solving great problems but now there were new challenges before us. It is true that despite great progress, science has not succeeded in unfolding the puzzle of life. Even great scientific geniuses and Noble Laureates recognize this fact that science has failed so far to unravel the mystery of universe. In fact, it has further deepened those mysteries in some ways.

In the not so distant past, it was easy to claim that the universe was made of matter. But now matter appears to have become invisible. Its centrality has come to an end. In the new science, there is no such thing as matter. The more science comes to grip with matter or particles, the more it loses its identity. Energy has turned into radiation. There is nothing solid about energy. Matter is solid, energy is not. Matter can be measured in a traditional manner; energy cannot be measured in the same way. Science was the other name for objectivity and certainty; but it now speaks the language of uncertainty. Eminent astrophysicist, Sir Arthur Eddington (1882–1944) has mentioned that the universe no longer looked like a thing but a thought. He also added that the defence of the idea of human freedom was the thesis that reality was basically mental.

Universe is more consciousness than matter. In the East, absolute consciousness and divine light have been centres of discourse for centuries. In the Indian philosophy as well as in the Sufi thought, one thing that has been much emphasized is that reality is absolute consciousness. As science unveiled many things around matter, scientific truths have become deeper

and complex. Science is losing the language to talk about elements that are extremely fluid. Science itself is becoming an unsolvable riddle. It looks science is learning to talk in the language of Buddha, Lao-Tze, or that of the Sufis. In the human thought, shunyata is the oldest language of paradoxes and it uses paradoxical grammar. ‘The Tao that can be spoken is not the Tao.’

Seemingly contradictory or absurd language is close to superconscious, or Yogi, or Sufi thinking. Its creative foundation rests on intuition and metaphorical expressions. Absolute consciousness is another name for infinity. There are no boundaries whatsoever. In other words, our life is based on paradoxes that cannot be sorted out in the common language. Their expression is possible in the ‘language of unsaying’ and that is close to the essence of life. We have mentioned this before that the gift of the ancient footprints of archetypal paradoxical thought reached Ghalib after a long trip from Sabke Hindi to Bedil. And this dug for itself such a strong root in Ghalib’s mind and imagination that it became one with his creative signature.

The new epistemology and poetry lay maximum emphasis on the plurality of meanings, wonder, discovery, and self-awareness. Ghalib’s dialectical creativity and its emphasis on freedom and openness, and keeping the mind open to all possibilities are closely related to postmodern thinking. Ghalib’s poetry is the poetry of defiance, subversion, and freedom of belief. Its idioms are change, differentiation, innovation, and inventiveness. In today’s scenario and priorities, this presents surprising similarities and we are wonderstruck with the fact that the language of paradoxical contradictions is a special quality of Ghalib’s poetry. And it is very close to the principles of plurality and uncertainty. Ghalib’s cosmic vision of existence and non-existence is that of intrinsic wholeness, a continuum. We know that Ghalib was ahead of his time. We have taken a long time to understand him. But this is a never-ending process. Ghalib’s open-ended poetics has a touch of infinite, and it is hoped that it would keep re-echoing the quest of mankind.

¹ Refer to [Chapter 6](#), about Bedil, in this book.

12

Landmark Life Events, Masnavis, Prose, Wit and Humour, and Dialectical Mind



*daulat b ghalat nabuvad az sa'ii pashemaan sho
kaafir natavaani shud naachaar musalmaan sho*

You cannot gain blessing by wrong means.

Do not bother yourself for nothing.

If you cannot have the audacity to be a kafir,
then be a Muslim at least.

—Ghalib's Persian Divan.

Ghalib in his letter to his favourite disciple Hargopal Tafta:

My Very Dear!

Every man, whether he is Muslim, Hindu, or Nasrani (Christian) is dear to me. I treat him as my brother. Others may recognize this or not. I couldn't care less.

—Ghalib

IN THE PREVIOUS CHAPTERS, we examined Ghalib's poetic work in detail and paid special attention to the fact how dialectics played an important role in his thought and poetics, and how the tool of inventive negation, which is his characteristic, and whose roots go back to Sabke Hindi, Sufi thinking, and eventually to Bodhi dynamics, was used by him. Although on the face of it there is no visible relationship between these elements, there are deeper connections. Our discussion in the earlier chapters was much focused on the textual analyses and poetics, which was required to explore and reinforce some core points.

If dialectical predilection is like a precious jewel and it forms a part of Ghalib's creativity and inventiveness, as we have seen, then it should also be visible in life events and occurrences. Personal circumstances may or may not directly impact the mind or vice versa. It is a two-way relationship. Like life in general, there is a paradoxical relationship between the evolution of mind and temperament and its impact on the development of human personality that cannot be mechanically understood, and it is simple to believe it to be so. These two aspects are part of something that cannot be precisely measured. Personality develops the mind and mind in turn develops the personality and this two-way dialectics continues as a part of the overall personal development.

There are many twists and turns in Ghalib's life that are rather enigmatic and their study is quite challenging. Therefore, in the current chapter we shall go through this step by step. In other words, we are not concerned directly with fundamental aspects of his creativity but whether there is consonance in his ways of thinking and his actions, in particular his spontaneous reactions to some of the crises in his life; how he saves the situation without compromising self-esteem or freedom of opinion; how he expresses himself in his letters to his close friends (which are masterworks in their own right); and how he comes across in critical moments of his life with his peculiar wit and ingenuity. For the sake of brevity, we shall focus only on those events which are treated as milestones in his life's journey.

We start with his early years in Agra, his carefree, confident, stylish, and charming youth and its distractions, his interactions with his Parsi-Persian teacher Hurmuzd, and how he got attracted to Persian language in a big way while he was still very young. Culturally, Persian language at that time was the hallmark of sophistication and a major source of liberal thinking, and we need to keep in view this tradition of pluralistic thought that Ghalib might have assimilated as a result of his deep love or unconscious urge for the Persian learning. What impact did it have on his views about religious belief systems? We have already noted and discussed at length about the unconscious impact of dialectical thinking on his poetic work. How did it affect his life more broadly? Do we find the same dialectical dynamics at work in his life's critical moments and his day-to-day interactions and conversations? Ghalib expressed himself freely in his letters to his friends, disciples, and associates. There is a portrait of an extremely interesting and inventive man that emerges from these prose writings. Is there concordance

in his prose and poetic writings? These are some of the questions that we want to address in this concluding chapter.

Agra: The Early Years

Ghalib's maternal family was among the richest in Agra and that is why he spent his childhood in great material comfort. After the death of his father and uncle, there was no one left to impose any strict discipline. His maternal grandfather Kamedaan (Commandant) Ghulam Husain Khan's personal estate included agricultural lands and residential properties. Therefore, his childhood and the years preceding adulthood were spent in a manner of a typical rich brat spoilt by the opulence of abundant material wealth. While reminiscing about his childhood in his later life, Ghalib wrote this in a letter addressed to Munshi Shiv Narain, a playmate of adolescent years from Agra:

What did I know about you? When I learnt that you're Nazir (Revenue Officer) Bansi Dhar's grandson, then I realized that you're someone dear to me. What do you know about the closeness of our two families? Listen to me. Your great grandfather in the reign of Najaf Khan was a dear friend of my maternal grandfather late Khwaja Ghulam Husain Khan Kamedaan. When my maternal grandfather retired, then your great grandfather also let go and he stopped working. These things happened before I came of age. When I reached adulthood I saw that Munshi Bansi Dhar was a close associate of Khan Sahib and was an attorney and caretaker in the Jagir (land grant) case filed against the government. We were of the same age. He could be one or two years my senior any sense of time, and sometime we sat past midnight.... I flew kites on the roof of one of the *katras* [quarters] and I competed against Raja Balwan Singh. Your grandfather had a security guard named Vaasil Khan who used to collect rent from various *katras*. Brother, listen to me. Your grandfather grew very rich. He bought agricultural lands for self-cultivation. He paid revenue to the government in the range of ten or twelve thousand rupees. I wonder how much of that wealth you inherited. Please do write to me urgently about this. ([Ghalib 1926, vol. 2: 672–4](#))

At the peak of his youth, Ghalib was considered one of the city's most handsome and attractive men. When Hali saw him in Delhi, he wrote, 'The signs of good looks and attractiveness were apparent from his facial appearance, his height, and build of the body' ([Azad 1950: 494](#); [Hali 1897: 17](#)). Mirza himself wrote about the days of his youth in the preface to his *Mehr-e Niimroz*.

Good name and wealth are like strangers to me. And I am myself the enemy of my own name and what I stand for. I am one among the happy-go-lucky and free and easy people and my friends are pleasure seekers. My feet are used to moving around and my tongue seeks the pleasure of wine drinking. I am the source of my own misfortunes and I tend to act as a counselor to my enemies. The

vagabondage of 50 years has broken my chord with the mosque and the temple. The places of veneration and drink houses have fallen on each other. ([Hali 1897: 314](#))

Agra is close to areas like Gokul, Mathura, and Brindavan that are sacred and are mentioned in Hindu mythology as places where stories about Krishna's escapades with his female companions (*gopis*) are told and re-enacted to this day. Famous poets like Mir Taqi Mir and Nazeer Akbarabadi had close associations with the city of Agra, and its importance from literary standpoint is well established. In Ghalib's letters and couplets, any mention of Agra is greeted with spurts of joy and celebration. Hali in his book, while talking about Ghalib's days of carefree youth, alludes to his love for champagne and *arq-e taak* (wine) and says that he was careless in matters relating to religious observances. He writes that his profligate and carefree manners that were ingrained in the beginning were not set right till the day the good times came to an end. There was fire in his temperament and, if he wrote any poetry at that time, it revealed signs of pride in his brave pedigree, and inner zest, and restlessness to be something great in the art of writing if not in the art of war. He talks about an 'arrow of defeat' and anguish in one of his ruba'is:

I belong to the pedigree of the great father of Pushang
and the great grandson of Tuur, son of Fariduun,
rulers of the territory of Tuuran (near Iran).
I take pride in my ancestors and what they did with the sword
and I am fortunate to be their offspring.
But since the empire and the need for soldiering is all over
and thing of the past, I had no option but to excel
in the art of putting the pen to paper.
The broken arrow of my ancestors has become
my reed pen and the sharpness of the sword has entered my poetry. ([Hali 1897: 255, 377](#))

It is interesting to note that in the days of playfulness, the 'skill' that Ghalib chose in his state of early youth, without any takers to begin with, he later took that art seriously and to such heights that it became the mark of his greatness. During this time, a traveller from Iran with a Zoroastrian name of Hurmuzd (which he later changed to Abdus Samad after embracing Islam), arrived in Agra in his sojourn and, according to Mirza, he stayed with him at his behest for two years. Hali writes, 'Mirza attained proficiency in Persian language with his help.... He made Mirza gain deep understanding of Persian idiom and artistic techniques, as well as religious views of Zoroastrians that have a deep affinity with Persian language,

ancient joint origin and close connection between Persian and Sanskrit, and many other related matters' (1897: 13).

Many biographers consider this story about his tutor a figment of Mirza's imagination because he had himself, from time to time, denied the existence of any such Zoroastrian teacher. Hali writes, quoting Ghalib's own words, 'From time to time I heard Mirza say this that the source of my learning is Providence as such and Abdus Samad is nothing but a made up name because people teased me as the *one without a teacher*. To silence these people, I had no choice but to concoct a story and carve up the persona of an imaginary teacher' (1897: 13).

Sheikh Muhammad Ikram is of the view that because of Hurmuzd, Mirza became familiar with the customs and beliefs of Zoroastrians, and in matters of religion and in his openness to diversity and plurality of faiths, Hurmuzd had a definite role to play (n.d.: 27–8). In Agra itself, Parsis managed a number of wine shops. Mirza in his later years wrote to Hatim Ali Mehr, a friend of his youthful years who lived in Agra, 'Sahib, come to your senses and tell me about dozens of Parsi shops that sold French wines and champagnes and the homes of traders and jewelers that were filled with currency and jewels. Where can I go to drink that wine? Where can I go to get that stuff?' ([Ghalib 1926, vol. 1: 517](#)).

This clearly shows that Agra had a vibrant cultural and social life filled with colours of free thinking and ideological brightness. The seed of Persian was sown in early years and the initial interaction with Persian teachers happened here. This was also the place where he soaked up the intricacies and beauties of Sabke Hindi poetry tradition of Mughal times and came under the influence of Bedil. This is where, under the early influence of Persian masters, he started his experimentation with Rekhta compositions, that is, Urdu ghazal, and where he tasted the fruits of free thinking, enjoyed wandering in the little-known vistas of his own mind, and gained the courage to challenge the established ways of thinking, be it in social life or in the art of poetry. The first marks of the inventive dialectical approach, whose shades we find in the first two rare nuskhas (manuscripts of early poetry), were carved here. It is also true that Ghalib repeatedly affirmed that except Providence no one else taught him anything. Because people called Ghalib (the one without a teacher), he made up a story to silence them.

This strange logic openly reveals his dialectical secret. Qazi Abdul Wadud writes, 'In order to resolve Ghalib's contradictions, Hali entangled himself in the midst of contradictions of his own creating' (1995: 324). Ghalib can make 'no' look like 'yes' poetically, and then miraculously change 'yes' into 'no'. What he praises he also demolishes, as both are a continuum. His dialectical twist does not allow anything to find a centre, meaning both 'this' as well as 'that' appear valid. His dialectical thinking creates conflicting situations that are highly believable, without any paradox, as if that was the only truth, without any disagreement.

Marriage and Consequent Relocation to Delhi

Ghalib married into a very wealthy, *jagirdar*, land-grant-owning Loharu family with the daughter of Nawab Elahi Bakhsh Ma'roof. His father-in-law was a disciple of poet Zauq and the brother of Nawab Ahmad Bakhsh Khan, the ruler of Loharu and Ferozepur Jhirka. The marriage, therefore, opened the way for Mirza to identify himself with one of the highly esteemed and noble families of Delhi. Hali pens an interesting episode about Elahi Bakhsh Khan Ma'roof, Mirza's father-in-law:

He was an elderly Sufi and was very fond of making people his *mureed* (disciples). Once he gained a sufficient number, in order to impress them he would give them a copy each of his family tree, mainly of great Sufi ancestors. So once he gave a family tree chart to Mirza and asked him to make a few copies. Mirza while copying the tree played a little trick. For every one name of an ancestor that he included, he omitted another one. When the copy was brought to the old man, he noticed changes in the tree and he got very upset and told him, 'Mirza, what have you done?' Mirza kept his cool and responded respectfully, 'Hazrat, this family tree is like a staircase that takes you to God. So if we remove one step no harm will be done. Rather, people can jump a step and reach God faster.' This explanation didn't work and the copy was trashed. ([Hali 1897: 88](#))

This incident shows that Mirza was unrestrained when it came to giving expression to his free thinking and using the dialectical lens for looking at things. He was used to turning viewpoints around and looking at aspects of reality that conventionally are not obvious. We shall return to this aspect of Mirza's personality but let us first examine how the currents of freethinking prevalent in Persian poetry at that time might have impacted Mirza's young mind.

Cultural Climate and Open-mindedness

We have mentioned that right from his early years, Ghalib was very much influenced by Mughal–Persian poetry. Persian, at that time, besides being the court language, was also the standard bearer of cultural sophistication, higher learning, and the pathway to attain greater recognition. Maybe due to a tradition of free thinking and a more tolerant religious outlook in which it flourished, Persian poetry was filled with intellectual thinking that looked at issues with freshness, unrestrained by the rigid views of the past on a very wide scale. As Sheikh Muhammad Ikram points out, ‘The Persian poets were relatively free and open in matters relating to religion. The narrow and rigid thinking imposed by the establishment and orthodoxy was poetically flouted by Hafiz, Khayyam, and Faizi’ (n.d.: 318).

Besides Faizi, we can add to this list the poets of Sabke Hindi Mughal era. Because of the influence of Sufism and the Bhakti movement on a vast scale, there was an atmosphere of openness and tolerance in which Mughal poets freely participated. The dominant theme of love and compassion was embraced more or less by all poets, and each one tried to do better than the other in bringing out something new. Ghalib, from his early years, must have assimilated the spirit of these influences. Let us look at a representative selection of couplets from Sabke Hindi poets:

Fughani

*dar haqiqat nasab-e aashiq-o ma'shuuq yakest
bil-fuzuulaan sanam o barhamane saakhta and
yak chiraaghast dariin khaana k az partav-e aan
har kuja mi nigaram anjumane saakhta and*

Lover and the beloved in reality are one.

People have uselessly turned the beloved into a Brahman's idol.

There is only one candle, just one shining source of light

but people have borrowed fragments of this light

to brighten their separate assemblies.

Ghazali

*maa o hariim-e dair ghazaali k ahl-e dil
iin gosha ra b mamlakat-e Jam nami dihand*

Me and the sanctuary of a temple?

This is the corner

that people with a big heart

will not exchange even

for Jamshed's kingdom.

Faizi

*aan k mikard mara man parastiidan-e but
dar haram rafta tavaaf-e dar o diivaar ch kard*

Who stops me from worshipping the idols?
He is the one who goes into haram,
the venerated Kaba and bows
and goes around the sacred walls and doors.

Urfi

*aarif ham az islam kharaab ast va ham az kufr
parvaana chiraagh-e haram o dair nadaanad*

Because the believers or the kafirs
all are tight in their own belief systems,
the moth does not recognize any difference
between the light that burns in a temple
or in a mosque.

*giraftam iin k bahishtam dihand be taa'at
qubuul kardan o raftan n jaaye insaaf ast*

Voila! An invitation into paradise
for no good reason.
But to accept this gift
I will have some reservation.

Saib

*makhur Saib fareb-e fazl az amaama-e zaahid
k dar gumbad z be-maghzi sada bisyaar mi pechad*

Saib, do not be deceived by the preacher's
high turban and benediction.
In the hollow dome and hollow mind,
there is lot of false echo.

Manohar Tosni

*agar iimaan hamien ka'ba parastiist
parastaaraan-e but ra ta'na az chiist*

If the veneration of a stone
in the centre of Kaba
is the essence of faith,
then why those who worship idols

are taunted as idolators?

Bedil

*z farq o imtiaz-e ka'ba o dairam ch mi pursi
asiir-e ishq buudam harche pesh aamad parastiidam*

Why do you ask
about the difference
between a temple and a mosque?
I am inflicted by love.
Whatever comes before me
I worship it.

*dar-haaye firdaus va buvad imroz
az be dimaaghi guftem farda*

The doors of paradise
were open today.
Look at my imperiousness
I postponed my entry
until tomorrow.

Chandar Bhan Brahman

*mra dilest ba kufr aashna k chandiin baar
ba ka'ba burdam o baazash brahman aavurdam*

My heart is that of a kafir.
I took it to Kaba many times
but it came back as a Brahman.

Dara Shikoh

*har kham-o peche k shud az taab-e zulf-e yaar shud
daam shud zanjir shud tasbiih shud zunnaar shud*

All the twists and curls
are that of my beloved's tresses.
Hers is the snare. Hers are the chains.
She is the rosary and she is the zunnaar.¹

Naziri

*z dair ta but o but khana mi burad ishqam
khajaalat az rukh-e mardaan-e raah-e diin daaram*

My love is driving me
towards the temple and the idols.
When I look at the guardians
of my faith, I am simply ashamed.

Faizi

*ka'ba o butkada yak rang o hariifaa do biin
khud musalmaane o khud brahamane saakhta and*

Mosque and the temple
are actually one.
But the opponents
have turned them into two
and they turned themselves
into Muslims and Hindus.

During the reign of Mughal kings, especially that of Akbar, many Sanskrit classics were translated into Persian. Faizi is especially important because he either translated or assisted in the translation of several books from Sanskrit. Mahabharata, the most sacred book of the Hindus, was translated with the collective efforts of Naqeeb Khan, Mulla Badayuni, and Mulla Shirani. Faizi was assigned the task of refining the language. Faizi's other works include translations of Bhagvadgita, and folk epics like *Nal Damayanti*, and *Liilavati*. Shibli has mentioned that even *Atharva Veda*'s translation is ascribed to Faizi. Because the text was difficult, a Brahman named Bhaavan was asked to explain the meaning. This task was first assigned to Mulla Abdul Qadir Badayuni but it was later taken up by Faizi and then Ibrahim Sirhindi. The Persian version of Ramayana was completed by Badayuni in four years, and later Masiha Panipati rendered this classic into verse ([Shibli 1988: 61–2, 65–70](#)).

In other words, there was a new awakening, an atmosphere of open-mindedness concerning issues that impacted people's daily lives. Undoubtedly, this must be a great attraction for Ghalib. He felt affinity with Mughal poets, especially Bedil who had a towering stature among his contemporaries. We have already looked closely at the relationship between Ghalib and Bedil in [Chapter 6](#) of this book. Bedil's magnetic personality and the boldness of his free-thinking mind swayed Ghalib immensely. Bedil had deep understanding of Indian cultural traditions, which he had assimilated in his own way. During his travels and wanderings, he had maintained a lifelong association with Hindu fakirs, yogis, and saints. We

have already mentioned his deep knowledge of Hindu scriptures, philosophy, Vedanta, Mahabharata, and folk traditions. Bedil was greatly loved and adored by his Hindu disciples. He had the same kind of deep relationship with Bindraban Das Khushgo as Ghalib had with his Hindu disciple, Har Gopal Tafta.

As it has been mentioned before, there is a difference between Bedil's views about transcendental Sufism and Ghalib's temporal existential thinking. Ghalib gave the impression that he embraced Sufism in the same manner but in reality, as Sheikh Muhammad Ikram has said, Ghalib's Sufism was nothing more than a cultural mannerism which he could wear on his sleeve as a social icon as it was popular in his day. Mirza's self-description as a 'hidden saint' (*vali poshiida*) while being an 'open non-believer' (*kafir khula*) was more in tune with his freewheeling, open, paradoxical nature.

*dekhiyo Ghalib se gar uljha koi
hai vali poshiida aur kafir khula*

Be careful about picking
a bone with Ghalib.
He is a seer out of sight,
though a known kafir.

The roots of Ghalib's thinking lay in his temporal existentialism, and not in transcendentalism. Its fountainhead lay not in any form of ascetic spiritualism but in his ability to celebrate life and love and delve deep into the mystery of existence. Ghalib's independent frame of mind drew its strength from his ability to think on his feet. There is a circular process in which his dialectical inventiveness reinforces his sharp intellect and vice versa. The way he claims to be saintly, while at the same time taking liberty with the traditional concept of God, or the way he claims to be Adam's progeny and destined to commit sin, the way he blames God and holds Him responsible for creating the predicaments of desire and non-fulfilment, and even the poetic way in which he playfully constructs and deconstructs the opposites—it was all made possible by his intellectual ingenuity and dialectical bent of mind.

To quote Sheikh Muhammad Ikram, Hali looks upon Mirza's personality through what he called *nig-h-e paak-biin*, the eye of a devotee (n.d.: 402), and though he mentions Ghalib's libertinism, he ends up covering up things and finding excuses. Ikram is more candid in his comments on these

matters. But, as we shall see later, layered complexity of Ghalib's dialectical surreptitiousness eludes him too. Ikram has some praise for Mirza for understanding the importance of sharia but he adds, 'Mirza had no interest in orthodox religious preachers' intricate debates and unnecessary argumentations. In his letters he has penned highly dismissive comments about orthodox education' (n.d.: 320).

Ghalib, in a letter addressed to Mir Mehdi, advises Sarfaraaz Husain,

Miyan, what kind of a mess you have placed upon your son? What will he gain by reading theology and religious law? Allow him opportunity to get some knowledge of logic and philosophy, indigenous medicine, astronomy, history, that would really make him a man. Listen, after God comes Nabi (Prophet), and after Nabi it is Imam (Ali). This is the essence of religion. Say Ali Ali and stay happy. ([Ikram n.d.: 321](#))

Ghalib writes about his early education and love for freedom in one of the letters, 'After finishing the basic books, that was it. I left the ritualistic and rigid syllabi behind and breathed free. I got involved into carefree living, pursuing my tastes and indulging in the pleasures and joys of life. I was attracted to Persian language and my passion for poetry was inborn and curative' ([Ikram n.d.: 27](#)).

Zoe Ansari concedes Ghalib's lack of interest in orthodox religious matters. In those days, those who had a literary bent of mind chose to study Persian language. But for religious education, an interest in Arabic was required. Ghalib's interest clearly lay in Persian. Religious instruction had no attraction for him. Whatever knowledge he gained was the result of his own personal effort.

Sabke Hindi poets had formed a common, more liberal ground with Sufism, spreading the message of love, emphasizing a direct relationship with God, and respect for unity of mankind. After Sufism arrived in India, it gathered much flexibility within a short time, especially in its worldly views but at the same time it tended to be more inclusive and transcendental. We have already discussed Ghalib's dialectical bent of mind and his tendency for free thinking and openness in [Chapter 11](#). We know that Bedil's writing had a touch of the absorption of different strains of Sufism. In addition, he had an understanding of indigenous cultural traditions, folklore, the Zero Doctrine, and ancient Indian thought, so much so that even texts like Yoga Vashishtha were known to him. We have already presented evidence of this from Bedil's masnavis like Muhiit-e Azam and Irfan.

Sheikh Muhammad Ikram writes that in the epilogue of his Mehr-e Niimroz, Ghalib appended a summary of Hindu belief systems and indigenous traditions. In addition, we know from Ghalib's masnavi Chiraagh-e Dair (The Lamp of the Temple), which he wrote while in Benaras, that he had a deep understanding of Hindu faith and practises. Ikram also testifies that Ghalib regularly studied and always kept with himself, *Dabistaan-e Mazaahib*, a book on religions, including Indian faiths and practises. Ikram also says that Mirza had a deep affinity with a sacred book of the Parsis, which testifies to his catholicity and wide-ranging liberal interests (n.d.: 317). He adds that some of Mirza's best couplets, which showed his openness, were the result of his deep intuition and inner awareness than something written just for the sake of writing ([Ikram n.d.: 318](#)). For example:

*dair-o haram aaiina-e takraar-e tamanna
vaamaandagi-e shauq taraashe hai panaahein*

The temple and the mosque
are simply mirrors
reflecting the endless efforts of man;
nothing more than resting places
for the tired seeker.

*ba man miyavez ae pidar farzand-e Aazar ra nigar
har kas k shud sahib nazar diin-e buzurgaan khush nakard*

Do not get into a brawl with me, dear father.
Look at Aazar's son.
Whosoever gets enlightened
does not follow the path of elders.

*dilam dar ka'ba az tangi giraft aavaara-e khwaham
k ba man vus'at-e butkhaana-haaye hind o chiin goyad*

My heart is troubled
looking at the restricted routines
at my sacred places.
It longs for freedom.
Can someone familiarize me
with the openness of the idol houses
of India and China?

*aavaara-e ghurbat natavaan diid sanam raa
baashad k digar butkada saazand haram raa*

We cannot see the beloved
moving around
as a vagrant in destitution.
Why not create some space
in places that we hold sacred?

Hali, although a puritan, was a staunch devotee of Ghalib and he often mellowed his disagreements with his mentor. But there were times when even he could not restrain himself from expressing his uneasiness. The following ruba'i is an example:

*yaarab tu kujaayi k b ma zar nadehi
bedard khudaayi k b ma zar nadehi
ne ne tu n ghaayibi va ne berahmi
be maaya chuu maayi k b ma zar nadehi*

O God, where can I find you
to get some money from you?
How cruel of you!
Why not give me some money?
Maybe I am wrong.
You are neither here nor there.
Maybe you are also a pauper
and penniless like me.

In this ruba'i, Hali felt, 'Mirza's playfulness and indiscretion had crossed the limits of established norms of writing about matters of faith. *Darulifta* (the religious authority that could issue a decree or fatwa) would consider this a deliberate act of blasphemy. Such comments even in poetry are against the established tenor of religious criticism and better be ignored' ([Hali 1897: 264](#)). Sheikh Muhammad Ikram also felt that Mirza was not comfortable wearing the garb of Islamic beliefs, customs, and conventions. He does not qualify to be called a true believer ([Hali 1897: 201](#); [Ikram n.d.: 322](#)).

Ghalib has the answer:

*ramuuz-e diin nashanaasam durust v m'azuuram
nihaad-e man Ajami v tariiq-e man Arabi ast*

True, I am not completely at home
with the ways of the religion.
My helplessness!

My origin is Iranian (Ajami)
and my belief is Arabi.

Ikram adds:

Of course, there are some couplets about God that darulifta would consider sacrilegious or blasphemous.... Mirza happened to be a person of very liberal views in matters of religion.... It is clear from many couplets that he did not believe in punishment or rewards (*jannat o jahannum*). Whenever he talked about paradise, it was more to make fun and he used words that were satirical and often full of sarcasm.... Mirza's opinion in these matters was very different from other believers. ([Ikram n.d.: 318–22](#))

The above comments are quoted simply to show that his paradoxical bent of mind was fully reflected in his beliefs and general social behaviour. There can be no two opinions about this. For example, he states his basic belief in a flexible manner, as if two opposing statements had the same validity. When it came to religious matters, 'the garb did not fit' him at all. And he writes poetry that would be considered blasphemous by darulifta. Sheikh Muhammad Ikram frankly tells the truth but at the same he, too, is compelled to offer excuses. In fairness, excuses do not work. This is not a matter of belief versus non-belief. For Ghalib, kufr and iimaan are two sides of the same coin that conventional wisdom would not accept. In order to understand Ghalib, we need to keep in mind his innate nature, that is, his dialectical unconscious drive. Ikram alludes to what he calls rhetorical 'poetic style' that, in fact, is some kind of a 'poetic license'. It is about dialectical creativity and a paradoxical temperament. This may have to do with some arch imprint or the labyrinth of his unconscious, something difficult to decipher but Ghalib's whole life is beholden to this type of innate characteristic. We cannot put it aside by way of excuses and explanations, because this has a very deep relationship with cultural and psychological make-up of his psyche. Without this, we cannot have a complete Ghalib, a full understanding of his personality, which is like a puzzle, and therefore any conventional approach is hopelessly inadequate.

According to Khurshidul Islam, 'Ghalib's creative power and intensity is such that it cannot be measured by conventional standards, it can only be described as *sachcha kufr* (true non-belief)' ([Islam 1979: 7](#)). But he does not say what a *sachcha kufr* is. Is it dialectical paradox or something else?

Shamsur Rehman Faruqi writes, 'The kind of speculation which is the characteristic of Ghalib's poetry has absolutely no place in strict Islamic poetics' (1973: 290). There is a basic difference between a religious

doctrine and poetic tenor or creativity. Both occupy different places. A doctrine can be strict and rigid but poetics that is strict is unimaginable. The purpose of poetics is not to conform but to bring out the beautiful hidden meaning and play of creativity. Poetics is dynamic; it may evolve with time, while a doctrine is given, revealed, and ordained. Sanctity is not a precondition for poetry, while a religious doctrine is necessarily sanctimonious. Ikram at least makes a place for 'poetic license', which hints at the predicament.

Prigarina, while facing the difficulty to decipher underlying logic, does not offer excuses. She simply presents the puzzle in Ghalib's own words, quoting from one of his letters, 'Stricken by bad luck, an unfortunate resident of Delhi, Muslim by origin but a *kafir*, nonbeliever by his actions, a fire-worshipper, one who nobody understood, that wretched person was given the name Ghalib' (1997: 81).

The question whether Ghalib was Shia or Sufi shows once again the puzzle of his dialectical temperament. At one place he announces his Shia beliefs, and at another he declares himself a Sufi with an equal vigour. What is true, no one can tell. To Hatim Ali Mehr, he writes, 'Sahib, this creature is *isnaa-ashari* Shia. I write the number 12 (indicative of belief in 12 Imams) after each paragraph. You and I are servers of one master (Hazrat Ali)' ([Ghalib 1926, vol. 2: 505](#)).

Similarly, he declares himself a Sufi with equal zeal. 'I am a Sufi, a believer in *hama ost* (He is all or all is He!)', he wrote in a letter addressed to Sarfaraz Husain. These are not empty words. They are supported by the fact that he had actually performed *bai'at*, that is, sworn allegiance to the noted Sufi Maulana Nasiruddin Kale Sahib of Delhi, who was also revered by emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar. At this open contradiction, the distinguished Ghalib scholar Malik Ram exclaims in astonishment, 'Which Shia worth his salt will swear allegiance, i.e. perform *bai'at* at the hands of a non-Shia Sunni Sufi saint?' (1964: 312–17).

Different biographers provide different explanations and some of them might be valid. But these paradoxes are part and parcel of Ghalib's dialectical nature. For Mirza, life is a paradox and it is impossible to make full sense of everything. There are paradoxes, contradictions, and mysteries but this is all part of a continuum. At some level, these pieces fit together. These contradictions are a mark of Ghalib's dialectical personality. They make Ghalib who he really is. Any attempt to simplify puzzle would be

misleading. That would not be in keeping with Ghalib's true tenor. Unfortunately, this is what conventional criticism of Ghalib has been doing so far.

We should not forget that Ghalib is among the more complex poets of Sabke Hindi. In his highly creative dialectical world, everything seems multidimensional, topsy-turvy, and non-linear. One doctrine rides roughshod over another. Every letter escapes cancelling another. There is nothing that appears to be fully in its conventional place. The imagination itself is spinning, while it is dynamically decentred. Thus, the conventional criticism does not work here. Someone has used the term *sachcha kufr*, while another dismisses him from the Islamic belief system altogether. Someone takes the cover of Ibn-e Arabi, while others use words like Epicureanism and paganism. Some even call him a free mason. One could say something in support of each of these assertions. But none is a complete description of what Mirza is. No label sticks here. Ghalib's world of thought does not fit into any one scheme of things.

Waris Kirmani is right when he says:

If we closely look into the magical world of Mirza's thinking we see a different reality altogether. He is not what he seems to be. His reality denies what has been believed as a fact for thousands of years. He casts doubts on religious principles and points of view and rebels against the established norms. The world he creates is not the work of one feeling but, on the contrary, it is the sum and substance of various shadows that emerge from the depths of human consciousness; how many forms appear canceling and criss-crossing other forms. (1984: 90)

You can imagine what kind of inner fire and turbulence Ghalib had to conquer in order to free himself from all kinds of comfort zones to attain the freedom that he really cherished for displaying his dialectical imagination in his work that was also filled with colourful imagery.

daulat b ghalat nabuvad az sa'ii pashemaan sho
kaafir natavaani shud naachaar musalmaan sho

You cannot gain blessing by wrong means.
Do not bother yourself for nothing.
If you cannot have the audacity to be a kafir,
then be a Muslim at least.

Kolkata, Masnavi Baad-e Mukhalif, and the Spirit of Freedom

We know that Ghalib's family name was considered among the most sophisticated and established ancestries of Delhi. Although his pension was meagre, he was quite liberal in spending and his appearance was that of a rich man living in great style. The pension issue was complicated by the Loharu family. He was hopeful that it would be decided in his favour but it became more and more complicated with each passing day. Therefore, Ghalib decided to travel to Kolkata to make his appeal to the British authorities in person. He reached Kolkata in February 1828 and he stayed there for a year and a quarter, and returned to Delhi in November 1829. The scenes of modern ambience and technological progress that he saw in Kolkata stunned him. He was mystified by a whole new world of social progress and liberal thinking that had come into being. While commenting on this in his foreword to *Aaiin-e Akbari* 20 years later, he wrote that he had never seen before what his eyes saw. Stones were emitting fire; steam-powered boats were coming and going; instruments were creating sound as if untouched by hand; words were virtually flowing in the air as they delivered news from one place to another. Kolkata was a vibrant city with lots of well laid-out parks and graceful greenery. At night, the parks and vistas glittered in the light of gas-filled lamps. Mirza wrote that people with scientific knowledge had brightened the city without the traditional wicks or candles.

Ghalib remembers, with a tinge of sadness, the time that he spent in Kolkata. The memory was like a dagger planted straight into his heart. He longed for the greenery and the beauty of its idols and their tempting manners, while not forgetting the sweetness of its mangoes and the intoxication of its vintage wines.

Because of the feeling of complete liberation that it imparted and the vibrancy of the day-to-day life, Kolkata for him was no less than a piece of paradise. He was not lucky in getting a resolution of the pension issue in his favour for which he had undertaken the whole journey but in the literary arena, and in terms of the outcome of his stirring controversies, the results were miraculous. His Persian poetry, which he had lately started writing, was regularly published in a local newspaper named *Aaiina-e Sikandari*. The better part of the nuskha Gule-Ra'na, was completed in Kolkata. He wrote, 'Friends arranged the assemblies and I was gracefully pressed to present my work. The honor they conferred on me was humbling. I used to sit there with my gaze down' (translation by Tanveer Ahmed Alvi).

About one of the poetical symposiums organized by Madrasa-e Aaliya, Ghalib mentioned, 'Because people are self-conscious and egoistic, some of them felt a sharp pang of jealousy with the effulgence of the appreciation that I received and they raised frivolous objections against two of my couplets' ([Ghalib in Oode-Hindi n.d.: 176](#)). In support of their contention, the opponents mentioned the name of Qateel who was like a revered teacher to them. On hearing Qateel's name, whom he considered as a poet of no consequence, Ghalib puffed up and this further inflamed the situation. The controversy went on for months in the local press. The mediators pressed for reconciliation. Ghalib wrote a qat'a (short poem) at that time which is included in his Persian Kulliyaat (complete works) and, according to experts, is quite a literary testament. The poem is a bold assertion of his free spirit and independent thinking. While thrashing his opponents, he showed great courage of conviction and ruthlessly exposed the mediocre poetic talent of his detractors:

I am not one among those people
who would compromise their beliefs
under pressure from others.
Also I do not think it is my duty
to enlighten others on matters of faith
and the nature of God.

After this, he expounds his free way of thinking, his matchless command over language, and excellence in poetry:

I am not among those who would readily follow
and get instruction from anyone who claims to be famous.
I am also not among those who would lose their gracefulness
for the sake of rewards of the paradise.
And do not count me among those who wear old worn-out clothes
simply to appear austere and feel proud of it.
If I act gracefully and with self-respect,
the foundation of the mansion of love would be strengthened.
But it is not possible for me to sing the praises of Lala Surdas
for his mediocre poetry.

The reference to 'Lala Surdas' was a direct hit at the late Qateel Faridabadi, a noted Persian poet, who had a following in Kolkata. In this composition, Ghalib asserted his freedom of opinion and independence of thought but his demeanour was stylistically quite aggressive. This further aggravated the situation and the opposition gathered momentum. The

incident underscores Ghalib's free spirit and his great self-confidence. According to Prigarina, 'In this poem we see the emergence of a new man; of a man who asserts his freedom of expression and the freedom of his basic beliefs and it is the basis of authentic poetry and the confidence that the truth would eventually prevail. In this dispute we see clear evidence of Ghalib's deep commitment to his personal convictions' (1997: 204).

Ghalib did not want his freedom in literary matters to be misunderstood. When this incident was blown out of proportion, then, on the advice of some of his friends he wrote a masnavi later called Baad-e Mukhalif (Storm of Opposition) and tried to resolve the misunderstanding. This masnavi, when first written, was referred to as Ashti Naama (A Testament of Reconciliation). In several couplets, Ghalib praised Qateel, while reaffirming his own principles and freethinking. But while he admired Bedil, he did not miss the chance to hit at Qateel because of his dialectical temperament. In spite of his observing oriental etiquette and saying something good about Qateel, he soon turned satirical. While eulogizing Bedil, he attacked Qateel in no uncertain terms. This aggravated the situation, especially among people who were admirers of Qateel and with whom he wanted to make peace. Let us look at the following verse:

Although Bedil did not come from Iran, he was not ignorant like Qateel.

He has said it himself and he was not wrong in this.

Whatever he said directly or indirectly was always true.

A person like me, who has trodden this path²

what would he care about the likes of Qateel and Waqif?

This masnavi is symbolic of Ghalib's free ways of thinking and his dialectical bent of mind. Ghalib is always reluctant to compromise with difficult circumstances. He accepts reality at his own terms, though he might suffer in the process. Therefore, the purpose for which the masnavi was written was defeated. The reasons were obvious. Ghalib was not in an enviable position at that time. He and his friends wanted a compromise. That is why he starts on a friendly note in his masnavi but later on the intensity of his feelings and dialectical sensibility makes him rise above personal considerations, unwilling to compromise on principles. Waris Kirmani is right when he says, 'On such occasions Ghalib's real personality (in other words dialectical and paradoxical) is bared for us to see. His humility and abasement turns into anger and indignation, and like a roaring river sweeps through every thing that hampers his way' (1984: 49–50).

Mirza starts with an effort to please Qateel's followers but his exaggerated praise soon turns into irony which, figuratively, reflects negatively on the one who is praised. He does not want to defend those Indians who wrote in Persian but he is not afraid to bring forward Bedil who too was an Indian and Ghalib's mentor and guiding light. In a gush of poetry, he makes the contradictory points look true, while maintaining his freedom and uprightness. Qazi Abdul Wadud has cast a doubt on Ghalib's intent because after returning from Kolkata, he revised the masnavi and made further changes that showed a side of his personality that simply wanted to declare victory (Wadud 1948: 45). But Waris Kirmani thinks otherwise.

Masnavi Baad-e Mukhaalif, looking at the original manuscript and the later revised one, is by no means a document of reconciliation. It embodies deep currents of sarcasm. Ghalib's denial and an attempt to blame self is nothing more than traditional Eastern good manners. There should be no difficulty in understanding the hidden artistry (meaning dialectical quality) of overflowing praise with sharp tinge of satire and sarcasm. The whole masnavi is a testament of Ghalib's intense and fiery temperament where his creativity is in full surge. (1984: 54)

In Ghalib's temperament, while, on one side, we find deep love, compassion, and open-mindedness, on the other, there is a mix of a great sense of self-confidence and an intense desire not to compromise on principles. From a dialectical viewpoint, these appear to be the two sides of the same coin. There is clear evidence in his poetry that he had great regard for his contemporaries. For some of them, his admiration was boundless. Nonetheless, if this conflicted with his convictions or his sense of freedom, nothing would stop him from intense disapproval or ruthless condemnation. Take the case of Hazein, a master poet. Ghalib wrote to his favourite disciple, Har Gopal Tafta, criticizing the matl'a, the first couplet of one of his famous ghazals, 'One *hunooz* in this matl'a is redundant. Don't follow it. This is wrong, absolutely wrong, reprehensible. Who will follow it? Hazein was after all a human being. Even if it were the word of Gabriel, it can never be quoted as a *sanad* (standard authority). Do not follow it' ([Ghalib 1926, vol. 3: 880](#)).

In another letter, he tells Har Gopal Tafta, 'Please do not consider true and right whatever the elders wrote. There were fools in the olden days too' ([Hali 1897: 78](#)). This shows his abhorrence towards the commonly accepted wisdom and an expression of his dialectical nature. 'Listen Miyan, my countrymen, in other words those Indian people who want to show off their

command of Persian language, they guess and create their own vocabulary. Like that dumb grass-eating owl, Abdul Waas'e Haansavi issues a dictat that the term *naamuraad* is wrong. And this bitch of an owl named Qateel makes many such stupid mistakes' ([Ghalib 1926, vol. 3: 892](#)).

Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar and Poet Laureate

Ghalib was not so lucky in matters relating to his relationship with the court and the desire to be nominated as a Poet Laureate. He suffered many setbacks in his life. Emperor Akbar Shah Sani (Zafar's father) had selected his younger son Prince Salim to be his successor. Thinking that Prince Salim would be the next ruler, Ghalib wrote an elaborate and forceful qasida in his honour. But bad luck struck. When Akbar Shah Sani passed away in 1837, it became obvious that the British did not approve of the selection of Prince Salim to be the next emperor. They did not wait even for the sun to rise and announced at three o'clock in the morning that Bahadur Shah Zafar would wear the crown. Zafar had an old association with Zauq and, therefore, it was obvious that Zauq would get the nomination to be the next Poet Laureate. Not able to hide his frustration, Ghalib composed a ghazal in the rhyming scheme attributable to the master poet Naziri. As you read the essence that follows, you can sense his sadness with the grotesque turn of events ([Hali 1897: 242–8](#)).

In the limitless desert of life,
where even Khizr's blessing would be useless,
I crawl rubbing my chest on the ground.
My feet are lifeless, with no blood circulation.
The wind itself has turned against me.
All is dark and I cannot see anything
in the dark of the night.
Suffering is attacking people's homes.
The kotwal is resting in his dwelling
while the king is restfully sleeping in his palace.
Stormy waves are rising.
The anchor has broken and the boat is rocking.
The saviour is nowhere to be seen.
I have no reservation in asking for help
but who is there to help?
I am like a beggar helplessly leaning
next to the palace wall.
Expecting that the king would take note is futile.

Windows and doors are open
but there is a python spread out at the foot of the door.

Prigarina writes that while Ghalib tries to find words of protest, in another piece he ends up with such imagery that astonishes the reader. She points to a parallel in Shiva's *tandav* dance (the dance of destruction and recreation).

The source of this imagery is clearly India's cultural landscape, its beliefs and mythic traditions, customs and conventions, and viewpoints. Can we imagine that in the 19th century Persian ghazal, poets would use the imagery of Shiva's dance, who is destroying the whole creation with his multiple hands and then recreates it too? In the following ghazal there is no reference to India but the imagery of dance is all around it. (1997: 239–40)

chuun aks-e pul b sail b zauq-e bala be raqs
jaara nigaah daar va ham az khud juda be raqs

Like the reflection of the bridge
in the floodwaters,
dance with great abandon.
Keep your feet firmly on the ground
and while forgetting yourself—
just dance and let go!

zauqe st justajoo ch zani dam z qa't-e raah
raftaar gum kun o b sadaay-e dra be raqs

If you have the motivation,
then why do you talk
of ending your struggle.
Forget the speed and dance
listening to the beat of 'dra'
and let go!.

The graph of Ghalib's stormy relationship with the court is sad as well as comical. Ghalib got into the royal employment in 1850 and received the robe of honour, *khill'at*, and the high-sounding title of *Najm ud Daula Dabiir ul Mulk Nizaam Jung*. He was asked to write the history of Timur's royal dynasty in Mehr-e Neem Roz for a meagre 50 rupees per month, and that too to be paid in lump sum in 6 months. He had to wait several more years to become the Poet Laureate. That dampened his enthusiasm quite a bit for a seat in the court. All this time, his relationship with emperor Zafar passed through many ups and downs. The following ghazal, in which you

can readily mark his dialectical artistry, was written during these rough times.

*daayem para hua tere dar par nahien huun main
khaak aisi zindagi p k patthar nahien huun main*

You will not find me
lying on your doorsteps.
My life may be shameful
but I am not a stone.

*kyun gardish-e mudaam se ghabra n jaaye dil
insaan huun payaala o saghar nahien huun main*

Why should not I get upset
by the constantly changing
nature of things?
I am a human being,
not a goblet or a decanter.

*yaarab zamaana mujhko mitaata hai kis liye
lauh-e jahaan p harf-e mukarrar nahien huun main*

O God, why do people
want to wipe me off?
I am not like a letter written
on the world slate
twice as a mistake.

*had chaahiye saza mein uquubat ke vaaste
aakhir gunaahgaar huun kaafir nahien huun main*

There ought to be a limit
to the harshness
of my punishment.
I am a sinner
but not an infidel.

*karte ho mujh ko man'-e qadam bos kis liye
kya aasmaan ke bhi baraabar nahien huun main*

Why do you stop me
from kissing your feet?
Why do you think

I am not even equal to heaven?

Ghalib's Persian Divan was published in 1845 that contained a ghazal which was a direct hit at Zauq. This verse is a fine example of dialectics that favours the proponent. This creative skillfulness was beyond Zauq's comprehension or anyone else's. Here is a summary:

In the king's company, you loudly proclaim
that you do not have an equal in the art of recitation.
You may be right.
We cannot compare the sound of a drum
with the fineness of the sound of *chung*.
What is wrong if my Urdu Divan is slim?
Or it is just a pale leaf of my whole garden of meaning?
If I have kept it short and less colourful,
it is intentional since I wanted the people to see
my Persian poetry that in terms of the depth of meaning
is no less than the great works of art.

Ghalib takes the fight even to a higher level.

You and me?
The norms of enmity dictate some parity
between the two contestants.
This is missing here.
You are not even capable of singing that song
that I can sing on my chung.
In the end, I would only say
that the quality that you think is hallmark
of your speech seems simply worthless and
hollow to me.

Because of his strong likes and dislikes and unconventional attitude, Ghalib had a tendency to create problems where none existed. There was already a tension in his relationship with Zauq. Why aggravate it? In 1852, while he was in the emperor's employment, he read a *sehra* (a conventional poem of greetings to the groom and the family) at the wedding of Prince Jawan Bakht and, in it while using his typical dialectical style, threw a challenge to Zauq.

*ham sukan fahm hain Ghalib ke tarafdaar nahien
dekhen is sehre se kah de koi barh kar sehra*

We are true and objective connoisseurs of great poetry
and we are not Ghalib's partisans.
But let us see who could say a better *sehra* than this one?

As expected, it created a big controversy. The royal tutor and court poet had been openly attacked. Zauq felt humiliated. In the end, Ghalib had to repeat the act of Baad-e Mukhalif from Kolkata, and he wrote a short poem showing his humility, but that too was not devoid of rhetorical scorn and ridicule:

*maqt'e mein aa pari hai sukhan gustaraana baat
maqsud is se qat'e-e mohabbat nahien mujhe
ruuye sukhan kisi ki taraf ho to ruu siyaah
sauda nahien junuun nahien vahshat nahien mujhe
qismat buri sahi p tabii'at buri nahien
hai shukr ki jagah k shikaayat nahien mujhe*

In the maqt'a
I might have said something spontaneously
that showed my poetic haughtiness
but my objective was not to hurt
any loving relationship.

Even in this apology, one could sense traces of his dialectical nature. White or black, honour or dishonour, truth or untruth, are all parts of one paradoxical reality. Zauq passed away after two years in 1854. By then, the tension had been reduced. But even after the long wait, becoming a Poet Laureate did not provide much happiness. Ghalib had lost his old fervour. His letters and his verse show that whatever he received later was just a matter of chance.

Dilli College Professorship, the Tragedy of Imprisonment, and Masnavi Abr-e Guhar Baar

Hali writes that in 1840, after Dilli College had gone through an academic reorganisation, a decision was made to appoint a Persian professor at a monthly salary of one hundred rupees. Three names were suggested for the job—Mirza Ghalib, Momin Khan Momin, and Imam Bakhsh Sehbai. Mirza was the first to be called in for an interview.

Mirza reached the place riding on his palanquin where the Secretary of Delhi Administration, who was to interview him, was located. The latter was informed of his arrival. Mirza was quickly called in but he stood there waiting for the Secretary to come and to formally receive him. Some time passed. The Secretary finally came out and told Mirza that he would be formally welcomed when he comes to the Durbar as a state guest, but 'today you are here for an interview for a job'. Mirza told him that he had decided to take up the government job expecting that it would add to his dignity and honour

but not at the cost of the honour and position he already had. The Secretary replied that he was bound by the protocol and rules. Mirza said that in that case he should be spared from consideration for the job and saying good bye he quickly beat a retreat. ([Hali 1897: 26–7](#))

The fact is that, at that time, Ghalib was facing terrible financial difficulties and his personal debt had amounted to thousands of rupees. The pension issue, even after visiting Kolkata, was not resolved due to the intrigues of Nawab Ahmad Baksh Khan and his son Nawab Shamsuddin Khan, as Ghalib was friends with his stepbrothers. Although Mirza considered himself a part of the city's nobility and aristocracy, his pension never exceeded 'sixty-two rupees and eight annas' ([Ikram n.d.: 97](#)). The resolution to financial issues was not on the horizon. College professorship at a salary of 100 rupees could have eased the financial problems but Mirza was not ready to compromise his dignity and high principles. This decision was not easy but it followed the script of his dialectical style. He was out of money. He was getting his wine on credit. Yet, he was keen on keeping up the appearance of the city's top gentry and aristocracy. This cavalier attitude was an extension of his free spirit that made him sacrifice a sustained source of livelihood.

Misfortunes tend to pile up. Mirza ran out of his luck again in 1841, when he was arrested for running a gambling operation at his house. He was fined 100 rupees. This was the time when his fame was at a new peak. The first edition of the Urdu Divan was published the same year. In 1842, he started receiving commendation from the governor general. Ghalib's complete works in Persian were published in 1845. In both Persian and Urdu poetry and prose, now there was no one who was Mirza's equal. When his reputation as a literary figure was on the fast track, he was once again arrested in 1847 on a gambling charge but this time neither the word of respectable citizens nor the recommendation of the emperor worked to his advantage. A criminal case was filed, and he was fined 200 rupees together with 6 months of imprisonment with hard labour. This was the most difficult and challenging time for Mirza, as we can see from the following lines:

*baadah b vaam khurda v zar b qimaar baakhta
va k z har ch naa-saza-ast ham b saza n karda em*

I drank my wine on credit
and lost money in gambling.
It is really sad that I could not do well

what I should not have done at all. ([Hali 1897: 224](#))

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad writes that since Hali was Mirza's close friend, he did not delve into this affair in great depth and tried to cover it up. The fact is that Mirza's house had become a gambling den. Some jewellers from Chandni Chowk were his regular customers. Mirza himself was addicted to *chausar*. There was no problem as long as Ghalib's friend and admirer Mirza Khani was the city kotwal (police chief). But when Faizul Hassan Khan, who was quite strict in these matters, was appointed the kotwal, circumstances changed. One day there was a raid. Most gamblers escaped but Mirza was arrested. ([Narang 1961: 23-45](#)) In this hour of great personal tragedy, most of Mirza's friends turned their backs. Maulana Azad writes:

It was quite obvious after the arrest that he would not get the bail. All those who were near and dear turned their gaze elsewhere. In this whole episode, the attitude of the Loharu family, his notable jagirdar landowning in-laws was most regrettable. No member from this family visited Mirza. When a newspaper from Agra published a story about Mirza being a relative of Loharu nobility, they took no time in issuing a denial that he was not related to the Loharu family. It was just a distant acquaintance. ([Azad 1959: 283](#); [Ikram n.d.: 108](#))

Of all the friends, poet Shefta stood apart in helping Mirza during this difficult time. He said, 'My admiration for Mirza was not founded on his being a religious or pious person but because of his intellectual prowess and poetic excellence. Gambling charge is new but wine addiction was always known. So just because of this arrest, why should there be any diminishing of my respect for him? His artistic prowess and creativity had not changed' ([Azad 1959: 283](#); [Hali 1897: 28](#)).

Mirza wrote a letter to Tafazzul Husain Khan that is a testament of courage of conviction and defiance in the face of adversity.

I have heard that compassionate rulers tried to influence the magistrate and told him about my helplessness as well as my love of freedom. So much so that on his own, the magistrate sent a report for my release. Although I consider this God's doing and I can't have a fight with him, I gladly accept what has happened to me already and what could happen in future. To hope is not against any faith. It is my wish that I should no longer live in this world and, if I live, it should not be in India. There is Rome, there is Egypt, there is Iran and Baghdad. Besides these places, there is Kaba for the free souls like me and then there is God Almighty who takes care of all. I don't know when the time will come when I will get release from this miserable life, which is worse than this prison. And before thinking of the place where I would like to go, I should go into the desert. Whatever there is, and whatever I have gone through, I wished it all. ([Hali 1897: 27-8](#))

Ghalib's reputation took a hit while he was in prison. Once he was a free man, Miyan Kale Sahib not only gave him shelter but arranged for Mirza's

access to Bahadur Shah Zafar's court. Miyan was king's spiritual mentor, and he used all his influence to repair the damage that was done to the poet's standing in the community. Shortly thereafter, Ghalib was assigned the work by the court relating to the writing of Mughal history, about which we have hinted before.

Around this time, Ghalib started work on his masnavi *Abr-e Guhar Baar*, which is considered to be one of his best. Many experts consider that the parts on heartfelt prayers and benediction are the best. The section given by Hali, perhaps, is the choicest. At the beginning, the masnavi talks about traditions of various religions. Ghalib admits that different faiths present different ways of knowing existence. Even within the same faith, there could be variations in how the reality is known. Hali says that Mirza had studied *Dabistaan-e Mazaahib*, a book on faiths, so thoroughly that it was fully ingrained in his thought processes. According to Prigarina, in a country like India where different religions and faiths present a wide spectrum of colours and the depth and breadth of viewpoints, Ghalib's writing makes him a true philosopher and a freethinking pluralist, who admits to finding a path that would appeal to people with diverse backgrounds. In the summary that follows, we can easily find traces of Bedil's influence.

If a sculptor, in his inebriated state, creates an idol out of rough stone and sees image of God in stone, then there are so many who believe that it is God. Some worship the Sun with their eyes closed and are thrilled by their inner happiness. They see the face of their beloved in the Sun. Wherever you look, people are searching Him in the mountains and deserts. People are busy finding God with the help of rites, ceremonies, and conventions of their own faiths. There is no dearth of worshippers but He is one and the only one. In whichever direction you look, you see Him. The one you see in your reflection is also Him ([Hali 1897: 303–4](#)).

Ghalib admits his addiction and confesses his sin, yet at the same time, he writes a qasida praising wine drinking. He also prays to God that he be forgiven for his minor indiscretion, for having tasted some in his life of penury, to overcome his suffering and grief. Maybe it should not be that big a sin compared to the drunkenness and sinfulness of kings like Jamshed, Behram, and Pervez. If there is punishment for this sin, then they are the much bigger sinners and culprits.

While confessing his sins, Ghalib does not forget to mock the make-believe concept of paradise. In one moment, a sinner and a wrongdoer, in another, there is the thought of a houri. But he shows his preference for the sinful pleasures of the earthly existence. He writes:

There will not be any taverns,
nor will there be the vision of the beloved.
When we shall remember the frustrations of love,
helplessness, and struggles here on the earth,
then paradise will lose its appeal.
There will be wine in the cup
but there will neither be beauty of the morning
nor free roaming at night and other indiscretions.
The drink houses of the paradise will be neat
and well-stocked but with no place in it
for the lack of discernment and judgment of the drunkards.
The rain clouds would not arrive
and there will be no feeling of rapture in the dark.
If there is no autumn, how will there be any spring?
How can we think of a houri
when we are not love-stricken
and have no burning desire for her?
When there is no parting,
where is the fun of longing and meeting?
When there is no hole in the wall of the garden of paradise,
where is the pleasure of peeping through it?
All will be so perfect, so monotonous and boring. ([Hali 1897: 307–8](#))

Hali writes that we cannot make any good guesses about a poet's beliefs from his verse. Mirza had no expectations either. In one Urdu couplet, he says:

I know the reality of paradise
but it keeps people pleased.

He shares similar thoughts in many places. In a Persian rub' ai, he says:

The ascetics roam in the garden of paradise freely
and filled with greed they pluck the fruit
from different branches—
it reminds one of a vast grassland where
all kinds of animals are roaming and grazing. ([Hali 1897: 259–67](#))

Ghalib's focus is more down to earth. Instead of houris and bounties, he wants fulfilment of human needs and heartfelt aspirations. This kind of temporal existentialism and emphasis on human life and man's aspirations is typical of Ghalib. After going through all the suffering of imprisonment, Ghalib did not lose heart. The most difficult turn of events were not enough to break his passion to create poetic work that decries oppression, celebrates human endeavour, and gives hope for zest and joy of life.

Masnavi Abr-e Guhar Baar is the best but also the longest (928 verses). Ghalib wanted to write something on the lines of Firdausi's *Shahnameh* but unfortunately he was not able to finish it. He gave different reasons why he could not complete it but at one place he is quite candid—'in religious matters my pen falters'. Sheikh Muhammad Ikram writes, 'This long masnavi was written by Mirza in a stop and go manner' (n.d.: 103). Once Ghalib started to write a marsiya, he would leave it unfinished after a few lines. He was not inspired by the description of historical events. While writing the history of Timur dynasty, Hakim Ahsanullah Khan would note down historical facts for him and he would transpose them into Persian prose. This lack of interest can be attributed to the fact that in describing historical events, there was no scope for flights of fancy and inventive philosophical twists and turns that were an essential part of his creative genius. He was quite frank in his foreword, and he wrote that the historical facts were so well known that there was hardly any scope for saying something original and new. But when it came to flights of fancy, Ghalib was at his best and his creative signature was discerned where his mind was absolutely free. According to Waris Kirmani, 'No poet has used the *munajaat* part of the masnavi so creatively to expose the conventional ethical order as Ghalib did. This is because in the court of God it is not the sinful but the arbiter who turns out to be the real accused and Ghalib emerges as an unequivocal spokesman of humankind.' (1984: 48)

Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and Ghalib's Verse Foreword *Taqriiz-e Aaiin-e Akbari*

Ghalib wrote 11 masnavis of which 4 became famous. These are Chiraagh-e Dair, Baad-e Mukhaalif, Taqriiz-e Aaiin-e Akbari, and Abr-e Guhar Baar. We shall talk about Chiraagh-e Dair later but now we just want to focus on Ghalib's relationship with Sir Syed Ahmad Khan and the *Taqriiz* (Foreword).

Sir Syed, who occupied the office of a magistrate in Moradabad, had made special efforts to prepare a new edition of Abul Fazl's classic book *Aaiin-e Akbari*, and he approached Ghalib for a *taqriiz*. Hali gives us the background:

Sir Syed Ahmad Khan took great pains to prepare a revised and corrected edition of *Aaiin-e Akbari* and he asked several distinguished writers of Delhi to write some introductory remarks. Mirza was requested to write a foreword. He wrote a *taqriiz* in the form of masnavi that we can find in his complete works. Although he held Sir Syed in high esteem and he had close relations with the family, he did not agree with the tenets that were written in the book. He thought these were out of tune with the spirit of times. Past is past, old order is gone, it is dead and of no use. Sir Syed should have used his talent on the issues of present which were more pressing. Therefore, he felt that bringing out a revised edition of *Aaiin-e Akbari* was a useless endeavour. Whether he was right or wrong, he did not hide his true feelings in the foreword that he wrote. ([Hali 1897: 76](#))

As we have pointed out before, during his trip to Kolkata, Ghalib had been introduced to an entirely new world. He had become a votary of open-mindedness, modernization, and new thinking. Therefore, when he wrote about it, his objective was to bury the dead '*murdah parvardan mubaarak kaar niist*' (to drag the dead is not good). He did not criticize Sir Syed's effort as much as he was critical of the manuscript. Though it was a great work of the past, he thought that it had lost its relevance. Prigarina explains:

Ghalib was respectful of every person's freedom to choose. Truly he was a man who belonged to the new age. His poetic greatness matched his vision to see the future ... the prophetic manner in which Ghalib ended his *taqriiz* was not liked by Sir Syed. Therefore, his masnavi was not included in the published edition ... nevertheless Ghalib could not have found better words to describe Sir Syed's contribution later on for promoting modernization and working for the pursuit of modern learning among the Indian Muslims. (1997: 283)

At the start of the nineteenth century, there were two great personalities who led the movement for modernization and progress—one was Raja Ram Mohan Roy in Bengal and the second was Master Ram Chander of Dilli College. In Delhi and its surrounding areas, the trend towards new thinking started only after the rebellion of 1857. Among the Muslims, the most important historical and transformational role was played by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan for which he is rightfully remembered. In this context, one must acknowledge and appreciate Ghalib's foresight as well. He was aware that the tide of unfolding history was taking the country in a new direction. Though at that time, Sir Syed might not have liked his words and did not include them, Ghalib in fact proved to be the mentor, as he was ahead of others in predicting a new order that included modernity and scientific progress.

Taqriiz-e Aaiin-e Akbari is a unique product of Ghalib's dialectical talent. Although he lost Sir Syed's goodwill, he showed commitment to freedom of spirit and enlightenment as well as his dialectical principles. Their relations were strained for many years. The manner in which they eased is

itself an interesting story. During 1860, Ghalib visited Rampur at the invitation of Nawab Yusuf Ali Khan, the ruler of Rampur. On his return trip, he had to pass through Moradabad where Sir Syed was posted as a collector. Although there was still some bitterness left in their relationship, Sir Syed acted as a gracious host and he received Mirza at the outpost of the town and brought him to the comfort of his bungalow. A relaxed Mirza took out his bottle of wine, wrapped in an old newspaper, and placed it on the central table. After a while, when the evening approached, he noticed that the bottle had disappeared. He got worried and asked his host, 'What happened to my bottle which I had left here?' Sir Syed took Mirza to a small room where the bottle was safely stored, away from the glare of ascetic visitors. Mirza picked up the bottle, looked at it suspiciously. While naughtily smiling, he told Sir Syed, 'I sense something here. Tell me who took a sip?' Sir Syed smiled but remained silent. Ghalib recited Hafiz's couplet:

*vaa'ezaan kiin jalva bar mehraab-o mimbar mikunand
chuun b khilvat mi ravand aan kaar-e diigar mikunand*

Religious preachers
when they adorn the pulpit
say lofty things.
But in the privacy of their quarters,
they do things differently.

The tension that had prevailed between the two came to an end. Ghalib laughed and embraced Sir Syed. Maulana Azad writes that Sir Syed had a hand in the restoration of Mirza's pension, which the British had stopped. There was an allegation that Ghalib had attended the court during the mutiny of 1857. Ghalib had presented a coronation couplet for which he was charged by the British. It can be guessed that after this meeting, Sir Syed might have moved the authorities and helped in the restoration of the pension and Mirza's place in the British durbar (Al-Hilal, 17 June 1914 in [Ikram n.d.: 147](#)).

Masnavi Chiraagh-e Dair: India's Kaba

Ghalib broke his journey in Benares while he was travelling to Kolkata. He admired the ancient city's ambience, the overflowing sacred Ganges, rows

upon rows of Hindu temples and hordes of saints and yogis, and the city's vibrant and colourful daily life. He shared his feelings in a letter that he wrote from Benares.

Due to the utter delight of this magical place, my heart was freed from the travails of the long trip. The sound of a conch shell that weaves its sound through these idol houses is making my heart to dance with joy. I got so absorbed in this that in my careless abandon I turned the candle off of the memory of my place and my home. If I were not stuck with this wretched pension case, I would have certainly said goodbye to my faith and religion, broken my rosary, worn the sacred thread around my body, and in this very moment I would have settled on the banks of the Ganges to wash the ash of existence from my body. ([Nama Haye Farsi Ghalib, Karachi 1999](#))

The imprint that the beauty and the cultural climate of Benares left on Ghalib's consciousness stayed with him all his life. He wrote in a letter to Daad Khan Saiyyaah, 'What can I say about Benares? Where can you find a city like that? I went there at the end of my youth. If I were young then, I would have stayed there my whole life' ([Ghalib 1926, vol. 3: 940](#)).

ibaadat khaana-e naaquusiyaan ast
hamaana Ka'ba-e Hindostaan ast

Benares is a worship place of conch blowers.
Without any reservation,
this can be called 'India's Kaba'.

Ghalib captured the memory of his stay in Benares in his most beautiful and famous masnavi named Chiraagh-e Dair. According to Prigarina, the masnavi's title points, on one side, to the spiritual significance of the city of Benares as a sacred city of the Hindus and, on the other, the title demonstrates metaphorically that Benares is the *chiraagh* (light) of the temple, which is India by another name ([Prigarina 1997: 80](#)). She writes:

The poet looks upon everything connected with Benares as symbolic of the traditions of ancient India. The rose petals enhance the beauty of the threads worn by the Brahmins and the sky itself, like the forehead of a believer, shines in twilight colours. But Benares, according to Ghalib, is not only revered by the Hindus. Just as Kaba is sacred to all Muslims, Benares is sacred to all Indians whether they worship Allah, or the Adi Granth, or they follow Buddha, or they are fire-worshippers, or they are Christians who go to their churches to worship while listening to the sound of ringing bells. ([Prigarina 1997: 184](#))

Ghalib is bewitched by the beautiful women of Benares. Although they are like enchanting idols, they worship the idols in the temple as required by their religion. How difficult it would be for a Brahmin to worship idols of stone, when their attention is fully grabbed by the living idols.

With air just as life reinvigorating as the one in the paradise, this enchanting city is located on the banks of Ganges. A bath here not only fulfills all one could wish for, it washes away all the sins as well. In order to gain freedom from the unending cycles of life and death, old men with their frail bodies bathe in the river while young bewitching women, in their colourful saris, rock and shake with water, and then they walk with such grace on the river banks so that their wet saris sticking to their well-proportioned bodies, make them look like heavenly flames.

*magar goyi banaaras shaahide hast
z gangash sub-ho shaam aaiina dar dast
b gangash aks ta partav figan shud
Benaras khud naziir-e khveshtan shud*

‘It appears that Benares is an intoxicated beauty, which is busy, morning until evening, watching her own reflection in the mirror that he carries around in her hand. What can we say about the loveliness of Benares that is matchless?’ ([Prigarina 1997: 188–90](#))

Ghalib often uses the metaphor of a spark to denote anguish and suffering. [Abdul Ghani \(1982: 90\)](#) feels that he borrowed the phrase *sharaar navishtan* (writing sparks) from Bedil’s *sharaar kaashtan* (sowing sparks). The masnavi in the opening lines starts with the dynamic image of *sharar* (spark), and it also closes on the image of spark denoting the longing and restlessness of the heart.

Spark has to do with fire which is used in all sacraments and rituals in Benares. In any case, while on the one side, a spark is symbolic of existence and the dance of life, on the other, it is a token of the light of hope and boundless freedom.

*nafas baa suur damsaaz ast imroz
khamoshi mahshar-e raaz ast imroz
rag-e sangam sharaare mi naviisam
kaf-e khakam ghubaare mi naviisam*

My inner self is in tune
with the joy of conch shells.
The silence speaks of the indescribable
mystery of existence.
I am the particle in the stone
that produces dance of sparks.
I am handful of dust
raising the cloud of dust.

The closing couplet reads as follows:

sharar aasa fana aamaada barkhez
be-afshaan daaman-o aazaada barkhez

Get up,
rise like a whirling spark
and dance heartily.
Forget the shackles,
be free and celebrate
freedom of life.

Keeping in view Ghalib's creative inventiveness, we can say that the spark of light is a metaphor that he uses for his love of freedom and dynamism, and this peerless masnavi properly ends on this dynamic note.

Wit and Humour, and Freedom of Mind

As we shall later see, Ghalib's dialectical temperament has a two-way detente with his wit and humour and they both enrich each other; in fact, it is a lens through which he projects different shades of his psyche and the way he unravels reality. Let the subject be travails of existence, complexities of religious conventions, experiences of love and beauty, joys of union or suffering of separation, pleasures of paradise, rivers of fire in hell, relations with friends and family, we cannot escape seeing Ghalib use a dialectical lens. In every situation, he attempts to find a lighter side. In a typical interaction, he seems to throw a furtive smile at the other person, says what he has to say, and then he moves on. He displays playfulness in his attitude that is missing in Bedil and other contemporaries. There is satire but no bitterness, there is compassion but no pettiness, there is praise for beauty but no lasciviousness—these are some special attributes of his personality. Hali called him *haivaan-e zareef* (laughing wise being). He does not get into counting pennies, losses and gains, and other mundane things. Most often, he shows himself as an objective observer of reality. There is no logic that can prove God's existence, and there is no logic that can prove His non-existence. So it is best to accept the reality, absurd as it is. The world is a play in progress in which there are paradoxical scenes or situations that are unresolvable. In the Eastern wisdom tradition, there is the character of Mullah Nasruddin that makes you laugh while pointing his finger to the absurdities of mundane life. In Japan, there is a concept of

Laughing Buddha or *hotei*. In the 1,000 year history of Persian and Urdu literature, there is only one *hotei* and that is Ghalib.

Hali writes, ‘Elegance and razor-sharp speech, quick wittedness, deconstruction of the mundane routine—these are Mirza’s special qualities. If we call him *haivaan-e zariif* instead of *haivaan-e naatiq* (witty speaking being), that would be appropriate. In Mirza’s personality, there is as much playfulness as there are musical notes hidden in the strings of a sitar’ ([Hali 1897: 60, 160](#)).

Umrao Begum, Mirza’s wife, was a traditional woman who strictly observed all religious customs and conventions. She gave birth to seven kids, both girls and boys, but none lived for more than two years. She was an equal partner in her husband’s suffering. Ghalib had a lavish lifestyle from his early years in Agra that stayed with him in Delhi. He was addicted to drinking and gambling, and he visited quarters that offered all kinds of sensual pleasures. Begum’s religious sensitivities were often being tested. Giving up on her husband’s piety, one day she separated her eating utensils from those that he used.

At one time, Mirza confronted her with his shoes on his head. She was rightly shocked and asked, ‘What are you doing?’ Mirza replied confidently, ‘Our home has become a mosque. I don’t know how I should go around this space.’ Before entering a mosque, as we know, worshippers have to remove their shoes and keep them in an outer place. He wrote in a letter addressed to Alauddin Khan Alaaui, ‘I was forced to marry on the seventh of Rajab Hijri 1225. I was chained. The city of Delhi was declared a prison and then I was placed into the prison’ ([Hali 1897: 164](#)).

Hali writes, ‘Once Mirza wanted to move to a new house. He went and saw the Divan-Khana [men’s section] but he couldn’t see the interior. So he asked his wife to go and check that out. When she returned, he asked her to share her impression of what she had seen. She replied that some people say that this house was haunted. Mirza coolly replied: Does that mean there is a bigger apparition than yourself in this world?’ ([Hali 1897: 87](#)).

There are several stories associated with Ramazan and fasting. Hali writes, ‘Once he visited the Court after the Ramazan had passed. The king asked, “Mirza, how many fasting days did you observe?” He replied respectfully, “Not one”’ ([Hali 1897: 60](#)). (The answer lends itself to two meanings: I missed just one or I did not keep a single one.) On one such occasion, Mirza read a qat’a, which had an indirect plea for raising his pay.

*iftaar-e saum ki kuchh agar dastgaah ho
us shakhs ko zuroor hai roza rakha kare
jis paas roza khol ke khaane ko kuchh n ho
roza agar n khaaye to naachaar kya kare*

If one could afford to observe fasting and prayers,
then one must observe the fast like it was ordained.
But if after breaking the fast one had nothing to eat,
then eating up the fast was the only fasting!

During the time of rebellion, pension stopped. People wrote to inquire about his hardship. In an answer to Mir Mehdi's letter, he wrote, 'Miyan, I have learnt the art of living without eating. You can assume that all is well. The month of Ramazan passed with fasting. God is the ultimate provider. There is always enough supply of sorrow to munch, even when there is no food' ([Hali 1897: 12](#)).

We can easily find a dialectical touch in these writings. Since this was part of Mirza's creative personality, he did not have to make much effort to show his wit. This was his ordinary way of life. There are many stories associated with drinking. Hali shares the following with us: There was a visitor who during a conversation expressed very strong views against drinking and he warned Mirza, 'God does not grant the prayers of a drunkard.' Mirza listened patiently and answered, 'My brother, if someone has enough supply of wine, then what is there for him to pray for?' ([Hali 1897: 66](#)).

In Delhi's severe winter month, he starts a letter with a Persian couplet:

*be mai nakunad dar kaf-e man khaama rawaaii
sard ast hawa aatish-e be dood kujaaii*

Without wine,
the reed pen is difficult
to hold in my fingers.
In this bitter cold
can someone bring me
the liquid fire
to warm up my nerves?

*kal ke liye kar aaj na khissat sharaab mein
y suuy-e zan hai saaqi-e kausar ke baab mein*

It is forbidden to drink in this world
thinking there is reward

in paradise for abstinence;
Providence is great, be it there or here.

Hali, because of his religious convictions, is uncomfortable sharing these anecdotes. He even says that Ghalib was very troubled by his addiction but he did not hide it. After the mutiny, when pension was stopped and he had no access to the powers that be, Pandit Moti Lal Mir Munshi (sub-judge) of Punjab came to visit him. Hali adds, 'There was some talk of pension. Mirza said, "You can call me kafir if I missed a day when I didn't have a drink. If I did recite my namaaz even once you can call me a sinner. Yet the government includes me in the list of Muslim rebels. I don't get this"' ([Hali 1897: 68](#)).

When Mirza's friend Shefta returned from Haj, he gave up drinking. During a day in winter, he saw Mirza relishing his drink. When Mirza offered him some, he told him, 'In consideration of *sharia* I have given up drinking'. Mixing his surprise with playfulness, Mirza asked, 'Even in the winter like this?'

There are numerous stories about his fascination for mangoes and other incidents where his presence of mind, driven by his witty dialectical nature, helped him bring about many interesting twists and turns into the conversation. Ghalib's love for mangoes was well-known.

Hakim Raziuddeen Khan was a close friend of Mirza but he didn't like mangoes. One day he was visiting him. They were sitting in the verandah when some donkey-owner passed in the street driving his two donkeys. There were some shreds of mangoes in a corner of the street. One of the donkeys smelled a piece but then left it there. On seeing this, Raziuddeen said, 'Look Mirza even donkeys don't like mangoes.' Mirza replied, 'Absolutely right. Donkeys don't like mangoes.' ([Hali 1897: 63](#))

Maulvi Amiinulddiin wrote a book titled *Qaat'e-e Qaat'e* that contained an abundance of obscene and abusive passages. Someone asked Mirza why he had not said anything about the book. He said curtly, 'If a donkey hits you, will you hit back?' ([Hali 1897: 44](#))

Mirza went to Rampur after Nawab Yusuf Ali Khan passed away to convey his condolences. After a few days Nawab Kalb-e Ali Khan had to leave for Bareilly to meet the Lt. Governor. As he was departing, the Nawab told Mirza as a customary greeting, 'I leave you to God's care!' Mirza responded light heartedly, 'Hazrat, God has handed me over to you for care and now you are returning me to God.' ([Hali 1897: 38](#))

One day Syed Sardar Mirza came to see Mirza late in the evening. When after a while the guest started to leave, Mirza took the candle light to the foyer where shoes were stacked so that the guest could easily put on his shoes. On this Syed Sardar Mirza mentioned, 'Qibla, why did you take the trouble? I would have found my shoes.' Mirza replied, 'I didn't bring the candle light to help you find your pair. I was afraid that you might take one of mine.' ([Hali 1897: 65](#))

When Mirza returned from the prison, he stayed for few days in Miyan Kale Sahib's house. One day a visitor came to see him and congratulated him in getting out of the prison. Mirza said, 'What are you talking about? Before I was in *Gore* (meaning white) Sahib's prison, now I am in *Kale* (black) Sahib's.'s ([Hali 1897: 29](#))

Ghalib predicted that he would die in Hijri 1277. The same year there was an epidemic in the city but Mirza did not die. He wrote in a letter addressed to Mir Mehdi Majrooh. 'Miyan, I didn't guess wrongly about 1277 h. but to die in an epidemic, I thought, would be below my dignity' ([Ghalib 1926: 363](#)).

Rebellion of 1857 and the River of Blood

Few years prior to the 1857 rebellion, many strange things happened in the court. British intervention had markedly increased. Metcalfe suddenly died in 1853. Historians tell us about the mysterious deaths of Eliot and Thomas, who had taken a keen interest in the selection of heir apparent. When Shamsuddin Khan was hanged, Prince Fatehul Mulk married his widow. He too died before Metcalfe. Zeenat Mahal, Zafar's favourite queen, was clearing the way for her son Jawan Bakht to be the next king. Too many conspiracies were competing with one another. No one could tell what turn the events would take. The letters that Ghalib wrote to the Nawab of Rampur were destroyed; only empty envelopes are found in the files as a fond memory ([Arshi 1949: 6, 80, 121](#)). On 22 May 1853, a Delhi newspaper published Ghalib's ghazal *baaziicha-e atfaal hai duniya mere aage* ([Raza 1988: 443](#)), with its tone decidedly prophetic and brimming with pathos and sadness ([Prigarina 1997: 292](#)).

baaziicha-e atfaal hai duniya mere aage
hota hai shab o roz tamaasha mere aage

The world is a kid's playground
in front of me.
Many acts are played out
in front of my eyes.
Each day when the sun rises and
each night when it sets.

ik khel hai aurang-e sulaimaan mere nazdiik
ik baat hai e'jaaz-e masiiha mere aage

The throne of Solomon
is a thing of amusement for me.
I have heard the talk
about Jesus raising the dead.

*hota hai nihaan gard mein sahra mere hote
ghista hai jabiin khaak p dariya mere aage*

My going into the desert raises
such dust that it conceals
its very existence.
But the river is humble.
It rubs its forehead on the ground.

*phir dekhiye andaaz-e gul afshaani-e guftaar
rakh de koi paimaana-e sahba mere aage*

Just watch the flowering of
my creativity
if someone take the trouble
of putting a goblet of wine
in front of me!

*iimaan mujhe roke hai to khiinche hai mujhe kufr
ka'ba mere peeche hai kaleesa mere aage*

My faith pulls me towards it
though disbelief
also tears me
in another direction.
Kaba is behind me
and the Chapel is in front of me.

*hai maujzan ik qulzum-e khuun kaash yahi ho
aata hai abhi dekhiye kya kya mere aage*

An ocean of blood
is rising like the high tide.
Maybe this is it.
Let us see what comes next
in front of my eyes.

During rebellion, Ghalib had to live through many perilous situations. If he had not used his wit-laced dialectical skills, he would not have survived the ordeal. One day, some English troopers intruded his home and he was asked to appear before Colonel Brun who was camping in Qutbuddin Saudagar's haveli. Hali writes,

Mirza appeared before Col. Brun in a typical Turkish Muslim outfit with his high fur cap. The officer looked at him with suspicion and asked, 'Are you a Muslim?' Mirza replied, 'Half!' The officer gave a confusing look and asked, 'What do you mean by half?' Mirza said, 'I drink wine but do not eat pork.' Hearing this, the officer could not control his laughter. Then Mirza showed him the letters of acknowledgment which he had received from the Queen that was in response to the qasida he had sent to London. The officer had a follow-up question, 'Why didn't you show up at the Hill where the British army was camping after the rebel forces were defeated?' Ghalib answered, 'My status required me to be carried in a palanquin shouldered by four people. They all deserted me. How could I come to the Hill?' Col. Brun was apparently amused with the answers and he let Mirza go. ([Hali 1897: 36](#))

Ghalib writes in his diary about this incident:

Free people don't hide anything. As a half-Muslim I'm free from the hardship of a prison house in the same way as my vagrancy saves me from the fear of infamy and ill-repute. For a very long time, I have been consuming French wine at night without any other food. I couldn't sleep if I were deprived of this. If Mahesh Dass, whom I consider a brave man, a blessed being and a man with a big heart, had not sent me the Indian wine, which had the same colour as that of French but a better aroma, then I would not have survived. ([Hali 1897: 37](#))

After this, Ghalib paid tribute to Mahesh Das in a ruba'i saying that in such days of suffering, the most generous Mahesh Das provided him with *aab-e hayaat* elixir, which was denied to Alexander the Great, who had died looking for it.

During the rebellion Ghalib continued to visit the court, though he was not very close to the regime. He keenly watched the situation. After the British take over on 14 January 1858, he wrote in a letter to the nawab of Rampur in words typical of his dialectical orientation. 'In this time of great turbulence, I kept myself away from the Court but with this fear that if I stopped visiting, then my home would be deprived of the royal privileges and even my life could be in danger. In my deeper self I was unconcerned but in my appearance I maintained a friendly demeanor' ([Arshi 1949: 437](#); see also [Narang 2003: 427-52](#)).

The fact is that Ghalib's close friend and associate Maulana Fazl-e Haq Khairabadi was one of those Ulema Muslim theologians who had signed the fatwa (religious commandment of rebellion). There were many friends and disciples of Ghalib who had actually taken part in the rebellion. Ghalib had

even written a couplet (*sikka-e she'r*), a chronogram of royal coronation, which is normally stuck on the ceremonial coins in support of rebels, and which was announced and read out in the court. Gauri Shanker and Jeevan Lal, the British spies, had offered an eyewitness account of Mirza's court appearances and his declaratory couplet was included in their confidential reports. It was these testimonies that formed the basis of suspension of his pension and, thereby, he was cut off from receiving any fresh privileges from the new rulers. This story is complex and tragic. Ghalib wrote to Yusuf Mirza a letter that is an example of his saying both 'yes' and 'no', 'I confess' and 'I deny' in the same breath, in an inventive poetic manner.

I didn't compose any coronation couplet. Even if I did, the purpose was to save my life and my honor. This is no crime. Even if it is, it is not so serious that Queen's Announcement is unable to erase it. God is great! Isn't it strange that manufacture of explosives, guns and cannons and lootings of magazines can be forgiven but not the two lines written by a poor destitute poet? ([Ghalib 1926: 249](#))

The coronation couplet reported by Gauri Shanker was actually written by Hafiz Ghulam Rasul Veeran, a disciple of Zauq but what Jeevan Lal reported as the couplet written by 'Mirza Nausha' (the family title) was actually the work of Ghalib. Both these couplets have been identified. The one by Ghalib reads as under:

bar zar-e aaftaab-o nuqra-e maah
sikka zad dar jahaan Bahaadur Shaah

On the gold of the sun
and silver of the moon,
coins are struck everywhere
in the name of Bahadur Shah.

The resumption of darbar visits and the restoration of pension took a long time. By then, Ghalib had lost his zeal and enthusiasm. At a time when most of the lanes and neighbouring homes were deserted and enveloped in darkness, Ghalib wrote in a letter: 'I live in a city named Delhi and the street named Ballimaran. But I can't find a friend who lived here. Make no mistake. Both rich and poor, high and low, have left this place. Those who have remained are being asked to leave ... home after home is found wrapped in deep darkness' ([Ghalib 1926: 58](#)).

There were places around Chandni Chowk where people's bodies were hanging from the trees with noose around their necks. Ghalib shared his

pain in the following verse in a private letter addressed to Alauddin Khan Alai:

*bas k fa'aal-e ma yuriid hai aaj
har silahshuur Englistaan ka
ghar se bazaar mein nikalte huuye
zahra hota hai aab insaan ka
chowk jis ko kahein vo maqt'al hai
ghar bana hai namuuna zindaan ka
shahr-e Dehli ka zarra zarra khaak
tashna-e khuun hai har musalmaan ka*

Every British Tommy has become blood thirsty.
Fear and danger stalk those who walk out of their home.
Chandni Chowk has become an open hanging place.
Every house has been turned into a prison cell.
Every particle of the great city of Delhi, it seems,
is thirsty for the blood of Muslims.

Let no one get this idea that I am dying because of my own destruction. Although orders to kill these people were given by the British, the deed was done by dark skinned faces of our own. Among those, who were killed, there were those in whom I had reposed my hopes and aspirations, there were those who were recipients of my affection. There were my friends, there were my disciples, my lovers, my beloveds. All of them are now reduced to a pile of dust. It is extremely painful to bear the loss of one friend but think of the one who is mourning the loss of so many friends. Why shouldn't he be miserable in his life? Alas! I have lost so many friends. Now when I die, there would be no one to mourn for me. ([Ghalib 1926: 91](#))

Tafta's book *Sumbulistaan* was badly printed. Looking at it, Ghalib, a lover of Mughal sense of beauty and aesthetics, was deeply saddened. Painfully he reacts thus: 'Ah! I was shocked to see the bad printing of the book and the ruined contents. It reminded me of the wandering Begums of the Royal Fort, moon like beauties but in rags, soiled dirty clothes, worn out slippers' ([Ghalib 1926: 91](#)).

Lastly, we have Mirza's letter to Alauddin Ahmed Khan:

O the partner of my breath! This is not the Delhi where you were born. This is not the Delhi where you used to come to take lessons from me in Sha'baan Beg's Haveli. This is not the Delhi that I have known from the age of seven ... it is a camp, an army camp! The servants of the king are now paid five rupees a month. Of the ladies of the royal house, who are old, have become pimps and the young ones are prostitutes. ([Ghalib 1926: 318](#))

Broken and Filled with Sadness: Pearls of Prose Writings

Ghalib achieves heights of excellence in his verse but his prose is also magical and spell bounding. Hali has rightly praised him for this. The dialectical spin and openness that his poetry exemplifies are also deeply ingrained in his prose. In fact, some prose pieces are so unique that without keeping them in focus, we cannot envision a full view of Ghalib's creativity. Ghalib's prose is a subject of study on its own. We cannot do full justice with this here. We can however point out few things in passing.

Umrao Singh was Ghalib's disciple. Someone informed Ghalib about the demise of Umrao Singh's second wife. He had young kids and therefore he had no option, he was told, but to marry for the third time. Now you can see from the letter below how Ghalib gives a twist to the whole thing and takes the focus away from another person's married life to his own. 'I feel sorry for Umrao Singh but I'm envious of his situation. Allah! Allah! His chains have been broken twice. And look at me. For the past 50 years I have had this noose around my neck. Neither the noose breaks nor my neck gives in. You should tell him, my brother, I can help you raise your kids. Why is he eager to have this calamity visit him again?' ([Ghalib 1926: 153](#)).

Ghalib used to receive many requests for ceremonial poems or short qat'as in all kind of occasions but specially for crafting a historical chronogram giving the year in *abjad* in relation to naming of a newborn child or celebration of the publication of a new book. Hali describes a response that sums up Ghalib's feelings about these things.

Once late Nawab Alauddin Khan requested him to write something about the birth of his son and also suggest a historic chronogramatic name for him. He replied:

A lion hunts and then feeds its offspring and teaches them how to hunt. When they grow up, they hunt on their own. You are a poet yourself and with God's grace you write beautifully. Why don't you write something yourself about this birth and select a historic name so that you don't have to bother a grief stricken person like me. Alauddin Khan, I swear by you, I wrote a poem on the birth of my son. That boy didn't survive. I'm afraid that was the work of my unfortunate words. Those I praise do not live long. Nasiruddin Haider and Amjad Ali Shah, rulers of Oudh passed away after one qasida. Wajid Ali Shah was hit by three of my qasidas and he never recovered. Whosoever received ten or twenty qasidas reached a point beyond the creation of the world. No sir, in the name of God, please forgive me. I would neither eulogize the birth of a child nor find a historic name for him. ([Hali 1897: 83](#))

Many letters that Mirza wrote to his friend Mirza Hatim Ali Beg Mehr are very interesting and famous, and they are symbolic of Mirza's distinctive style. Nawab's courtesan named Chunna Jaan passed away. He sent him condolences but that did not get the desired effect. Then he wrote a

letter that is considered to be a classic of Urdu prose for its candour and dialectical flight of imagination.

Mirza Sahib, I don't like these things. You are sixty-five. For fifty years you have been enjoying the colours and aromas of life. In my early youth a *murshid* soaked in the game of life had told me a secret: drink, eat and be merry as much as you may but remember to become a fly that sits on fine sugar. Don't be a honey bee that gets stuck and entangled. I have followed this advice. If you are immortal, only then you should grieve at someone's death. What tears to shed? What wailing? Be grateful for your freedom. Don't grieve. If you are happy being in the prison, then take a Munna Jaan if there is no Chunna Jaan. If I died and got into the paradise I will have a suite, and a *hour*i to take care of me. Because it will be an afterlife, I will have to spend all my endless years with that blessed being. When I think of this, my heart sinks and my breath gets ready to leave my body. Alas! That *hour*i will become hell, how boring? The same garden and sitting on the same branch of a sacred tree. God save this image from an evil eye! Living with one *hour*i, day in and day out! My brother come to senses and find something else to do. ([Ghalib 1926, vol. 2: 499](#))

The challenges and ordeals of life reached a stage where Ghalib was forced to disown his own self. It was as if he had gone beyond himself and had turned into a witness; standing apart and looking at the self from some distance, watching what was going on in daily life. This is also a dialectical spin in which the person becomes a shadow of the real self; just observing like a spectator.

I don't expect any help from God. What is there to expect from ordinary people? Nothing seems to work for me. I have become a spectator of my own self. When my real self is insulted or rebuked I feel good. I have accepted myself as someone else. When I'm hurt, I say, look people Mirza received the insult of another shoe thrown at him. He used to take big pride in being a great poet and a great scholar of Persian. No one could find, he claimed, another person as accomplished within miles. Now answer your creditors. The truth is that he died but died a very sad death—died like a kafir. He expected to own a place in Heaven usually reserved for kings and emperors because he considered himself to be the king of verse. He had a high sounding title. Welcome Najmuddaula Bahadur! One of the creditors has his hand on his collar. Another creditor is lecturing to him. I am asking him, 'Hazrat Nawab Sahib! What kind of Nawab Sahib are you! You used to say lofty things about yourself, say some thing now. Why are you being insulted? Whisper something? Say something? What could he say—the shameless one, the man with no honor? Wine from the mansion, rose water from the perfumery, clothes from the cloth merchant, mangoes from the fruit-seller, money from the jeweler, all on loan. Has he ever thought how he would pay it back?' ([Ghalib 1926, vol. 2: 614](#))

The following letter that Ghalib wrote to Har Gopal Tafta is unique in its own way. The thoughts expressed here are very close to his last unpublished ghazal that we will consider in the concluding section of this chapter.

You're learning to write poetry while I'm learning to die. I consider the knowledge of Bu Ali Sina and the verse of Nazeeri a waste, meaningless and empty. You need just little extra time to lead your life. The art of healing, managing an empire, verse-making, pursuit of magic—these are all senseless callings. If Hindus had an *avatar*, it doesn't matter. If Muslims had a *nabi*, it doesn't matter either. If you earned fame in life, it doesn't matter. If you lived your life anonymously, it doesn't matter. If you have economic security and good health maybe that is some thing. The rest is all an illusion. O my

dear friend! Maybe even that illusion is an illusion, but I'm still stuck with that. Maybe as I move ahead even that would change and I could go beyond all illusions. I could ignore money, health, recreation, everything. I may live in a state of existence beyond existence. I am in that stillness where I'm unaware of this world and the next one. People ask me questions and I do answer what I know. But all this is hypothesizing. This is not a river; it is a mirage. This is not existence; it is sheer ignorance or vanity. Two of us are pretty good poets. We became famous like Saadi and Hafiz. What did they get out of their fame? What are we going to get from ours? ([Ghalib 1926 vol. 3: 894](#))

Existence beyond Existence and the Chopped-off Hand

During the last part of his life, Ghalib did not write much. He was physically weak and exhausted. Delhi had been destroyed as a city. Few homes had their hearths working and lights were on again but Muslim neighbourhoods were still like a wasteland.

*musalmaanon ke melon ka huva qul
puje hai jog maaya aur debi
nishaan baaqi nahien hai saltanat ka
magar haan naam ko aurangzebi*

The festivities and festivals of Muslims are all gone.
It is only worship of Yog Maya and Mata Devi.
The story of the Mughal Empire is all over;
it is just a name that echoes in the stillness of silence.

As we mentioned before, Ghalib received selfless and compassionate care and support from his Hindu friends and disciples during the difficult days following the rebellion. Some names that are worth mentioning in this context besides Har Gopal Tafta, whom Ghalib called *mirza*, Mahesh Das *dariya dil*, Jawahar Singh, Shiv Ji Ram Brahman, Heera Singh, Bihari Lal Mushtaq, and Bal Mukund Besabr.

Pyare Lal Aashob, who hailed from Todar Mal family of Akbar's time and occupied a high-ranking position in the education department, was a close friend of Ghalib's. He was also secretary of the Literary Society of Delhi. He published Mirza's following qat'a in the society's magazine in 1857 as his latest composition that had not been previously published.

*Hindostaan ki bhi ajab sar zamiin hai
jis mein vafa-o mehr-o muhabbat ka hai vufuur
jaisa k aaftaab nikalta hai sharq se
ikhlaas ka hua hai isi mulk se zuhuur
hai asl tukhm-e Hind se aur is zamiin se
phaila hai sab jahaan mein ye meyva duur duur*

What a great country India is
where you will find love,
compassion, and tolerance
in great abundance everywhere.
As the sun rises in the East,
love has risen from this land.
The seed of love sown here in this land
became a sweet-tasting fruit
that reached far far away.

Stricken by the miseries and sorrows of life, Ghalib recalled a couplet that he had written in his younger years and he shared it with Maulvi Abdur Razzaaq Shakir as a metaphor for his current life.

Piir-o Murshid—

ik sham'a hai daliil-e sahar so khamosh hai
*zulmat kade mein mere shab-e gham ka josh hai*³

Darkness prevails in my abode
and the night of sorrow
is fast moving back and forth.
There is only one candle left;
that too is silently squabbling
with the approaching dawn.

This is happening. Darkness of the night of sorrow. Darkness spreading all around. Thick and deep darkness. Dawn is awaited, meaning it has not yet appeared in the sky. But there is a plea for the light. Burnt out candle will be turned off when the morning comes. The irony of this is that the plea for morning has itself become a reason for the apparatus of darkness. You can see that the abode in which the signs of approaching dawn have become the reason for darkness, how dark that abode be? ([Ghalib 1920: 155](#))

During this time, he also wrote to Abdul Ghafoor Nassaakh:

I'm neither worried about Persian nor have something to say about Urdu, nor do I have any expectation from the rest of the world, nor there is any hope for salvation. It is me and my everlasting defeat and failure.

chashm-e kashuuda and b kirdaar-haaye man
z aayinda naaumiidam v az rafta sharmsaar

Whatever I am,
I stay present in the eyes of the world.
I have no hope for the future
as I carry with me the suffering of my past.

One year short of seventy I have lived. Now how long would I last? One Urdu Divan with one thousand or twelve hundred verses. One Persian Divan with ten thousand verses. Three books of

prose writing. These five publications are all done. What more can I say? I got no reward for qasidas. No appreciation for my ghazals. I spent my whole life in useless pursuits. ([Ghalib 1926, vol. 1: 396](#))

While commenting on the last few years of Ghalib's life, Prigarina further testifies to his dialectical nature and the love of freedom.

Ghalib in his last years stayed away from the commotion and the hue and cry that happened due to his critique *Qaat'-e Burhaan*. It was as if someone's cursed hands had unknotted a bundle that contained the ghosts of this uproar. Ghalib started to receive anonymous letters; he was labeled a drunkard and an atheist. The fanatic defenders of the faith tried to put the fear of hell in him. His whole ancestry, including forbears and forefathers, was made a target of abuse. Given the failure of the rebellion, atrocities and abominations, hangings of many learned people in the community, the impact of massive destruction of the city and the Muslim culture as a whole made these kinds of reactions not unexpected. The unending reign of brutality and savagery still darkened the place. Under these circumstances, it was natural for the more extreme elements to sound the alarm bells about the fall of religion. It was hard to imagine what a great challenge it posed for people who were open-minded, and who had faith in human intelligence to solve the problems of the future. (1997: 345-46)

Ghalib writes in a letter to Maulvi Habib Ullah Khan Zaka:

My dearest, my lover! Are you aware? I was weak and frail but now I am semi-alive. I was hard of hearing, now I'm getting blind. Weak eyesight and infirmity in hands. As soon as I write these four lines my fingers get twisted. I couldn't grapple with the words. I have lived seventy-one years. That is a long time. The life that remains can be measured in months and days, not in years.

haqq-e aan garmi-ye hangaama k daaram bishanaas
aye k dar bazm-e tu maanam b chiraagh-e dam-e sub-h

I wish others had reciprocated the warmth of feelings and appreciation that I deserved. Of course I was the candle light that burnt in your gathering and had to be extinguished at the arrival of the dawn. ([Ghalib 1926: 28](#))

We have already discussed that he had prophesized in a Persian ghazal that like the vintage wine, the true worth of his poetry will be appreciated only after he was gone. Ghalib died on 15 February 1869. The *Namaaz-e Janaaza* was read outside Delhi Gate. Hali said that members of both Shia and Sunni communities and distinguished citizens participated. According to Sheikh Muhammad Ikram, the tension among Shia and Sunni followers, due to their affection for the poet, was similar to what had happened between Hindus and Muslims at the death of Sufi saint poet Kabir ([Ikram n.d.: 201](#)).

man aan niyam k z margam jahaan baham n khurad
fughaan-e zaahid o fariyaad-e barhaman yaad aar

I am not the one whose death should not cause a furore.
On the one side, the devout Muslim is shedding tears

and on the other, the Brahman is grieving and lamenting.

Ghalib had predicted that after his death, contemporaries might write his marsiya with the following couplet as the base line:

rashk-e Urfi-o fakhr-e Taalib murd
Asadullah Khan-e Ghalib murd

Asadullah Khan, the equal of Urfi
and the pride of Talib is gone forever!

Sheikh Mohammad Ikram was right when he wrote:

Mirza was a free spirit.... In our language I can't think of another poet who could be placed next to Mirza in terms of his openness, wit and liveliness. His presence had such charisma that people naturally bowed their heads in great admiration and appreciated his literary excellence. We leave him not only in the midst of emotions of dedication and respect but also friendship and camaraderie. His towering personality occupies a space which is not only worthy of respect but the one who is friendly and good-natured. You can come to him in any situation and mood and he knows how to be your confidante and understand the pain in your heart. He will do everything to soothe and comfort you. His personality is not indebted to any one practice. He is familiar with the risks and dangers, twists and turns of every path. He can rightly claim:

raazdaan-e khuuye dahram karda and
khandā bar daana-o nadaan mi zanam

Providence has opened all its secrets to me.
I can trash and make fun of
both the idiot and fledgling,
sage and sagacious. ([Ikram n.d.: 411–14](#))

Ghalib wrote the following words on 13 February 1865:

Some traits that my Creator gifted me, such as a cheerful outlook, love of freedom, a compassionate nature—they all blossomed in one thousand ways. I don't have the physical prowess any more to hold a stick in my hand and attach to it a tin box with a cotton chord and then start walking barefoot. Sometimes appearing in Shiraz, sometimes staying in Egypt and sometimes reaching Najaf. I don't have the capacity to be a host to the whole world. Forget about the world. Could it be my city in which I don't want anyone to come out hungry and naked? I'm God's being, old, frail, sick, beggar-like, captive of misery, incapable of seeing anyone panhandling, but himself a mendicant who goes from door to door. ([Ghalib 1926, vol. 2: 753](#))

Latest research shows that the following ghazal was the last one that Ghalib wrote in a letter to Ameenuddin Ahmed Khan on 3 March 1867. It seems that these couplets were written by him metaphorically by drawing blood from his heart ([Ghalib 1926, vol. 2: 1113](#)).

mumkin nahien k bhuul ke bhi aarmiida huun
main dasht-e gham mein aahuuye sayyaad diida huun

My life never allowed me
any comfort or respite.
In the desert of life
I have been a deer
hounded by a hunter.

*ne sub-he se ilaaqa n saaghar se vaasta
main ma'raz-e misaal mein dast-e buriida huun*

Neither could I hold a rosary,
nor a cup of wine.
In the mirage of existence
I have been like a hand
chopped off.

*hargiz kisi ke dil mein nahien hai meri jagah
huun main kalaam-e naghz vale naashuniida huun*

No one has a place for me
in his or her heart.
I have the sweetness of verse
but no one ever listens to me.

*ahl-e var'a ke halqe mein har chand huun zaliil
par aasiyon ke zumre mein main barguziida huun*

Among the pious ones
I am the one who has been damned.
But among the sinful ones,
I am highly esteemed.

*paani se sag gaziida dare jis tarah Asad
darta huun aaiine se k mardum gaziida huun*

A person bitten by a mad dog
runs away from water.
I am scared of the looking glass
as I have been bitten by man.

In these lines, written just two years before his death, we sense the echo
of his whole life's anguish and suffering.

*auraaq-e zamaana dar navishtam-o guzasht
dar fann-e sukhan yagaana gashtam-o guzasht*

My writing
was like a leaf of time
that withered.
I was unique
in the art of verse making.
It withered
with time, too.

Ghalib's voice is alive and well. He called himself 'the nightingale of a garden that has not yet come into existence'. Today we find that Ghalib's innovative and multidimensional open thinking is very much in tune with the present thinking. Some of his commitments are even more relevant today than they were in his time. He was against all forms of dogmatism, oppression, and persecution.

Ghalib's way is a way of radical openness and freedom. The biggest challenge that we face today is the protection of freedom, especially freedom of expression and diversity in thinking. In this scenario, Ghalib's dialectical discourse is even more important. Life is a bundle of paradoxes. No one has a monopoly to truth. In Urdu, there is no other verse that matches Ghalib's dialectical signifier. We hope that as times change, Ghalib's poetry will also find new meanings and interpretations, and his melody will forever be new and filled with great sweetness.

*gardish-e saaghar-e sad jalvaa-e rangiin tujh se
aaiina daari-e yak diida-e hairaan mujh se*

The circulating cup of joy
and its myriad colours is you.
Like the wonderstruck
wide-open eye of the mirror,
it is me, my curiosity.



*huun garmi-e nishaat-e tasavvur se naghma sanj
main andaliib-e gulshan-e na aafriida huun*

It is the joy
and upsurge of imagination
that keeps me going.
I am the nightingale
of the garden
that is not yet born.

*the Zuhuuri o Urfi o Taalib
apne apne zamaane mein Ghalib
n Zuhuuri hai aur n Taalib hai
Asadullah Khan-e Ghalib hai*

Zuhuri, Urfi and Talib—
Ghalib, they were great in their time.
Now there is neither Zuhuri nor Talib.
But only Asadullah Khan Ghalib.

¹ Zunnaar is the sacred thread of the Hindus.

² That is, path of excellence of language and poetry.

³ Ghalib reversed the order of the lines of this popular couplet.

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