

Ghalib and the Art of Conversion

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On the 149th death anniversary of the renowned Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib, a look at how the poet breathed new meaning into the old.



Credit: Wikimedia

This year is Ghalib's 149th death anniversary. His poetry has not rusted with time, unlike the daggers of kings kept in museums of history. His lines can still stir one's blood without spilling it. Ghalib, after all, weighed blood most deeply as tears. Picking up a couplet by Mir Taqi Mir – ‘

Ashk aankhon mein kab nahi aata

/

Lahu aata hai jab nahi aata

’ –Ghalib made it more exquisite and memorable: ‘

Ragoñ meñ daudte phirne ke ham nahīñ qaail

/

Jab aañkh hī se na Tapkī to phir lahī kyī hai

’. This was in tune with the tradition of Urdu poetry, where you took a line or couplet by an older master and turned it around, to grant it new meanings. This tradition fascinated many but especially the Kashmiri poet, Agha Shahid Ali, who often used the same technique in his English ghazals, playing with and remembering, lines by Rainer Maria Rilke, Yehuda Amichai, Yiannis Ritsos, T.S. Eliot, Faiz Ahmad Faiz and others. Another pattern of this inspired style of borrowing is what is called the [hum-radeef ghazal](#). It involves having the same ‘[radeef](#)’, or the repeating pattern of the rhyming word. A famous example is the ghazal by Amīr Miinaai, the poet from Lucknow who was a contemporary of Ghalib, who wrote: ‘[Uski Hasrat hai jise dil se mita bhi na sakun/Dhoondhne usko chala huun jise paa bhi na sakun](#)’. It is as if in reply to Miinaai’s couplet that Ghalib wrote (the [ghazal](#)), ‘[Meherbaan hoke bula lo mujhe chahe jis waqt/Main gaya waqt nahi huun ke phir aa bhi na sakun](#)’. Jagjit Singh and Chitra Singh blended both the ghazals together and sang this broody [hum-radeef ghazal](#). Instead of the conventional references and interpretation of Ghalib’s poetry, which exist in abundance, I would rather like to think of the possibilities that a figure like Ghalib and his poetic dispensation creates in India’s cultural and aesthetic milieu. We’ve already seen how Ghalib’s role as an Urdu poet included translating the idea of the poetry before him as much as being in dialogue with his contemporaries. Ghalib’s brilliant variation of Mir’s idea of tearful blood or blood-in-tears is a way of belonging to a tradition of poetry. It is the same with Ghalib picking up Miinaai’s couplet and transforming it into another ghazal. The act of translation and dialogue has been part of the history and regeneration of Urdu poetry. But this idea can be taken much further. In a famous sequence from his life, Ghalib was asked by the British sergeant when he was caught gambling, “Are you a Muslim?” To which Ghalib’s famous reply was, “(I’m Muslim) only by half.” Here, often the popular emphasis stops at how Ghalib’s part-affirmation of his Muslim identity is self-attributed to drinking. It is indulgently, decadently, blamed at his his irreverent poetic nature. But this idea of Ghalib being part-Muslim, also opens up another interesting possibility of Ghalib being part-*kafir*. He has often referred to the *kafir*, especially in reference to the beloved, in endearing terms. One is reminded of the line, “[Usī ko dekh kar jite haiñ jis kīfir pe dam nikle](#)”. Though he wasn’t always generous about the *kafir*-dil. He also put it in a couplet, “[tañgi-e-dil kī gila kyī ye vo kīfir-dil hai ki agar tañg na hoī to pareshīñ hoī](#)”, implying that the idolatrous self is narrow hearted and miserly. It is quite obvious that being *kafir* is not only part of Ghalib’s poetic imagination but also part of a way of his cultural being. Ghalib as part-

kafir

and part-Muslim opens up a certain moment, not only in the history of Urdu poetry but also in India’s cultural history. We’re all in a way, as Hindus and Muslims, never purely one or the other. It is impossible to be so, by language or by culture. This brings me to the question of conversion. I would like to propose that apart from the most obvious form of religious conversion, there are other cultural forms of conversion that take place in the lives of Indians that require no change of faith, for we don’t *culturally* belong to one faith alone. When Dara Shikoh translated the Upanishads from Sanskrit to Persian, he became one of the first

exemplars of what much later Salman Rushdie called 'translated men'. The act of translation is also an act of conversion into another language and sensibility. As Rushdie explains in [Imaginary Homelands](#), "The word 'translation' comes, etymologically, from the Latin for 'bearing across'. Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately to the notion that something can also be gained." In this sense of bearing oneself across from language to language, from thought to thought, idea to idea, one gets translated, and if you will, converted into something more than oneself, something other than oneself. All Hindus, in this sense, are part Muslims, and all Muslims, part Hindus. To deny this is to create the pathologically divided self that is never at home with the cultural history and possibility of being both at once, constantly bearing across being one thing into being another. It is this denial that is the course of much of the violence and rift in Indian society. We must learn from master-translators like Shikoh and Ghalib, learn about who we are. What Aurangzeb was not happy about in Shikoh was this desire to move from tongue to tongue, seek god, and seek language, in translation. In an introduction to Jagjit Singh's programme on Ghalib, the late poet Nida Fazli said, Ghalib "asked questions of religion, of life, of society and of the self". To ask questions is already a way to leave home – the home of inept self-satisfaction, of self-idolatry – and to be in the world. We are all converts to Ghalib's poetry, and in being so, we too would do well to ask questions of ourselves, of religion, the present state of our society and the world. Ghalib's questions were full of ironies and wonder, and this is a dominant poetic aspect that stayed with me as an admirer of his poems, and it found place in this poem which I offer here as tribute.

A Visit to Ballimaran

No longer that alleyway

of unending pastimes,

no longer that couplet

stalling a game of dice,

no longer that foot's pause

driving a thought home,

no longer that inspiration

turning words into kites.

Ballimaran is a busy stream

of shoes hung for sale.

No sound of hooves

or sight of palanquins

reigns over subjects.

The colour of footwear

automobile horns

[mark the citizen's health.](#)

I ask a man, "Which way

to Ghalib's home?"

His eyebrows arch, "Why didn't

you ask him the address? A

name is not enough."

I go my way, telling Ghalib's

ghost, "Your name has lost its

address. Is that how

one gains the world?"

*The guard in blue uniform
is wearier than stone. He ushers
me inside the ancient
courtyard made up to date.*

*I stare at forgeries on stage
[set to befool children. It isn't easy](#)
[to veil someone's neglected](#)
absence.*

*The telephone booth is an offstage
parody of callers in prosaic
[hurry. No one carves like old times a](#)
*turn of phrase to perfection.**

*[I ponder. No one anymore counts](#)
blessings with wine. No one
disobeys god with irony. No one braids
the night with couplets.*

*As light sinks a girl drifts in to read
the dilemmas of Ghalib's heart. The azan
distracts her glued eyes. She
leaves folding a secret in her dupatta.*

*It is time to go home. Time to leave
what is left of Ghalib in
Qasim Jaan. To leave what is left
of Qasim Jaan in Ballimaran.*

*Names that belong to a different
time when the air breathed
verses. And a couplet weighed heavier
than a pair of shoes.*

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