

Recently we had a small workshop here at Columbia University about Urdu poetry, as we do every spring. Both scholars and poetry-lovers in other fields came. Everybody had received a packet of materials to read in advance, and this formed the basis for discussion. As usual, in the morning we did close readings of poems, and in the afternoon we discussed the poetry in larger social and historical perspectives. This year, our topic was a special kind of *ghazal* that purports to speak in a feminine voice, a form of *ghazal* called *rextii*. (For an explanation of the transliteration system used for Urdu words, please see the “note on transliteration” at the end). In the morning, we read and analysed *rextii ghazals* by Insha, Rangin, and Jan Sahib. The afternoon’s discussion was based on several recent theoretical articles we had read; the most significant ones—Naim 2001, Petievich 2001, Vanita and Kidwai 2001—are listed in the brief bibliography at the end.

Men Impersonating Women

The *rextii* tradition was created entirely by male poets: *rextii ghazals* were recited in *mushairahs*, and met with both disapproval from the more puritanical as well as amused appreciation from others. These *ghazals* purported to be in the voice of women involved in lesbian love affairs and expressing affection, vexation, longing, etc. toward their beloveds; but then the last verse contained the poet’s pen-name, and this deliberately broke the illusion. Undoubtedly *rextii* poetry did incorporate real women’s language of the time (idioms, expressions, turns of phrase), especially that of courtesans. But did this amount to a form of tribute offered by male poets who were friendly with courtesans, spent time with them and learned to

“The Straw that I Took in My Teeth”: Of Lovers, Beloveds and Charges of Sexism in the Urdu Ghazal

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reflect their concerns in verse? Or did it represent a cooption of women’s language into a satirical subgenre that sought only to amuse voyeuristic male audiences?

In the course of the discussion, the observation was made that at least *rextii* was a refreshing change from the sexism of the “regular” *ghazal*. This brief, casual remark gave me an unexpected shock. It made me realize that I myself, having studied the *ghazal* for decades now, had never even thought of it—much less reacted to it—as “sexist” poetry. It astonished me to realize that others might perceive it this way. (If you want to see irritating sexism and male chauvinism in classical Urdu literature, head straight for the *daastaan* or romance tradition (Pritchett 1991) where it is very much in evidence).

Quest for Union

Yet it shouldn’t have astonished me that people might read the *ghazal* in this way. After all, the case for “sexism” in the classical *ghazal* looks, on the face of it, like a strong one. The poet always assumes the voice of an (aristocratic) adult male, a

passionate lover who is determinedly pursuing a beloved who may be an unavailable respectable lady, a fickle courtesan, a beautiful boy just about to reach puberty, or of course God. The poet may tease, reproach, blackmail, beseech, or scold the beloved, but his constant quest is always for *vas.l*, a directly sexual term which is usually discreetly translated as “union.” When the voice of the beloved is briefly reproduced, the beloved is never allowed to emerge as a person, but is made to say only flirtatious, disdainful, or fickle things suitable to the role of sex object. Rejected ten times or a hundred times, the lover refuses to accept the beloved’s will; his is the sensibility of a stalker. He is sure that the beloved who says no is merely testing him; the beloved who chooses other lovers is only testing his faithfulness. The lover’s quest for “union” is carried to the point of obsession: he cannot take no for an answer, he cannot leave the beloved alone. Nor is he really sorry for his infuriating behavior: he feels vindicated by the strength of his love and desire. In short, he sounds like the raw material for a “crime of passion;” we expect violence to appear in the story somehow. Does the beloved, silenced and objectified, deserve to endure this harassment? If this isn’t arrogantly sexist and male chauvinist behavior, what is it?

Of course, the above is a kind of “police report” reading of the *ghazal*, as though its characters were real

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humans walking around the streets of Delhi. But such literal-minded readings of the *ghazal* do have a long history. People began to read *ghazals* as though they were versified reportage of social reality soon after the Rebellion of 1857; before 1857, such readings are not to be found. The reason for this abrupt change is pretty clear. It came from a convergence of interests. The Rebellion made the British realize that they needed to take precautions against any such upsets in the future, and that these precautions should include a greater hand in education, cultural life, and social reform. The Rebellion also made the Indo-Muslim elite realise that they had suffered a crushing defeat, and that they needed to modernise and generally rethink their culture, including the poetry that was at its heart. The convergence of these two interests resulted in efforts to “reform” the *ghazal*, to make it correspond to a vision of “natural poetry” along Wordsworthian lines (Pritchett 1994).

For after all, if you believe (as the British and Indian reformists and “natural poetry” advocates did) that poetry both is and ought to be a mirror of society, then the classical *ghazal* indeed depicts a “decadent” society.

Decadent, Bizarre Lives?

The lover in the *ghazal* is always likely to behave as a real reprobate: he will frequent courtesans; covet respectable and unavailable ladies; pursue beautiful pre-pubertal boys; get drunk and pass out beside the road; ruin his home and wander off into the desert; go mad and tear off his clothes; sneer at well-meaning and pious persons; renounce Islam in favor of “idolatry;” kill himself, or get himself executed; and then speak from beyond the grave about his continuing passion. All these activities can be amply documented

in the *divans* of the great classical *ghazal* poets. And all these activities are presented in the same manner, with nothing to choose among them as far as evidence or probability.

I’ve never met anyone who was bothered by the more bizarre of these activities: probably nobody has ever seriously envisioned Mir and Ghalib and the other great poets tearing off their clothes, wandering off into the desert, renouncing Islam, being publicly executed, or continuing to speak after death. Yet I’ve certainly met people who were bothered by the idea that Mir and Ghalib and the others drank all the time, sneered at religious persons, chased women indiscriminately, and pursued beautiful boys—although there’s no more reason to believe they did these things than to believe they went mad and tore off their clothes, etc., since the poetic evidence is exactly the same for all such activities.

Wordsworthifying Ghalib!

Taking the *ghazal* as a mirror of society is thus, in its extreme forms, upsetting, since the society it would correspond to would be a bizarre and unhealthy one. But for the same reason it’s also logically self-limiting, since anybody who looks closely at the wilder kinds of *ghazal* behavior can easily see that they’re unreal. The

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lover’s most extraordinary forms of behavior don’t describe or fit into any actual society at all, much less the late-medieval and early-modern Indo-Muslim society that the poets themselves lived in. Many champions of “natural poetry” have responded to this situation by singling out for attention only those verses of classical *ghazal* that can be made to look realistic, societally descriptive, or (best of all) autobiographical. To try to edit Ghalib into a pseudo-Wordsworth is a terrible idea, and has resulted in extremely skewed and limited views of the classical *ghazal*.

The Lover and Beloved

But now I want to get down to the most fundamental level: the basic situation of the lover and beloved. The poet assumes the persona of a certain kind of lover, and that lover is definitely an adult male. In almost all classical *ghazal* verses the poet speaks in the voice of that lover, freely referring to himself as “I” (*maiN*), or colloquially as “we” (*ham*). The beloved is never an adult male, but is a woman, a youth, or God. Grammatically, however, the beloved is always treated as masculine, even if clearly feminine traits are being described. Various theories have been advanced to explain this fact. Probably the simplest explanation is the *ghazal*’s mystical tradition: in principle the beloved can (almost) always be God, and it would be theologically undesirable to refer to God in the feminine. Most of the time, of course, in a two-line *ghazal* verse it’s impossible to identify the beloved with any precision at all: neither male/female nor human/divine distinctions can be made.

But one generalisation can be made, and I want to make it strongly: the power distribution in the *ghazal* is radically unequal, and the overwhelmingly powerful one is the

beloved, not the lover. The lover suffers and dies; the beloved lives and thrives. This basic truth shapes the *ghazal* world in countless ways. For one thing, it at once removes the *ghazal* from the realm of normal social convention, in which, as we all know, adult males (especially aristocratic ones, such as the lover generally seems to be) are still at the top of the hierarchy. In the *ghazal*, the (aristocratic) adult male lover is so far inferior in power to the non-adult-male beloved that the difference is almost inexpressible. (Think of the proverb *kahaan raajaa bhoj kahaan ganguu telii*, which translates to *how can you compare a King Bhoj to a Gangu oilman?*) This extreme imbalance of power is sufficient in itself to cause accusations of “sexism” and “male chauvinism” to miss their mark.

Let me illustrate this point with a few verses. Since I’m now working on a commentary on Ghalib (available online at <http://www.columbia.edu/~fp7>), I will draw my examples from Ghalib. This verse is germane to the discussion, because it’s directly about submission (10,3 in my enumeration, composed after 1826):

*nah aa)ii sit:vat-e qaatil bhii
maana (mere naaloN ko liyaa
daaNtoN
meN jo tinkaa hu) aa reshah
nayastaaN kaa*

(Not even the grandeur of the murderer could forbid my laments, the straw that I took in my teeth became a vein of a reed-thicket)

Here is one influential commentator’s explanation of the verse:

The custom is that when someone is oppressed by someone’s grandeur and overbearingness, he takes up a piece of grass or straw and holds it between his teeth, so that the person will take him for an obedient and conquered one and no longer seek to kill him. The poet says

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that not even the grandeur and overbearingness of the murderer caused my laments to cease. The straw that I took in my teeth as an expression of submission became a vein of a reed-thicket, and it’s obvious that the flute grows in a reed-thicket, and the flute is a master of lament; in short, that straw became the root of lamentation [*naalah-kashii kii jaR*]. (Nazm 1900:10-11)

Surrender in Suffering

Here the seed of poetry itself is found in the lover’s suffering, almost as in the Sanskrit epic account of how *shoka*, or grief, gave rise to the *shloka*, or verse. Not only suffering occurs, but suffering accepted without protest, as shown by the straw taken between the teeth as a sign of surrender. Suffering results in laments that the lover tries his best to stifle, and that are expressed only, paradoxically, through the reed he has taken in his teeth in very extreme submission.

Another form of extreme submission is to kiss someone’s feet. This example is built on that image (in my numbering system, it’s 25,3, and was composed in 1821):

*le to luuN sote meN us ke paaNv kaa
bosah magari
aisii baatoN se vuh kaafir bad-
gumaaN ho jaa) egaa*

(I would kiss his/her foot in sleep, but, from such things that infidel will become distrustful/disaffected/arrogant).

As Hasrat Mohani (Hasrat 1905:26-7) has pointed out, the verse

doesn’t make clear in whose sleep I might kiss her foot—in her sleep, or in mine? (Please note that I’m saying “her” only for convenience and clarity; the verb is, as always in classical *ghazal*, masculine.)

If we take the first reading, so that the sleep is hers, then the lover seems to be in a position of utter submission—the beloved is so disdainful of him, and so confident of his helplessness, that she is willing to go to sleep in his presence, undisturbed by any thought that he might take advantage of the situation. As in fact he will not, because he knows he will risk her distrust and anger if he does. Since she is asleep, though, perhaps he could kiss her foot without waking her? Maybe he is too intimidated to risk it. Or maybe her omniscience (and her deep though subliminal interest in dominating the lover) extend even to the realm of sleep? Of course, kissing someone’s foot is itself a sign of complete subservience—and not even that is permitted to the lover.

If we take the second reading, and the sleep is his, we locate the whole scene in the lover’s dream. He dreams of the beloved, but even in his dream he’s afraid to kiss her foot, for fear of vexing her. Because she so dominates his imagination, he doesn’t dare take liberties even with a dream-image of her. Because she’s so mysteriously powerful, her real self will know if he kisses her dream-self’s foot. In the latter case, doesn’t it imply a deep, strange bond between beloved and lover despite everything, since she monitors (and dominates) even his dreams?

Beloved as God

The beloved is here affectionately called a *kaafir*, an infidel. She is also often called an idol *but*, *sanam*, and many verses play on her resemblance to God—and replacement of God in the lover’s imagination. Here’s a

notable example (27,8 in my ordering, composed in 1821):

*falak ko dekh ke kartaa huuN us
ko yaad asad
jafaa meN us kii hai andaaz kaar-
farmaa kaa*

(Having looked at the sky, I remember him/her, Asad, in anger he/she has the manner of a ruler commander)

“Asad” was Ghalib’s early pen-name. When I first read this verse, I kept expecting “*bhii*,” (too), to be there somewhere in the second line, to quietly make the point that the beloved was being compared to God. But in fact there is no *bhii*. Thus either the verse is a pious commonplace, which is how some commentators read it, or else the beloved has entirely displaced God from the lover’s horizon. Ghalib has of course arranged it to permit both readings. When the lover looks at the heavens, the proper domain of God alone, he doesn’t think of God at all, it’s the beloved whom he thinks of—for she, like the heavens, has deadly, commanding power when she’s angry. God, in short, is nowhere, since not even looking at the heavens serves to evoke him, and the very quality he is famous for—being powerful and dangerous when angered—is effortlessly transferred to the beloved. Her status as a sort of alternative God has rarely been so unselfconsciously confirmed.

Gender Identity Hidden

Verses like these are of course illustrative rather than definitive. Verses could also be cited that suggest a less direly skewed power balance between beloved and lover—but for every one such verse, a much larger number of this radically inegalitarian kind would be found. And of course so much more is going on in good *ghazal* verses (not to speak of great ones like Ghalib’s) that usually the nuances and subtleties and wordplay are what’s fascinating,

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not just the prose content. The *ghazal* is open to everybody, of all ages and classes and genders and conditions, and its very stylization and complexity are what make it so. Classical *ghazals* composed by women poets are virtually indistinguishable from those composed by men.

Women can, in short, enter the *ghazal* world just as intimately and accessibly and identifying as men, without being put off by sexism. For it contains no real men and women, but only the lovers and beloveds and rivals and advisors and other stylized characters who are needed for the great “passion play” of the *ghazal* world. Humans long to live, and know they will die; they long for ideal love, and know they will not find it; they long for joy, and find sorrow. This world of inhuman pressure on the human (suffering, death) and human

pressure on the inhuman (vain demands, protests, the consolations of great poetry) is the world of the *ghazal*; it’s a world deeper than that of social conventions, and it’s a world we all know all too well.

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