The Politics of a Lover's Complaints: Loss of Power as a Metaphor in Ghalib's Urdu Verse

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ABSTRACT: *In the nineteenth century India, the older indigenous culture which had achieved its zenith during the times of the great Mughal Empire gradually declined after the defeat of the last Mughal king in the 1857 rebellion against the British. Ghalib was not only an eyewitness to a great political change but he was also a victim of it. The present study is an effort to read Ghalib's Urdu love poetry as a commentary on the discursive political situation in the Delhi of his times especially in the aftermath of the 1857 defeat. Ghalib has artistically used the canons of classical Urdu love poetry to reflect the ideological conflicts of his turbulent times. Seen from the New Historicist point of view, the lover's complaints in Ghalib can be interpreted as the political statements issued by the deposed Mughal king. Ghalib's dealings with his beloved may be read as negotiations between the commanding British rulers and the subdued Indian nobleman. Ghalib's love poetry also gives useful insight into the reshaping of the individual identity under the impact of the experience of loss. Sometimes, we find Ghalib circulating subversive ideas. Ghalib's times, especially the post 1857 years, were not suitable for the expression of subversive political ideas. Ghalib's poetry shows that he was painfully aware of the precarious position not only of his native culture but also of his own individual position as the dignified member of a quickly vanishing culture. Ghalib's poetry is an endeavour to give voice to the conflicted ideology of his time when survival as a virtue had become more relevant than the direct expression of political truths.*

Keywords: Ghalib, love poetry, history, politics, cultural identity, New Historicism.

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Ghalib happened to live at one of the most turbulent times in the history of India. It was a time when the splendid edifice of the great Mughal empire finally came crumbling down rather in a very awkward fashion after the defeat of the last Mughal king, Bahadur Shah Zafar in the 1857 rebellion against the British. The decline of the Mughal political power had started in 1707, at the time of Aurangzaib's death. The British had been gradually increasing their influence in India. In 1803, they defeated the Marathas, the powerful political group of the time, and practically set up their dominance over the Mughal emperor. The decline of the Mughal Empire had been slow but certain. By 1803, the Mughal king had practically lost his control on Indian politics. Shah Alam received royal stipend from the British. Percival Spear (1980, 37) gives the East India Company policy in the following words: "The reduction in Shah Alam's status was to be accompanied by every attention to his material comfort and to his personal dignity. The Mughals were no longer to count in Indian politics, but their political feelings would be dulled by the opiates of comfort and respect". The curious mixture of the Mughal kings' limited power and their abundant lack of power is described by Spear in this fashion: "If throughout India the Mughal was henceforth to be regarded as a pensioner, within the palace walls he was still to enjoy the powers and dignities of a sovereign" (38). The artificial pomp and power which Bahadur Shah Zafar possessed was rudely shaken during the 1857 rebellion, and the aftermath of the 1857 event was death, destruction and humiliation.

In spite of its painful decline, the Mughal Empire at its zenith (especially in the seventeenth century) had been a source not only of great power but also of great splendor. In this connection**,** Spear (1990, 52) remarks:

> The seventeenth century was the great age of the Mughals. To contemporary Europe India was the land of 'the great Mogul'... Their pomp and luxury intrigued and their power impressed foreigners. Bernier's description of the empire at its height was something of a best seller and so popularized Mughal politics as to move Dryden to write his Tragedy of Aurangzebe.

Ghalib was a well known member of a society which had been defeated politically but which still took pride in its splendid past and characteristic customs. Ghalib was an apolitical person; he did not write much verse that was overtly political in content. His letters contain pertinent political comment and his Persian prose *Dastambu* is an

account of the 1857 rebellion. The ghazal form, in which most of Ghalib's Urdu poetry is composed, served as an excellent medium for the metaphorical expression of the politics of Ghalib's days. It is especially in the love poetry composed by Ghalib, in the complaints of the lover, and in the negotiations between the lover and the beloved that we find an expression of the political sentiments of his days.

Research Methodology:

Louis Montrose in his essay "Eliza, Queene of Shepeardes", and the Pastoral of Power' (1994) had shown the presence of power in the genre of the pastoral - a genre that is commonly not associated with the expression of power. Montrose analyzed the part which Elizabethan pastorals played in 'the symbolic mediation of social relationships' (cited in Hans Bertens, 157). Commenting on such a role of the New Historicism, Hans Bertens (158) has remarked that New Historicism focuses on "... thus far hidden and unsuspected sources of, and vehicles for, power and on the question of how power has worked to suppress or marginalize rival stories and discourses". Simon Malpas and Paul Wake write: "...new historicism insists that texts are part of the everyday, are firmly embedded in the institutions and power relations of general culture" (60). Michel Foucault remarks that "... power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations" (94). According to Foucault, power remains unstable because the very use of power produces resistance. The American critic Aram Veeser observes, "every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices", and "literary and non-literary 'texts' circulate inseparably"(xi).

Arthur F. Marotti in his book *John Donne: Coterie Poet,* has revealed the political dimension of Donne's love poetry. He is of the opinion that Donne's love poetry is a reflection of his unfulfilled ambitions for socioeconomic and political power. Achsah Guibbory has also analyzed what Andrew Mousley (41) calls "the misogynistic politics of love in Donne's *elegies*". Guibbory has presented the thesis that Donne did not accept the change in the patriarchal gender hierarchies that was caused by the rule of Elizabeth I. Therefore, in his Elegies, Donne tries to re-establish male dominance by debasing women. Analyzing the political aspect of Donne's love poetry, Guibbory sees love itself as political, as representing power transactions between men and women. In his Elegies, Donne has shown his concern over submission to female rule. In many of his Elegies, Donne attacks or

rejects female authority. In the opinion of Guibbory, Donne's efforts to degrade and conquer women have a special sociopolitical meaning"(28).

The present study is an effort to show that the expression of love in Ghalib's Urdu poetry is pregnant with political sentiments. The complaints of the lover and the transactions between the lover and the beloved may be read as contemporary political history. Several couplets in Ghalib may be interpreted as political statements given by the deposed and defeated Mughal king. Ghalib's love poetry may also be seen as shaping his personal identity. While fighting for the restoration of his pension, Ghalib was, simultaneously, endeavoring to preserve his personal as well as his cultural identity. The study focuses on Ghalib's Urdu ghazals only. Ghalib's text is taken from *Ghalib's Urdu Ghazals*, edited and translated by Yusuf Husain, and published by Ghalib Institute, New Delhi. At the end of each couplet quoted, the numbers refer to ghazal number and couplet number respectively in the selected edition. For example, 105:3 means ghazal number 105 and couplet number 3. If translation is taken from some other source, it is mentioned at the end of the translated couplet. The study makes use of the New Historicist approach. In order to get a clearer picture of the politics of Ghalib's days, help is taken from contemporary letters, written by Ghalib himself and others, Ghalib's account of the 1857 events, *Dastambu*, *Kotwal's Diary* which was written by Syed Mubarak Shah, the kotwal of Delhi during the 1857 uprising, and *Yadgar-e-Ghalib*, the biography of Ghalib written by Altaf Husain Hali.

Discussion and analysis:

The Lover as the Deposed Mughal King

It has been pointed out that since the times of the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam, the political power of the Mughal kings had been the de jure power rather than the de facto one. The Mughal kings had become British pensioners and they were never satisfied with the stipend which they received from the British. Bahadur Shah Zafar's annual stipend was never increased despite his wishes and requests. The Mughal king's power was further curtailed by depriving him of his prerogative to name his heir or son as successor to the throne. So it would be apt to remark that the Mughal kings in the second half of the nineteenth century were obliged to enjoy a kind of loss of power rather than any real royal or political power in the strict sense of the word. In so many of his couplets, Ghalib seems to be representing the political sentiments of the de jure king, Bahadur Shah Zafar. The following statement could have

been made by any of the de jure Mughal kings between Shah Alam and Bahadur Shah Zafar:

Love's *throne* will seek in vain a lover worthy of *my place*

And beauty's airs, and beauty's graces fail now I am gone.

(Ralph Russell, 2003, 57:2, p. 116, the italics are mine for emphasis)

Yusuf Husain's translation of the same couplet runs like this:

There is none deserving

The dignified office of madness;

Blandishment and grace

Have been *dismissed* after me.

(Yusuf Husain, 57:2, p.83, the italics are mine)

The Urdu words 'mansab' and 'mazooli' in the original couplet and the words 'throne', 'my place', 'the dignified office' and 'dismissed' in the translation have political connotations in the context of the Mughal authority in Ghalib's days. The couplet can be read as a statement given by the deposed king who seems to be reminding us that grace itself has been dismissed after he was deprived of his exalted seat and that there will be none deserving the imperial rank in future.

The political power of the Mughal kings from the last decades of the eighteenth century to the end of the 1857 revolt was characterized by a loss of power. Shah Alam II was deposed, blinded and humiliated by Ghulam Qadir, the Rohilla, in July, August 1788 (Spear, 1980, p. 27). Jonathan Scott writes to Hastings in a letter dated May 20, 1789:

> I have a dreadful account of the unfortunate fate of Shaw Aulum and his family. The poor old king had his eyes put out, wanted common necessaries and was often beaten by the abominable Golaum Khadir... The new king Bedar Shaw... was obliged to beg for a rupee to buy a meal off Golaum Khadir who refused to see him, when His Majesty went on foot to beg an interview... (cited in Spear, 1980, p. 27-28)

The Mughal kings were forced to receive pension. Spear writes: "in 1836, 795 salatin were receiving stipends of some sort" (1980, p. 39). The helplessness of Bahadur Shah Zafar can be seen on several occasions during the 1857 uprising. On the 13th of May, 1857, around forty Europeans, consisting mostly of ladies and children had taken refuge in the king's palace. The king issued instructions to the rebel

soldiers asking them not to harm these Europeans. The rebel soldiers took this group to the Dewan-i- Aam with the intention of killing them. Mubarak Shah, the kotwal of Delhi at that time, writes is his diary: "The king wept and besought the Mutineers not to take the lives of helpless women and children... The mutineers refused to listen..." (19). The unfortunate women and children were slaughtered in spite of the king's instructions to the contrary. On another occasion during the mutiny, the rebel soldiers attacked the house of Raja Jeet Singh, the uncle of the Raja of Puttiala. The soldiers insisted that the Raja conveyed information to the British side. The mutineers disgraced him and let him bare foot through the main bazars to the king's palace. Mubarak Shah narrates the story in the following manner:

> The King... saw the Raja being thus hurried along by the sepoys and rose up at once clasping him to his bosom and consoling him... and expressing regret at the treatment he had met with. He bemoaned also his own helpless position and the power and unbridled license of the soldiery" (104).

The king's helplessness was pervasive. He was helpless at the hands of not only the British but also the native people. The helplessness and weakness suggested by the foregoing events is quite characteristic of the de jure Mughal kings during the nineteenth century. There are several couplets in Ghalib's ghazals which may be seen as statements of confession of weakness and loss of power on behalf of the fallen Mughal king. For instance:

O stifled desire

For complete destruction;

My body no longer has the vigour

To face a battle-seeking love. (Husain, 103:5, p. 126)

And:

Through weakness, not resignation

We have given up the search,

And have become unwholesome

As a resting place for man's ambition. (Husain, 82:4, p. 109)

The unconscious 'desire' in the first couplet quoted above could be the desire for complete political authority. But the consequence of such a desire could be 'complete destruction'; that is why it is a 'stifled desire'.

The second couplet is an answer to the question: why his "body no longer has the vigour / To face a battle-seeking love"? The frank confession of weakness can change into a sense of self-mockery:

The eye is broker for the wares of dishonor,

And the heart buys the *delights of humiliation*. (Husain, 188:4, p.213, emphasis mine)

A lot more verses could be quoted here. Commenting on the general impression created by the conventional classical Urdu ghazal, Shamsur Rahman Faruqi has observed that its protagonist is a person

> ...who is essentially a helpless slave to social power or sexual desire, battered and defeated... we are left with the feeling that we have been in close touch with a vigorous , complex intellect, a mind capable of self-mockery and introspection, a body and spirit that have suffered and enjoyed , and are still prepared to suffer and enjoy... (27)

It is not merely the helplessness of the conventional lover that Ghalib is portraying here; seen in the larger political context of his age, Ghalib is alluding to the harsh political reality of his times. The mixing up of 'throne' and 'dismissal', of 'desire' and 'destruction', of 'vigour' and the 'battle-seeking love', and of 'weakness' and 'man's ambition' has political implications. Ghalib has meaningfully employed the traits of the conventional lover-protagonist of classical Urdu ghazal to give expression to the loss of power of the Mughal kings of his time.

The British as the Beloved

Not only Ghalib's verse but also his prose serves as a space where the conflicting, discursive discourses of his times can be observed. One of these discourses was the perception of the loss of power of the Mughal political authority. Ghalib was a distinguished member of the Indian nobility of his age. Bahadur Shah Zafar's powerless politics posed a serious threat to Ghalib's position as a native nobleman. In order to survive in a hostile situation, Ghalib had to follow the dominant discourse of his times. His Persian prose *Dastambu* is frankly pro-British. On the surface it is an account of the 1857 revolt, but, in fact, it offers a justification of Ghalib's conduct during the revolt. *Dastambu* tells us 'his story' / history: "Readers of this book should know that I...have eaten the bread and salt of the British and, from my earliest childhood, have been fed from the table of these world conquerors" (cited in P. K. Varma, 144). The characteristic expression and

confession of the natives' weakness that we have seen in Ghalib's verse is to be found in his prose as well. In *Dastambu,* he writes:

> A few poor reclusive men, who received their bread and salt by the grace of the British, lived scattered throughout different parts of the city .,. These humble, peaceful people did not know an arrow from an axe; their hands were empty of the sword ... These were not men who could do battle. They could do nothing but sit, helpless and grief-stricken, in their locked houses... I was one of these helpless, stricken men. (cited in Varma,145)

The foregoing lines refer to the discourse which finds abundant expression in Ghalib's verse. Along with the lines of the 1857 rebellion, there had been another battle going on in the nineteenth century, though it was fought on a different level and in a very different manner. It was Ghalib's persistent endeavour to regain his lost pension. On the surface, it seems to be an effort to secure his financial position, but deep down, Ghalib was fighting to preserve his cultural identity in the face of the British political dominance and social anarchy. Ghalib was a member of and a staunch supporter of the declining feudal, aristocratic, Mughal society. He was 'Asadullah Khan, the nephew of Nasrullah Baig Khan, the Feudal lord of Sonk, Sirsa in the district of Agra'. Ghalib had a place of honour in the Governor-General's durbar. Ghalib insisted on the preservation of his exalted social position in the Mughal society. In 1842, Mr Thompson, Secretary to the Government of India, wanted to appoint a lecturer in Persian at Delhi College. The names of three great scholars of Persian were suggested. They included Ghalib, Momin Khan and Maulvi Imam Bakhsh Sahbai. Mr Thompson first invited Ghalib for an interview. Ghalib reached the Secretary's house in a palanquin and waited outside for the Secretary to come to greet him according to the Indian custom. Ghalib was informed that he had come there in the capacity of a candidate for a job and, therefore, could not be received as a guest of honour. Ghalib said, "I intended to enter government service to enhance my prestige, not to lose what I already have" (Hali, 38). Ghalib declined the job and went home. In behaving in this manner Ghalib becomes a carrier of a different, discursive kind of discourse: the assertion of the sanctity of indigenous culture in spite of political disadvantage.

It is interesting to note that in the context of the pension, the situations of Bahadur Shah, the king, and Ghalib, the poet, resembled strikingly. Pavan K. Varma (29) has referred to this correspondence: "What Ghalib fought for and lost at his level, Bahadur Shah fought for

and lost at his". The British had granted pension to Ghalib's uncle Nasrullah Baig Khan. In 1826, Ghalib was deprived of his share in this hereditary pension. Ghalib had to fight a long battle (extending over more than thirty four years) to win his pension back and it was in April, 1860 that his pension was finally reissued (R. Russell & K. Islam, 17-20). The story of Ghalib's efforts in this connection is a long one. Ghalib had to write and request the British authorities endlessly. In a letter to Mir Mehdi Majrooh, dated Oct, 1858, Ghalib writes: "What should I tell you about my pension when I myself know nothing at all? All inquiries in the office regarding action taken in my case remain unanswered" (translation by K. C. Kanda, 336). In February, 1859, Ghalib writes to the same person:

> After 22 months of silence, the Kotwal has received a communication from the high-ups, asking him to send them information about Asadullah Khan's financial status. Is he really in a bad state? The Kotwal has, as per rule, asked me to produce before him four witnesses to certify my indigence... This doesn't mean that after the attestation of these four witnesses, I'll receive the arrears, and the regular release of pension will resume. No sir, this is not possible. The proof of my financial bankruptcy will only entitle me to be included in the list of the "hopefuls". (Kanda, 341)

Commenting on Ghalib's position regarding his pension, Varma writes that Ghalib was not "pleading for favours but asking for his rightful due, through procedures open to him as per the British laws themselves" (24-5). The fact was that it was not just money that Ghalib demanded but along with it esteem and recognition of his dignified rank in the Mughal society. This point is made clear in his April 1860 letter to Mehdi Majrooh**.** While referring to the Nawab of Rampur, Ghalib writes:

> The Nawab has been sending me a monthly allowance of rupees one hundred regularly. When I visited him last, he gave me another hundred rupees as the invitation allowance. Which means that I'll get 200 rupees per month if I stay in Rampur... *Brother, it is not the question of one or two hundred rupees only. The fact is that Nawab Sahib doesn't treat me as a servant, but loves me as a friend, and rewards me as a teacher.* (Kanda, 347, italics mine)

Ghalib's *Dastambu* is a vindication of his conduct during the 1857 mutiny. It is an endorsement of the discourse of the indigenous culture's

political weakness. But, even this book contains a discursive discourse. At the end of this book, Ghalib states in clear words what he expected from the British authorities:

> However, if I do not receive the arrears of my pension my heart will be broken in pieces as a mirror by a stone... I long for orders from the auspicious sovereign concerning the three petitions about which I have written in this book - that is, *for title, for robe of honour, and for pension.* (Varma, 152, emphasis mine)

Ghalib's priorities are clear here. In the context of the Urdu love poetry of Ghalib's times, the negotiations between Ghalib and the British authorities may be read as dealings between the lover and the beloved: the former begging, broken-hearted, complaining and trying to show his social prestige while the latter indifferent, discourteous, snobbish and even rude. Commenting on the conventions of Urdu love poetry, Faruqi observes: "The lover-protagonist and the beloved object both live in a world of extremes: supreme beauty, supreme cruelty, supreme devotion – all things are at their best, or worst, in this world" (11). In the context of the lover - beloved transactions, the following couplet becomes quite rich in political implications:

One who sits in the shade

Of his beloved's wall

Can think himself king

Of the empire of Hindustan. (Husain, 135:6, p.167)

The couplet quoted above makes an interesting suggestion: sitting in the shade of one's beloved's wall is a great privilege. The wall of the beloved's house is too high and formidable for the lover to cross it. He can sit in its shade for some time, but it will not convey his message fully across the wall. The only option left for the lover is to dash his head against the wall. For Ghalib, pursuing his pension case must have been a similar experience:

Poor frenzied Ghalib

Breaking his head;

I recollect this

When I see thy wall. (Husain, 63:12, p. 91)

One great obstacle for the traditional lover is that his beloved is obsessed with the perception of her own beauty. This leaves little scope for the lover's sentiments to succeed. The problem aggravates when in frustration the impudent lover tries to assert his own beauty:

Thou art vexed at the sight

Of thine own face in the mirror;

If there should be two more like thee

In the city, then how will it be? (Husain, 125:5, p.156)

In the foregoing couplet, Ghalib is cleverly trying to remind the British that they are not the only "beautiful" people in India, that the indigenous culture has its own beauty, and that this fact must be acknowledged. However, from this point onwards, the lover decides to seek power out of his powerlessness and starts expressing subversive ideas:

If thou wilt not give a kiss,

So be it. Abuse me then.

At least you have a tongue,

Even if you have no mouth. (Husain, 108:4, p. 132)

And:

Would to God that my hands

Be put to shame for sometimes

Ravishing my own front-opening,

And sometimes my sweetheart's skirt. (Husain, 126:4, p.158)

And finally:

What is fidelity? And what is love?

If I have to strike my head

Against a stone, O flint-hearted one,

Why should it be on thy threshold? (Husain, 127:4, p. 160)

Thus, in the disguise of love poetry, Ghalib becomes a carrier of the discursive and conflicting discourses of his times. He can also be seen circulating subversive ideas. His times were suitable for the expression of half-truths only. Ghalib expresses this dual nature of perception of his times in his love poetry.

Conclusion:

The nineteenth century in India, especially the second half of it, was a difficult time for the people of India, and more so for the Muslims of Delhi. In the 1857 revolt, the efforts to bring the enfeebled kingship of the old king to power failed miserably. The things in the rebels' camps were chaotic; moreover, there were spies and traitors within the royal palace. Ghalib preferred not to record in his writings the complete political truth of his times in clear words. His *Dastambu* as well as the diary of the kotwal Mubarak Shah contain only the half truth. After the failure of the revolt, Ghalib was summoned by the British officer to justify his role during the mutiny. Ghalib's statement before the British officer that he (Ghalib) was half Muslim contained the whole truth. However, Ghalib's love poetry, in the form of the complaints of the traditional lover, and in the transactions between the lover and the beloved, serves to comment on the politics of his times. Ghalib's love poetry is replete with the images of prison, chains, prisoner, bloodshed, dead body, throne, deposition, slave, honour, native land, fidelity, and empire, etc. These images work to create an impression of the loss of power. But this very loss of power serves as a source of strength and inspires subversion. The study also shows that Ghalib's own position as an individual was closely connected with the shift in the political power in his times. In presenting the political situation of his times in his love poetry, Ghalib was also, at the same time, serving to reshape the culture of love poetry in the Urdu language. Thus, Ghalib's Urdu ghazal, with its observance of the conventions of traditional love, provides a space for circulating the discursive political discourses of his times. By presenting subversive ideas, Ghalib not only serves to reshape the norms of love poetry, he also upholds Foucault's contention that "...power is exercised from innumerable points" (94).

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