

Ghalib in Translation: Finding Love and Loss in Select Poetic Allusions

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Abstract

Mirza Mohammad Asadullah Khan Ghalib, born and brought up during the turbulent Mughal Empire, was remarkably the first virtuoso to represent Urdu literature internationally. His verses reveal all the colors in the palette of human emotions and seem to provide respite from the political and communal upheaval that went on around him. The West tries to look into what it is about the work of this poetical stalwart that transcends borders and leads countries across the globe to embrace his timeless verses into their own literary culture. Allusions being one of the most universal literary devices, this paper closely analyses the sheer vicarious nature of the aforementioned allusions he uses in his poetry. The research aspires to elucidate the literary and religious allusions alongside the themes of love and loss found in the select couplets. An attempt is made to explain several translations of his couplets bearing in mind the incidents that had befallen during his days and to disclose how Ghalib continues to fascinate the modern world even today through his distinctive use of various allusions.

Keywords: *Ghalib, Urdu Poetry, Literary and Religious Allusions, Love and Loss.*

Introduction

Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib, a prominent poet hailing from the Mughal era, distinguished himself as the literary figure of the 19th century by composing verses in both Persian and Urdu languages. Born in Agra on December 27, 1797, Ghalib gave the ghazal a specific place in literatures around the world in addition to introducing it as one of Urdu literature's most distinctive forms.



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There are almost 200 ghazals in his renowned collection, *Diwan-e-Ghalib* which have been translated into many different languages of the world and he, along with his literary pieces makes up more than half of all Urdu literature. The couplets of his *Diwan* portray numerous facets of humanity. Extensively read and frequently referenced in daily life, his poetry appeals to a wide range of audiences, much like the works of internationally renowned writers Shakespeare and Wordsworth. In an effort to make him more well-known, many attempts have been made to translate Ghalib's works into many languages. In his article "On Translating Ghalib", Ralph Russel writes, "for much of Ghalib's thought is remarkably modern, there are important elements in it which we can expect to understand more readily than they could". (72)

Thus, the goal of the current study is to draw attention to numerous allusions that Ghalib uses in his ghazals, especially the literary and religious allusions. He is a master at employing allusions in his ghazals and portrays universal human emotions like love, grief, jealousy and mysticism. He is also skilled at using numerous literary devices including conceits, irony, metaphors and humour. Allusion is a literary technique in which a person, place or thing is subtly alluded to. It improves the text by increasing the reader's ability to relate to it and illuminates the main idea, packing a lot of information into a small amount of words. Literary allusions refer to a literary text or figure, whereas religious allusions refer to a religious text, tale or character.

Since the research attempts to shed light on the allusions of a few chosen couplets from Ghalib's *Diwan*, it is expected that the reader will be able to recognize Ghalib's mastery in condensing the entire story into a few words and how uniquely he connects it to his own life and his beloved. Gulshan Suri writes in his article "Ghalib: A Poet of the People":

But, what makes Ghalib unique and darling of the people is his ability to deal with diverse human situations and phases of life that an ordinary human being may be facing in the most critical moments of his life. Ghalib comes to our aid when we are down and low. He does not sermonize; he does not hold promise of a bright future; he does not bring hope of heavenly bliss in this or the other world; he makes no tall claims and he does not try to turn us away from reality. Rather, he confronts us with the bitter truth and persuades us gently to accept it and to live with it; to face it smilingly like a man or to laugh it away like Ghalib could do. And all that while, he stands by our side in our sorrow. He consoles and soothes us and applies the healing touch like a gentle friend. Ghalib has something for every human being facing the strife and ordeal of life. (112)

The translations that follow have purposefully been picked from one specific edition namely, *Ghalib: Selected Poems and Letters* translated by Frances W. Pritchett and Owen T.A. Cornwall, but the analyses and interpretations are entirely own.

The axe caused Farhad to speak with Shirin.

Of whatever kind, in anyone, accomplishment is good.¹

The tragic love story between Shirin, a princess from a royal family, and Farhad, the courageous and talented stone-cutter is alluded to in this lovely couplet. In the first line of the couplet, Ghalib claims that Farhad's proficiency in stone carving allowed him to meet Shirin and allowed them to speak. Farhad might not have been able to find Shirin if he did not have the ability to cut stone. In the second line of the couplet, Ghalib says that successes of all kinds are admirable. It is accomplishment alone that can make people accessible to power, just as Farhad was able to meet Shirin, the love of his life, despite their enormous socioeconomic divides because of his rock-cutting skills.

Understanding Urdu Poetry and its Contributions

Although Urdu poetry has multiple roots that can be traced back to the soils of different lands, the first name that has gone down in the annals of Urdu history in the Indian subcontinent is that of Amir Khusrau, a mystic Persian poet-musician who was associated with the Delhi Sultanate. He was one of the few poets acknowledged exceptionally by Ghalib. Omar Shafee in his "Ghalib Mere Kalam Me- Mirza Ghalib" writes about an exquisitely composed couplet, where Ghalib attributes his genius to Khusrau by claiming to have drunken from the dregs of his "honeyed verse". The decline of the illustrious Mughal Empire in the 18th century saw the rise of Urdu poetry and literature. Contrary to this inverse relation between the Mughal Empire and Urdu, the process of India's struggle for Independence paralleled with the growth of Urdu poetry. Gandhi brought with him the profound sentiment of peaceful resistance which altered the very course of the country's freedom struggle. This poignant rehabilitation can be traced through the evolution in the works of the Urdu poets.

Mike Ghouse, in an article "Ghalib and Marx- A literary encounter between them" writes that Ghalib's influence on the West was so immense that even the renowned philosopher Karl Marx, upon coming across a couple of his verses immediately took to penning down a passionate

¹¹ See Ghalib: Selected Poems and Letters translated by Frances W. Pritchett and Owen T.A. Cornwall, 24.

response to them. “Brother, it’s wonderful! I had never envisaged that revolutionary feelings for independence from slavery would ripen so early in our country like India!”. Marx’s passionate response proves the universality that Ghalib is associated with. The weight of the essence of Ghalib’s work across all themes outside of the traditional idea of “love” is not any less than his heart-wrenching love lyrics on characters like Laila-Majnun. Affection comes in all shapes and sizes, on one hand, it can be the romantic kind and on the other, it may be a citizen’s love for the motherland. The latter has found place in Ghalib’s most prominent pieces after his love poems. Society is a still lake at midnight where the poets and artists are the pebbles launching themselves into its stillness. The resulting ripples in the lake disperse the image of the perfect moon pouring life into it. The prime examples of this analogy are Mirza Ghalib and poets from the West like Wordsworth and Emily Dickinson. Both wrote on themes of longing and loss in love and the reality of the romanticized version of an ideal lover. The raw emotion conveyed in their lines amidst the background of socio-political unrest crossing the boundaries of East and West remains identical in spirit. Out of the insurmountable despair Wordsworth was feeling over the death of his muse was borne his famed collection of Lucy Poems. In a similar vein goes Ghalib’s couplet which he committed to paper in between throes of pain after the loss of his progeny:

Dil-e nadaan tujhe hua kya hai

Aakhir is dard ki dawaa kya hai

My naive heart, what ails you, what?

What’s the cure for this ache, what?

The above mentioned couplet is taken from Anisur Rahman’s 2021 collection “A Garden of All Senses: Five Centuries of Best Urdu Poetry” where he curates the best Urdu poetry of the 20th century. In this couplet, Ghalib asks his innocent heart about his state and tries to find the reason behind all pain.

Religious and Literary Allusions

Through this literary allusion, Ghalib introduces us to the two’s love tale while also bringing to mind Farhad’s uphill struggle to use his axe to chip away at the rock. He helps us understand the

worth of success by taking us to the narrative of Farhad, who toiled tirelessly for many years to cut stone and dig a canal in the rocky mountain beds using his exceptional stone-cutting skills. And when he was almost done, he was wronged by an elderly woman who claimed that his beloved Shirin had passed away as a result of that, he cut his own head with the same axe, sending blood streaming through the canal.

Without an axe Kohkan couldn't die, Asad-

He was dizzy from a hangover of customs and rules.²

Using a literary reference to highlight the themes of love and loss, Ghalib writes that Farhad, a passionate lover and skilled stone-cutter, used an axe to murder himself after being misinformed by the elderly woman that his beloved Shirin had passed away. Even though Ghalib is kind to Farhad, he cynically remarks that he required an axe to kill himself since he was so tied to worldly traditions rather than being madly in love. Ghalib thinks that if Farhad had been so passionate about her, the news of her death should have been enough for him to die.

The poet skillfully immerses readers in Shirin Farhad's tragic love tale and discusses the slave-like relationship between a lover and the laws of the outside world as opposed to the flame of his feelings for the beloved.

Every dwelling is honored through its dweller, Asad.

Since Majnun has died, the wilderness mourns³.

The tragic love story of Laila and Majnun is being referred to by the poet in this couplet. In the opening line, Ghalib discusses the bond between a home and its occupant and how the pride of any home rests with its owner. In the second line of the couplet, the poet describes the wilderness of Majnun's home which he had left after he had gone mad for Laila. Majnun was well-known to the wilderness, thus the news of his passing left it depressed and unpleasant. According to Ghalib, just as a home loses its appeal when its dweller departs, the forest also lost its jolly ambience when Majnun, who had lived there, passed away. Ghalib highlights the depth and fervor of Majnun's love for Laila with this couplet. The forest bore witness to his love and lunacy to the point that his death caused it sorrow and caused it to weep.

² Ibid, 3.

³ Ibid, 90.

In boyhood, Asad, against Majnun
*I'd picked up a stone, but I kept my head.*⁴

The poet alludes to Laila Majnun's tale in this beautiful couplet. When he was a young boy, he claims, he tried to throw a stone at Majnun. Suddenly, he had the thought that he, too, might become like Majnun and be targeted by stones. In other words, Majnun was the epitome of a mad lover who was attacked by the young boys with stones, and Ghalib believes that he deserved mercy. When Ghalib had attempted to pelt stones against him, he realized that such brutality might befall him as well and that his head might be hit in the same manner as was Majnun's head hit by the small children. In this couplet, the poet makes a comparison between the madman's affection and his own nature, which represents the same kind of madness, to show his soft spot for the crazy lover. These lines reveal the poet's personality by showing how his fervor can resemble Majnun's love.

Ardor, in every guise, rejected dignity and propriety-
*Qais, even in the veil of a picture, turned out to be naked.*⁵

The exquisite couplet makes reference to Laila Majnun's tragic love story. According to Ghalib, Qais abandoned all the luxuries and material possessions of life and went naked across the wilderness because he was deeply in love with her beloved, Laila. The opening line of the couplet asserts that love is the adversary of all comforts and that in order for Qais to find the love of his life, he had to give up all his material things. Even now, when people exhibit Qais in a painting, they do not portray him as a respectable individual. In the view of the poet, one can either be financially wealthy or carry the ocean of love within oneself. An individual cannot own both. The crazy lover, Qais, was naked and wandering through the forest. He is depicted naked even in the artworks. In other words, his ferocious emotion is such that it cannot be marked in his paintings as well. The powerful emotion of love is unafraid of what restrictions life has to offer and due to his own disregard for the limitations of the corporeal world, Qais is depicted in the artwork as being completely naked.

⁴ Ibid, 8.

⁵ Ibid, 35.

*I'm a lover, but tricking beloveds is my game-
Laila says bad things about Majnun, before me.*⁶

By making use of creative language, Ghalib in this couplet elevates his own position as a lover above that of Majnun and draws attention to the tale of Laila and Majnun. He is so crafty that even Laila, who has come to feel the spark in his love, brings all of her grievances against Majnun to him. He claims that even Laila thinks that Ghalib is a superior lover because of the allure of his status as a lover. Usually, lovers fall prey to the charms of their beloveds but the poet believes himself to be the master of all lovers and finds himself to be skilled at duping with his entrancing love. It is the captivating nature of the art of his love that traps the object of his affection. Ghalib addresses his beloved not to challenge his position as a lover because he masters the art of love.

*People may be unhappy with their Rivals- but with the women of Egypt
Zulaikha is happy, for they are entranced by the moon Canaan.*⁷

Ghalib employs this couplet as a religious allusion to discuss the tale of Prophet Yusuf and Zulaikha. The poet suggests in the first line of the couplet that since the rivals in love have a common beloved, it is only natural for them to be enemies or to harbor jealousies towards one another. Zulaikha, who is in love with Prophet Yusuf and is not envious or angry with her rivals, is an exception to this rule. Instead, she is content. She used to be made fun of by the Egyptian women for falling in love with a slave. She then invited some of them over and gave each person a fruit and a knife and in the meantime, Prophet Yusuf entered. The women cut their fingers instead of the fruits as they witnessed his astounding beauty. Zulaikha was delighted to observe that and felt proud of herself for becoming so deeply engrossed in Prophet Yusuf's affection.

*Although Jacob had no news about Joseph in prison,
Still his eyes became the crevice-work in the wall of the cell.*⁸

Through his original word choice, Ghalib alludes to the tale of Prophet Jacob and Prophet Yusuf and highlights their undying love. Even though Prophet Yusuf's father, Prophet Jacob, was

⁶ Ibid,26

⁷ Ibid, 18.

unable to visit or assist him when he was imprisoned in Egypt, this did not mean he was not concerned about or in love with his son. Prophet Jacob used to keep an eye on his adored son with eyes that had grown to resemble the prison windows. His eyes were extremely teary, turning white, and they were staring at Prophet Yusuf nonstop like the cracks in the prison cell. Through this religious allusion, the poet illustrates how lovers become unhappy when their loved ones go through any difficulty. They may not be able to rescue their loved ones from the ocean of suffering, yet they never stop worrying about them. Although Prophet Jacob loved his son and was unaware of his circumstances in prison, he continued to keep an eye on him from a distance out of an unending love for him. Since the poet himself has suffered the loss of close ones, the story that is referred to here, has many parallels to his own life.

*Except for Qais, no one entered the field of action-
Perhaps the desert had narrowed like a jealous eye.¹⁰*

Ghalib employs the aforementioned couplet as a literary reference to Laila Majnun's famous love story and skillfully highlights Qais' unrivalled reputation as a lover. The poet begins by claiming that no one has attained such a position in the realm of love as Qais. In the poet's opinion only Qais could be brimmed with such strong emotions and stand so high in the universe of love. In the next line of the couplet, the author draws a comparison between the eye of a jealous person and the desert where Majnun dwelled and says that while being very vast, the desert is as narrow as an envious eye which cannot take the peace and progress of fellow beings. The poet thinks that the desert which could only accommodate a crazy lover like Qais, is similar to the eye of a jealous man.

*The world is entirely the dust of Majnun's madness-
How long would anyone think of Laila's curls?¹¹*

⁹⁹See Ghalib: Selected Poems and Letters translated by Frances W. Pritchett and T.A. Cornwall, 36
See Ghalib: Selected Poems and Letters translated by Frances W. Pritchett and T.A. Cornwall, 65

Ghalib alludes to Laila Majnun's tragic love tale in the aforementioned couplet and poses a question as to why and how long can Laila's hair attract anyone when the world is nothing more than the dust of Majnun's intense passion for Laila. The poet asks that how long would anyone be rendered blinded by Laila's alluring curls when the entire universe is composed of the craziness of Majnun. Ghalib believes that one cannot just continue to fantasize about Laila and that the readers must face the fact that this world is nothing more than a fantasy. The poet claims that Majnun's insanity and passionate feelings are more important than Laila's lovely hair.

Who prevents Laila from going around in the wilderness?

*The house of Majnun the desert wanderer was without a door.*¹²

Through this beautiful couplet, Ghalib makes a literary reference to Laila Majnun's love story and he asks for the reason that keeps Laila from falling madly in love like his beloved Majnun. The poet begins his couplet with a question as to what is it that stops Laila from walking into and¹³ through the wilderness which belonged to her Majnun. The desert where Majnun lived was an open area rather than a place sealed off from the outside world by any doors. He then inquires about the reason which kept Laila from visiting Majnun's house. Ghalib thinks that perhaps her lack of strong feelings prevented Laila from going into the wilderness.¹⁴

Conclusion:

The word allusion has its roots in the Latin language, from the verb "alludere", which means "to refer to". An allusion is a literary device that authors employ to make references to people, places or events while assisting readers in understanding ideas without those being explicitly said. According to M.H.Abrams:

Since allusions are not explicitly identified, they imply a fund of knowledge that is shared by an author and the audience for whom the author writes. Most literary allusions are intended to be recognized by the generally educated readers of the authors's time but some are aimed at a special coterie. For example, in *Astrophel and Stella*, the Elizebethan sonnet sequence, Sir Philip Sidney's punning allusions to Lord Robert Rich, who had married Stella of the sonnets, were identifiable only by intimates of the people concerned. Some modern authors, including Joyce, Pound, and Eliot, include allusions that are very specialized, or else drawn from the author's

¹³See Ghalib: Selected Poems and Letters translated by Frances W. Pritchett and T.A. Cornwall, 73

private reading and experience, in the awareness that few, if any readers will recognize them prior to the detective work of scholarly annotators. (13-14)

While Daniel Liden in his article “What Is the Function of Allusion in Literature?” asserts:

In many cases, allusions serve a more specific purpose than simply tapping into a body of associations. In some cases, a reference of another work is given in a context that is drastically opposed to the original meaning. This technique is often used to refute the meaning of the original and to assert a new meaning.

William Irwin in his paper “What Is an Allusion?” suggests:

Allusion is bound up with a vital and perennial topic in literary theory, the place of authorial intention in interpretation, and in literature itself allusion has become an increasingly pivotal device. (288)

In poetry, the subjects of love and loss are frequently covered. These are the concepts that writers select in order to build a lovely universe with the aid of precisely balanced literary devices. Emily Dickinson clearly examines the relation of death with love and considers it as a physical process in her poetry. William Wordsworth’s “Lucy Poems” have a strong focus on love and loss. The poet is unaware of the possibility that his beloved will also eventually succumb to death because he is so overcome by love for her.

Mirza Ghalib, a poetical genius who focused on themes of love and sorrow like many other poets throughout history, is like Shakespeare who owed his success to common people. The bigger half of Urdu literature is composed of the prodigious works of this poet whose verses encompass even the most prosaic humanistic feelings and the everlasting qualities of his poetry makes people come across the upheavals of their emotions and their mortal lives in a new light.

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