

Appendix 3

The Life, the Times and Works of Ghalib

The Life

Mirzā Asadullah Beg Khān, alias *Ġhālib*, was born in Agra on December 27, 1797. Both his father and uncle, who were of Turkish ancestry, died while he was still young, and thus he spent a good part of his early boyhood with his mother's family, a situation he would regret and that inevitably affected his self-image. *Ġhālib* received tutoring at home from *Harmuzd*, a Zoroastrian from Iran who converted to Islam, and who was a devoted scholar of literature, language, and religions. (There is a controversy in the literature as to whether *Harmuzd* was a real person or a fictitious entity conjured by *Ġhālib* so he could claim he had had a traditional teacher.) *Ġhālib* received no formal education of any sort and followed the tradition of private tutoring in various subjects. *Ġhālib* openly acknowledges his academic shortcomings. He was, however, a Persian scholar and knew Arabic well. Repeatedly, he has referred to himself as a Persian poet, listing his *Urdū* contributions as side efforts. Ironically, the fame of *Ġhālib* stems from his *Urdū* poetry.

In 1810, he married into a rich family and moved to *Delhī*; he apparently never cared much for his wife. In his letters, *Ġhālib* is very forthcoming about his life. He speaks of only one love affair and that with a professional singer; however, he did admire many women. In *Delhī*, *Ġhālib* lived a life of relative comfort, though he had great difficulty maintaining his aristocratic lifestyle.

Ġhālib began writing poetry in *Urdū* at the early age of 10 without having served under any *ustād* (mentor), as was traditional. He chose

the pseudonym of “*Asad*,” meaning *lion*, from his name, Asadullah, which means, *Lion of God*, given to him by his parents. Incidentally, it is also one of the surnames of the fourth caliph of Islam, *Ḥaẓrat Aḥī*, cousin of Prophet Mohammad^{pbuh}; the pen name “*Ġhālib*” is another surname of the same caliph: *‘Aḥī ibn Abī Ṭālib al-Ġhālib*, the “triumphant conqueror.” Thus his names pay homage to the hero of Shia Islam, the religious form to which the poet was inclined and contrary to his family, who were Sunnis. He changed his penname after discovering there was another [“cheap,” according to *Ġhālib*] poet who had used this pseudonym before him. *Ġhālib*’s writings graduated from pedantic to fastidious ingenuity with great complexity, rivaling that of *Mīr Taqī Mīr* in *ġhazal* writing, all before he turned 21. *Ġhālib* changed his course of writing to Persian in the 1820s and gave up writing in *Urdū* until the mid 1840s. The later works of *Ġhālib* appear remarkably seamless with his experiments 30 years before. *Ġhālib*’s obsession with material things and his sense of personal insecurity are abundantly visible throughout his writings. *Ġhālib* was never really a part of the court except in its waning era. He could not stand *Ẓauq*, who was *Bahadur Shāh Zafar*’s tutor. The King and *Ġhālib* also were at odds until the death of *Ẓauq*, when *Ġhālib* was asked to write the history of the *Mughal* Dynasty. During these years, until 1869, *Ġhālib*, disgusted with the British Empire after the Revolt, remained confined to his rented house while he received a stipend from *Nawāb of Rāmpur*. *Ġhālib* died on February 15th, 1869, at the age of 72.

The Times

From the beginning, *Ġhālib*’s poetry was controversial. Full of complex arrangements and archaic Persian constructions, his works drew much sarcasm and ridicule from his peers and contemporaries, similar to what the “University Wits” had heaped on Shakespeare. His prime literary enemies of the time were the established poets, Shah *Nasīr* and *Ẓauq*, who did their best to discredit *Ġhālib*. But nothing could stifle his art

from reaching perfection, as was demonstrated in the publication of his *ġhazals* (Divan) at the age of 23. Published in 1821, this is known as the *Hamidīa* manuscript and includes about half of the written works of Ġhālib at the time, exactly 3,776 lines. Ġhālib had deleted much of his work that he thought would be too difficult for many to understand. Novices to Ġhālib's *ġhazal* would find many versions of these *ġhazals* with different listings of his verses; generally, the *Hamidīa* manuscript is considered to be authentic, although later, *Arshī* compiled a more modern version of Ġhālib's *ġhazals* (see Bibliography).

The years between 1825 and 1833 were spent in futility trying to restore Ġhālib's family pension, which was jeopardized because of family feuds. After losing the case in 1833, Ġhālib continued his efforts until 1844, when he finally gave up all hope of recovering anything from the British. This period of continual pursuit of the British Empire brought him closer to many of his admirers and pupils, among them the rulers of Rampur and Lucknow, as he needed their help and also as he traveled to Calcutta, where the office of the East India Company was then located. Many episodes of travel find a significant place in his prolific letters. Even the ruler of the *Muġhal* Empire became one of his admirers as he asked Ġhālib later to write a chronicle of the *Muġhal* Empire in 1850. Ġhālib's desire to reach the royal court was achieved only after the death of the court-poet, *Zauq*, in 1855, which appointment included substantial annuities. Unfortunately, these favors came to an abrupt halt following the mutiny in 1857. The *Muġhal* court also conferred upon him two titles and an array of honors and gifts, yet his financial troubles continued, as reflected in his often-frustrated poetry. The two greatest sorrows of Ġhālib's life were the death of the singing woman he loved and that of *Zainul Abedin Kḡhān Ārif*, his adopted son and his wife's nephew, and for whom Ġhālib produced eloquent elegies.

Whereas much of Ġhālib's life remains obscure, his quintessential letters to friends reveal some colorful aspects to his life and, as such, make for

excellent reading in some of the finest *Urdū* prose existent. Revealed in these letters is his philosophy of life, his ego, his pride in his nobility, his imagination and ability to make critical observations, his criticism of the indifference of people, and the sense of frustration and bitterness that he harbored throughout his life. These traits of personality and nuances of emotion flow abundantly through his verses as well.

In 1865, the British signed a treaty of ascendancy to the *Mughal* empire. This event would mark the ultimate decay of the *Mughal Empire*, which had a significant impact on Ġhālib's poetry. Revolts, orthodoxy, and a general decay of law and order, not to mention the fall of the dignified Emperorship, prevailed in those times. Though the British had ascended, people still owed their allegiance to the *Mughal* Emperor, knowing full well that he was merely a symbol with little authority. To assert their identity, people took to religious fervor and split into warring loyalties. While the oriental culture remained intact, the Western style slowly crept in and the general sense of morality felt threatened by the most orthodox. Poets like *Momin* and Ġhālib even preached a revolt against the British. Above all other poets, Ġhālib took this changing environment to heart and, given his remarkable imagination, it resulted in poetry that is highly structured, complex and that sets the ground for an entirely new way of expression through unusual similes, highly dramatic exaggerations, and using techniques that trace their roots to very old Persian literature. This was also the era when another school of poetry began thriving in Lucknow, which is often called the "fleshly school." Carla Pietevich's "Assembly of Rivals" examines this issue thoroughly and concludes that the differentiation between the Lucknow and *Delhī* schools was arbitrary and that it is not justified to call the Lucknow school any "fleshier" than the *Delhī* school. A rivalry between the two schools also had an impact on how poets belonging to each school maintained their identity through their selection of topics and the art and craft of presenting ideas.

Ġhālib's poetry reflects a movement of thought, the product of a civilization standing on the brink of change, as he remained fully yet remorsefully conscious of it. Given the complex personality that Ġhālib inherited, he put a stamp of individuality on all his verses and, as a result, founded no "school," nor did he leave any heir to his tradition of individuality. Of all things, the legacy issue separates Ġhālib from the sundry poets of his time, who began a style—a movement—that was often sustained even after their death. Never had there been a poet who thought like Ġhālib and there has not been any poet since to challenge Ġhālib's individuality of expression. In the words of *Ahmad Alī*: "Only a mind like this could feel and express as he could, hammer out plastic images from a piece of steel still red-hot on the anvil." It is difficult to improve on this characterization. The only thing that needs iteration is that the age of Ġhālib was indeed a period of Renaissance for the *Urdū ghazal* and that he did receive great intellectual and literary challenges to enhance and cultivate his thinking and abilities.

The social order of the 18th century saw a great freedom of expression giving rise to many critics, such as *Saudā* in his satires and *Nazīr* in his odes. Whereas *Saudā* would engage in mysticism and *Mīr* would imagine post-existence, Ġhālib was busy looking at what had happened to the minds of the people of India—an emotional state turned to intellectualism. A bridging gap, if we can call it that, between the 18th century poets and Ġhālib, comprised two of the greatest poets, *Nazīr* and *Momin*, who worked on expressing how the mind shaped emotions. *Nazīr* talked about the injustices of a society degrading man and *Momin* of the trials and tribulations of a society ransacked by invaders. Ġhālib, however, took a metaphysical turn in his approach. He used the richness of the language of his predecessors more sharply to the point of near nihilism. The mid-19th century was rife with unrest among the middle class as religion took a diverse turn with many factions of Islam vying for attention, and Ġhālib did not remain oblivious to it. He was often blamed for having a *shī'a* and atheistic bent.

The Works of Ġhālib:

Ġhālib's writings comprise works in Persian and *Urdū*, wherein he wrote both prose and poetry prolifically. Following is a listing of his written works:

Persian Writings

1. *Panj āhang*: This book comprises five parts as the name implies. The first part contains salutations and etiquette; the second part entails lexicon; the third part is a selection of verses from his *Urdū* collection; part four is *taqrīz* (meaning ode to the living); and the final part contains letters written by Ġhālib.
2. *Mehr nīm roz*: King *Bahadur Shāh Zafīr* had commissioned Ġhālib to write the history of the *Taimūrī* family but later, the King modified the scope and Ġhālib ended up writing a history from the time of Adam up to King *Humāyūn*.
3. *Dastanmbo*: This book was written in the revolution of 1857 and tells of the events from May 1850 to August 1858. Published in 1858, the book distinguishes itself by containing Persian words free of Arabic or any other language.
4. *Qata'-e burhān*: *Maulvī Mohammad Husain Tabrezvī* compiled a Persian dictionary by the same name. In 1857, Ġhālib reviewed the dictionary and found it to contain many errors. He corrected these and published it in 1861 from Lucknow.
5. *Darfash kādiyāni*: The second edition of the Persian dictionary (4) included many changes and was renamed in 1865.
6. *Kulliyāt-e nazm fārsī*: Ġhālib's first collection of Persian poetry, which was called *Maiḵhanā-e ārzū* (Tavern of Desires), was first published in 1845. The second edition, containing verses written through 1859, was published in 1863; the third edition was published in 1893 and the fourth in 1924.
7. *Subd chaen*: A short collection of Ġhālib's *masnavi*, *abr guhar bār*, and other writings left out of earlier collections were published in 1867.

8. *Du'a-e sabah*: The Persian translation of the Arabic prayer is known by the title, which is associated with *Hazrat Alī* and was written at the request of Ġhālib's nephew, *Mirzā Abbās Baig*. This *maṣnavi* contains 131 verses and was published in Lucknow during Ġhālib's lifetime.
9. *Mutafarraqāt-e Ġhālib*: Some unpublished works of Ġhālib compiled by *Masud-ūl Hasan Rizvī*; first published in 1947 in Rampur, the book contains some letters, some poems and *maṣnavis* written by Ġhālib in Calcutta, and includes the *maṣnavi* written in 1853 to defend the reputation of King *Bahadur Shāh Zafar*.

Urdū Writings

10. *Dīvān-e Urdū*: Whereas Ġhālib took greater pride in his Persian writings, his real fame is indebted to his collection of *Urdū* verses. Ġhālib's initial writings were heavily *Persianized*, but at the advice of his associates, particularly *Maulanā Fazal Haq Ḳhairābādī*, he changed his style and made a selection of verses himself that he considered intelligible to his *Urdū* speaking audience. The first edition of Ġhālib's *Urdū ghazals* was published in 1841, followed by the second edition in 1847, which contains 1,159 verses; the third edition was published in 1861, the fourth in 1862, and the fifth in 1863. The great popularity of Ġhālib's *Urdū ghazals* necessitated publication of frequent editions and printings, which inevitably modified the verses, partly because of typographical errors and partly because of the preferences of the compilers (mostly fans of Ġhālib) who sought to reflect their own interpretations. The most important versions of Ġhālib's *Urdū ghazals* are found in the *Hamidīā* and *Arshī* manuscripts.
11. *Aud-e hindī*: Collection of Ġhālib's letters published in Meerut (India) in 1868.

12. *Urdū-e mu'alla*: Another collection of Ġhālib's letters, the first part of which was published in March 1869, and the second (which included the first one) in 1899 under the guidance of *Maulanā Hāli*.
13. *Makātib-e Ġhālib*: A collection of Ġhālib's letters written to the court of Rampur; this was compiled by Arshi and published in 1937 and the fifth edition in 1947.
14. *Nadīrāt Ġhālib*: A collection of letters written by Ġhālib to his friend, *Munshī Nabī Baḡhsh Haqīr*, and compiled by *Mīr Mehdi Majrūh* and *Mīr Aḡal Alī*, was published from Karachi in 1949 by Afaq Dehlavi.
15. *Nukāt-e Ġhālib-o-ruqq'āt-e Ġhālib*: At the request of *Piyare Lāl Āshob*, Ġhālib compiled two issues of a journal which include the grammar rules of the Persian language written in *Urdū* and includes 15 letters written in Persian. The book was published in 1867 from *Delhī*.
16. *Qādir nāma(h)*: For the children of *Ārif*, Ġhālib's dear nephew, Ġhālib wrote this 8-page journal in which he explains the concept of God. The first verse of the writing is: *qādir āllah aur yazdāñ hai ḡhudā/ hai nabī mursil payambar reħnumā*: (Powerful is Allah and Omnipotent is God/ The Prophet is sent to bring the message of guidance).