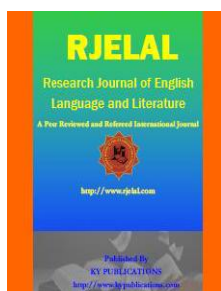




## CRAFTSMEN OF GENIUS: PERSIAN POETS OF MUGHAL INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

The present paper argues that the Persian poetry which flourished during the heyday of Mughal period in India can best be approached from a formalist critical perspective which foregrounds the linguistic structure as the defining feature of poetic art. It will attempt to discuss the craftsmanship of some renowned poets of Mughal India and highlight their contribution to the rich tradition of Persian poetry. The paper will highlight how these poets achieved distinction through the use of various formal elements which have been recognized as the hallmarks of the Indian Style in Persian, also known as *sabk-e hindi*, such as *ma'naa-ye bigaana* (unfamiliar or alien conceit), *ma'naa-ye rangin* (colorful or variegated idea), *mazmun-e barjasta* (outstanding conceit), *eehaam* (word play) and *tamseel* (exemplification). It will focus especially on some of the eminent Persian poets of the seventeenth century, especially Tahir Ghani Kashmiri (d.1669), to illustrate this idea. Also, drawing attention to some practices such as *jawaab goyi* (writing response-poems), illustrated in the paper through the verses of the great Indian poet of Persian and Urdu, Mirza Ghalib (1796-1869), a case will be made for a fresh assessment of the Indian Style (*sabk-e hindi*) as a remarkable literary achievement.

**Keywords:** Indian Style (*sabk-e hindi*), ghazal, Ghani Kashmiri, Ghalib, Mughal poets.

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Although the term *sabke hindi* meaning the 'Indian Style', was used first by a group of Iranian critics as a derogatory label for the style of poetry which flourished between 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in the larger Persian speaking world, it needs to be understood that there was nothing singularly Indian about this style. The fact remains that this style flourished with equal fervour in Iran and India and what is termed as the Mughal-Safawid ghazal was not confined to the geographical boundaries of the Indian subcontinent. Leaving aside the reasons that can be given to the rise and spread of *sabk-e hindi*, I will argue that the style should be seen as a remarkable literary achievement in the history of Persian poetry.

For its detractors, the Indian style poetry marks a departure from the earlier more

indigenous and hence 'purer' styles in its excessive reliance on rhetorical devices such as conceit, pun, ambiguity and paradox. Alleging that the poets of this style employed a hyper-cerebral and convoluted diction, some Iranian critics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries held the Indian and Indian domiciled Iranian poets responsible for turning their backs on the fluent, simple and mellifluous style of the earlier Persian masters. These opinions gained acceptance due to the emergence of a new literary movement in Iran in the eighteenth century known as *adabi baazgasht* or 'literary revival'. The movement, not unlike most other literary movements, largely defined itself in contradistinction to what it held to be the characteristic features of the earlier period dominated by the Indian style. The Iranian critics such as Lutf Ali Beg Aazar, in his famous

biographical dictionary, *Aatash-kadah*, Raza Quli Khan Hidaayat in his *Majma'ul Fusaha* and Taqi Bahaar wrote disapprovingly of the style which they rather pejoratively called the 'Indian Style'. In India, Shibli Naumani followed his Iranian counterparts and gave an overall negative estimation of this style, although he thinks that the decline did not occur in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but later in the eighteenth century best represented in the poetry of Nasir Ali and Bedil. Shibli prefers the term *tarz-e taazah* or 'new style' to *sabk-e hindi* and regards with disfavour its intellectual ingenuity. Echoing the Romantic fallacy which locates the origin of poetry in the intensity of the poet's feelings and evaluates it by its capacity to affect the readers' emotions, he discredited much of the Indian style poetry holding that it was not suitable for the ghazal which is essentially a love lyric. To quote S R Faruqi, "Shibli's disapproval of abstraction, complex metaphoricity, ambiguity and high imaginativeness particularly recalls the prevalent Victorian literary bias against these things."<sup>1</sup> One is also tempted to echo Faruqi's swipe at Shibli, "given such friends one doesn't need enemies" (2004-17). Although Shibli criticized what he called the new style in poetry, he thoroughly discussed Saa'ib Tabrizi (d.1677-8) and Abu Taalib Kaleem (d. 1651), especially the former whom he regarded as one of the most remarkable poets of the seventeenth century. Shibli, however, rightly identified two main features which he thought were typical of the Indian Style, *tamseel* or exemplification and *eehaam* or wordplay. Critical assessment has generally regarded Indian and Indian-domiciled poets the finest practitioners of the Indian Style and Shibli too, notwithstanding his somewhat adverse judgment, credits them with refining the 'new style'.

After suffering neglect and disapprobation for a long time, the poets of the Indian Style are now being reconsidered both in Iran and India and the tendency to regard them as preoccupied with artificiality and unhealthy intellectualism is being reconsidered. To take an example, Mirza Abdul Qaadir Bedil (1644-1720), of Azimabad, India, a poet whose name has become almost a byword for the complexity of style and who according to many

critics is the foremost representative of the Indian style, has recently earned his due share of approbation from Iranian critics. Saa'ib too is now widely recognized as one of the most brilliant poets of his age. His use of metaphors, conceits and other sophisticated poetical devices has found appeal with many modern critics. A modern Iranian critic Amiri Firuzkuhi in his introduction to Saaib's divan eloquently dismisses the negative estimate of the Indian style.

It was owing to the fact that the Persian poets from late 16<sup>th</sup> century inhabited a world of stiff competition in which poets vied with each other for fame, fortune and patronage, that intertextual engagements attained unprecedented levels. This state of affairs encouraged poets to search for newer meanings, fresher expressions and startling figures of comparison meant to draw attention to their 'originality'. The idea of appropriating a pre-existing text was never alien to the Persian ghazal poet and one may even say that if there is a classic example of how poems are made from other poems, the Persian ghazal and especially the Mughal-Safawid ghazal provides an ideal example. To begin with, the Persian ghazal is a highly conventional literary form which has exhibited a remarkable degree of structural and thematic tenacity over a period of eight centuries or so. With its fixed metres, well-established images and tropes and a peculiar form where all verses end with a refrain, it is not surprising that repetitions and imitations of previous texts are a common feature in the ghazal. This highly conventional nature of the ghazal imposes certain restrictions on its practitioner, constraining his freedom of expression to fit the form. Ghalib's complaint that he needs some other form to express himself as the ghazal is too rigid to accommodate his imaginative flights is thus perfectly understandable.

But how did the ghazal retain its status as the crown of Persian poetry in the period of when the Indian Style was dominant in the Persian speaking world if there was been little for the individual poets to innovate? To understand this we need to see the complex relationship between the literary tradition as *langue* and individual works as *parole*. On the one hand the generic structure and

formal patterns put in place by the tradition demand conformity from poets and on the other no poet can just repeat what his predecessors have said without somehow saying something 'new'. This tension between the need for conformity and an equally urgent one for originality is a common heritage of all serious poets and the capacity of the poets to negotiate it to their advantage has largely determined the extent of their success in the ghazal tradition.

A cursory look at the ghazal tradition of the Indian Style (*sabk-e hindi*) reveals various ways of intertextual engagement. One can enumerate *tazmeen* (quoting directly from another poet), *javab-guyi* (writing response-poems), *istiqaal* (lit. welcoming, the practice of reworking the theme of an earlier ghazal but retaining its formal structure) and *tasarruf* (lit. appropriation, altering a word or two of a text) as the principal intertextual techniques. Among these a study of *istiqaal* and *javab-guyi* (the two are sometimes taken to be synonymous) can offer valuable insights into the kind of dialogue between a model poem and its response. A response-ghazal is invariably written in the same *zameen* (lit. ground, meaning the formal structure which includes metre, rhyme and refrain) as the model ghazal and often includes some verses which redo themes of the original.

The Classical works of criticism in both Arabic and Persian traditions devoted considerable space to the discussions of *sariqa* (literary theft) or plagiarism. Given the characteristics of the ghazal discussed above, it is not surprising that poets were acutely aware of the risk of inviting the charge of literary theft. As a result an important distinction was made between *sariqa* and *tavaarud* (unintentional coincidence), the latter understandably exempted from reproach. How much the Indo-Persian poets were obsessed with charges of *sariqa* becomes evident as one discovers that almost all of them stressed their originality by repudiating any possible accusations of plagiarism. Thus Ghani Kashmiri (d. 1669), while accusing others of stealing his themes, claims that he never stole from anyone:

Friends have taken my verses  
Pity, they did not take my name.

I saw that poets steal each others' verses.  
I am still retrieving mine which the rivals  
have stolen.

No wonder then, that when Ghani was once openly accused of plagiarism, he was so dismayed that he abandoned writing poetry until he had proved the accusation baseless:

The thornless rose of the garden of silence  
is worth picking.  
Lay off the prattling tongue like an unruly  
slave.

And Ghani's contemporary Abu Talib Kaleem refuted the charges of theft thus:

How can I borrow others' themes when in  
my creed  
Redepicting my own ones is no less than  
theft?

Ghalib, in one of his letters to Tufta, refutes the charge that he used a ghazal of Naziri Nishaapuri (d.1612) as the model and merely altered some words to create his own poem. 'Poetry', he says, 'is creating meanings not measuring rhymes'. The statement is important because for Ghalib, as for other poets of the Indian style, the essence of poetry lies in *ma'nae aafriini* (meaning-creation). This meaning-creation could not, however, be achieved without assimilating the works of the past writers. In other words, a poet's excellence would always be tested against those of the past masters while some kind of novelty was still demanded of him. The mere presence of similar or even identical leitmotifs, images and tropes would not insinuate plagiarism if only some twist in the final meaning was discernable. And when there was enough extra-literary evidence that no plagiarism had taken place, even strikingly similar verses would be explained as instances of coincidence, an example being the one given by Azad Bilgrami in his critical work *Sarve Azad* where he quotes three quite similar verses of Saa'ib Tabrizi (d.1677-8), Saleem Tehrani (d. 1648) and Ghani Kashmiri.

The dynamic engagement with the tradition which this situation necessitated meant that the poet had to have both a critical and a creative sensibility or to use Eliot's concept, there could be no creative sensibility without a critical

one. The poets would often try to prove their skills by intervening in an antecedent text, usually by an ingenious alteration of the context, thus creating their own distinct meaning. The very practice of *javab-guyi* (writing response-poems), or *istiqaal* (the practice of reworking the theme of an earlier ghazal but retaining its formal structure) implied that the poet is producing something novel which can at least measure up to, if not actually excel, the precursor's text. Adherence to certain fixed formal patterns, however, made this task very difficult and only the genuinely talented could produce something which was simultaneously conventional and original. The literary forerunner's text was both a challenge and guide for the poet who would most often express an attitude of acknowledgement and deep admiration for the forerunner while actually trying to prove his own mettle.

To explicate the idea of creative appropriation of the literary forebears' texts, let us turn to the great poet of India, Ghalib. Ghalib is the fitting example of what Harold Bloom calls a 'belated' poet. He wrote at a time when Persian was breathing its last in India, and is rightly acknowledged as the last but one great Persian poet of the subcontinent, the last being Iqbal (1877-1938). It is, therefore, exciting to see how Ghalib, coming so to say at the end, produced his own corpus of Persian lyrical poetry by a creative appropriation of the texts of his literary precursors. It is well-known that Ghalib considered himself a poet of Persian *par excellence* and prided himself on being the only one among his contemporaries who could match the great masters of the past. Almost snobbish towards the poets of the Indian origin who strived to produce verses in Persian, he thought his own far excelled theirs as well as his own Urdu ghazals:

Look to my Persian to see myriad-coloured constructions

Skip the Urdu collection, my bland achievement.

And he never forgave his contemporaries for denying him the recognition he thought he deserved:

What for did You inspire the tormented Ghalib to speech

In a land where they can't tell Naziri from Qateel?

And again:

O you, so engrossed in the poets of a bygone age.

Don't turn away from Ghalib because he lives in yours.

In the afterword to his Persian *divan*, Ghalib expresses his indebtedness to Naziri, Urfi (d. 1590), Zuhuri (d. 1615), Taalib Amuli (d.1627) and Ali Hazin (d. 1766) all great ghazal writers of the Iranian origin who had settled in India, and describes how they inspired him and how he managed to woo their spirits to guide his artistic genius in the paths of poetry. He recalls how in the beginning he had tended to stray into the dark alleys of literary anarchism and mistaken many idiosyncrasies for originality before he was rescued by these gracious souls. He calls himself a fellow-traveller treading the same path as they and describes how they pitied his lot and agreed to be his instructors. Ali Hazin, Taalib, Urfi, Zuhuri and Naziri, all offered him their blessings and helped the latent talent to bear fruit. Pleased at his feat, he indulges himself, calling his pen "a cock pheasant in gait, a musical bird in singing, a peacock in glory and a phoenix in flight" (1969: 453).

To further elucidate this idea, let us look at a few verses of Naziri's ghazal with the refrain '*chi haz'*, on which Ghalib modelled one of his. Naziri's opens thus:

If you turn a deaf ear, what good are cries to me?

If you turn a blind eye, what good are tears to me?

My eye has got the garden drunk to its core.

If you keep abstaining, what good is spring to you?

If the keys to all the treasures they entrusted to us

But deprived us of freedom, what good are they to us?

Ghalib opening verse or *matla* reworks the second verse of Naziri:

Since I have no wine, what good is life to me?

You have it but will not drink, what good is spring to you?

The third verse in Naziri pivots on the word *ikhhtiyaar* translated above as 'freedom'. Ghalib uses the same word which translates better as 'ability':

Where I am not able, what is the point in abstinence?

Where the beloved is not willing, what good is ability?

It is only in his *maqta* (signature verse) that Ghalib uses the first hemistich of Naziri's *matla* (opening verse) as *tazmeen* (using a verse by another poet or, graft verse):

To recount his tale of distress, Ghalib invokes Naziri alone.

"If you turn a deaf ear, what good are cries to me"?

This is just one example of how the legacy of the Indian Style poets is appropriated by a great latter poet, Ghalib. We must, however, look at some earlier poets to see how poetic devices are used to create fresh meanings. Saai'b, Kaleem, Qudsi, Taalib Amuli and many others follow the same style which draws attention to some obscure aspects of reality.

Let us look at Kaleem's following verses which derive their strength from using similes and metaphors in ways which quite often result in delightful poetry.

He who learns the mysteries of existence leaves the world forthwith.

When one has learned one's lessons well, one bids farewell to the school.

My skill delivers me not from my wretched state.

Like the ruin which does not flourish by the treasure it hides.

Her union with me is like the wave's fondness for the shore.

Always with me, yet ever receding away from me.

Kashmir's poetic genius, Ghani stands out as one of the best practitioners of the Indian Style. Known to his contemporaries and the later critics as a remarkable *mazmun aafreen* or 'creator of fresh

meanings', Ghani's verse is especially appealing to the modern reader who readily accepts linguistic and intellectual ingenuity in poetry rather than dismiss them as unsavoury or downright unpoetic. It will be worthwhile to look at some of the verses of Ghani as an illustration of his craftsmanship in the use of poetic image:

Her decked vermilion feet; his endless prostrations.

What act, for a Hindu, can excel the worship of fire?

The skies are in motion to put my ill-luck to sleep.

The rocking cradle brings comfort to the fretful child.

Fleeting beauty is unworthy of love.

The lamp of lightning's flash attracts no moth.

These verses, chosen randomly from different ghazals, are just a few examples of the delightful use of metaphors and similes which characterize much of poetry practiced by Ghani. As is instantly evident, they bring out a connection between the idea and the image, thereby bringing about a new set of connotations to bear upon the image. They suggest what Wordsworth described as a process of:

...observation of affinities

In objects where no brotherhood exists  
To passive minds.

(Book II, lines 384-6)

Far from reflecting a lack of organic sensibility which would enable a poet to fuse disparate experiences into an artistic unity, presenting an abstract idea in the first hemistich and following it with a concrete exemplification in the second, creates a fine balance between a direct abstract proposition and its concretization and helps bring a compactly built world of distich or *she'r* into existence. The striking manner of linking thought with image is a way of startling the reader, and wonder, surprise and revelation have always been accepted as important functions of poetry. The technique also foregrounds an aspect of reality which tends to be overlaid with familiarity and custom.

These and many other such verses testify to Ghani's ability to imagine situations which are not just embroidered with certain figurative devices, but where the fundamental imaginative process reveals itself to be metaphorical. The metaphors used, at least in some verses, give the indication of a way of experiencing the facts rather than an embellishment of a prior known fact. Moreover, fresh poetic meanings can be created from a well-worn image only by using it in contexts which bring its different connotative aspects into play. Ghani, working with the conventional repertoire of images of Persian ghazal, invests some of them with multiple and often contradictory meanings. An example of this is the image of *habaab* or 'bubble' which is used to suggest diverse ideas in the following verses:

Too flimsy to bear ties are  
the apparels of the burdenless.  
Like an air bubble our robes  
are without a stitch.

Though the sea harbours  
meanings in plenty  
Mine is a pearl,  
theirs' a bubble.

The silent lips of the bubble  
whispered into the diver's ears:  
'A pearl more precious  
you shall never find.'

None fathoms the secret  
of nakedness like me.  
Like the bubble my skin  
and apparel are one.

A dull mind may fix its gaze on the book  
Yet meaning shall ever remain beyond his  
grasp.  
Empty-headed fail to fathom the depths  
Like a hollow bubble they can never  
plunge the sea.

Alas! so swiftly did youth's ebriety pass  
Before we could savour fully the ruby  
wine.  
We opened our eyes to behold the world

And the bubble burst ...

As I open my eyes in love's tumultuous sea  
Like a bubble I perish in an instant.

The bubble thus becomes a symbol for such diverse ideas as hollowness, incapacity, lightness, transience, perfection and nakedness.

Among the earlier Persian poets *eehaam*, i.e. *double entendre* or wordplay, were used by Amir Khusraw to achieve great poetical effects. But in the hands of the later poets such as Saa'ib, Kaleem and Ghani, the technique was further refined and used with remarkable dexterity. As S R Faruqi remarks, "wordplay infuses new life into old themes, expands the horizon of meaning, and often makes for an ambiguity of tone which enriches the total feel of the poem" (1999: 3). A few examples from Ghani's poetry will illustrate how he employs this device to produce what may be called 'multi-layered poetry.'

Since the daughter of vine has slipped  
away from my embrace,

I am left to deal with the child of tears.

In this verse the Persian '*dukhtar-e raz*' used in the first hemistich denotes wine but literally means 'daughter of vine'. Likewise, *tifl-e ashk* in the second hemistich means both a crying child and a droplet of tear. The verse exploits the double meaning of these words to conjure up two different situations: one in which the speaker laments his separation from wine and says that constant crying is now his lot and the other where he mourns the separation from a woman who has left behind a crying child.

Though the sea harbours meanings in  
plenty

Mine is a pearl, theirs' a bubble.

The original for sea is *bahr* which also means metre in which verse is written. The verse simultaneously brings both meanings into play.

Neither this abode I desire nor the next  
one.

Like Mansur, in your love, I desire one  
beyond both.

Again, the original *daar* means both abode and gibbet. In the context of the verse both are simultaneously implied, as Mansur Hallaj, the renowned Sufi of Baghdad who was crucified for

blasphemy, by preferring to die on a gibbet also chose an abode beyond this world and the paradise of the orthodox.

Not once did she open her mouth to curse the rival.

I am fed up with a love so tight-lipped.

*bidahan*, translated here as tight-lipped, literally means 'mouthless' and in Persian poetry the smallness of the beloved's mouth is a mark of her beauty which, in keeping with the conventions of hyperbole, is sometimes compared to just a tiny dot. The verse draws on both meanings of *bidahan*, thus meaning: would that she were not so beautiful to attract the rival; and, would that she had the will to curse him! By this device the poet makes use of a verbal nuance which in the words of William Empson, "gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language" (1961:19). Unfortunately, the beauty of punning and wordplay is one among those things which are lost in translation.

To conclude, it is clear that Mughal poets of India quite brilliantly demonstrate the idea that the function of poetry is to defamiliarize. The Russian Formalists of the early decades of the twentieth century had argued that poetry can be defined in terms of its unique form, that is, a unique linguistic structure based on the principle of differentiation from other ways of language use. Because of its unique formal character, poetry deviates from prose. And the most striking difference between poetry and prose is that language in poetry draws attention to itself rather than being a transparent medium through which an extra-linguistic reality is captured. Flaunting its own status as a linguistic construct, however, is not an end in itself. It is rather meant to obstruct our habitual and long-established modes of perceiving the reality. By using language in unfamiliar ways poetry breaks through the veil of habitual modes and thus refreshes our perception of things. The function of poetry, therefore, is to bring about a renewal of perception. As we have seen it is the singular context of remarkable possibilities of intertextual engagements available to the Indian Style poets that they were able to enrich the Persian poetic tradition in this way.

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