

DEVELOPMENT OF THE URDU GHAZAL

S. M. Mehdi

The literary urge of the Urdu-speaking people found its expression in verse mainly through the forms prevalent in Persian poetry, the *Masnavi*, the *Qasida*, the *Rubai* and the *Ghazal*. The *Ghazal* later on became the most popular medium of expression in Urdu poetry. We need not here go into the historical background of the Persian influence. It must however be stressed that, though the forms used in Urdu poetry were Persian in origin, it had a distinctive character of its own rooted in the Indian ethos. The Persian tradition and its peculiar variant of *Sufism* and philosophy made their contribution in the shape of verse forms. But the Indian genius, while following these traditions, broke new ground by assimilating in it the Indian metaphysical concepts, on the one hand, and by incorporating the sensuous, exotic imagery, on the other. Thus Urdu poetry, and the *Ghazal* in particular, combined in itself the metaphysical and the sensuous, the divine and the human. This synthesis was the culmination of a process of acceptance and rejection. The search for self-expression in Indian aesthetic terms led to a passionate concern for words, phrases and idioms taken both from the Persian language and the Indian dialects, thus creating a literary pattern more beautiful and richer in hue and colour than in the Persian *Ghazal*.

The word *Ghazal* comes from Arabic, its dictionary meaning being "to converse with women". As a literary form it developed in Iran and achieved excellence in the hands of Hafiz, Saadi and others. The *Ghazal* consists of couplets, each couplet being independent of the other, but all of them in the same metre with rhyme (*qafia*) and double rhyme (*radeef*). The insistence on *qafia* and *radeef* (or at least the *qafia*) imposes a sort of restriction on the poet, and in the hand of a poet not endowed with talent, this restriction results in mere versification, a phenomenon widespread in Urdu poetry. But in the case of the great masters this very restriction acted as an incentive in the quest to give a new dimension and richness to the form. The restriction imposed by the *qafia* and *radeef* became a challenge that produced some of the most beautiful *ghazals* rich in an inner music that one rarely comes across in other forms in Urdu poetry.

Historically speaking the Urdu *Ghazal* came into its own at a time when Mughal rule was entering the final phase of decline. The old feudal order had started showing signs of disintegration before the onslaught of Western imperial order. The ancient Indian agrarian set-up with its self-sufficient economy was giving place to a colonial economy. The decline of Mughal rule and the rise of Western imperialism coincided with the rise of Urdu poetry. The old order was dying but the new one had not yet taken shape. "England has broken down the entire framework of Indian society, without any symptoms of reconstitution yet appearing. This loss of his old world, with no gain of a new one, imparts a particular kind of melancholy to the present misery of the Hindu, and separates Hindustan, ruled by Britain, from all its ancient traditions, and from the whole of its past history."¹

The feeling of defeat and despair gave a peculiar poignancy to the works of earlier Urdu poets and, above all, to the *Ghazals* of Meer Taqi Meer (1724-1810).

*The proud head that wears the crown
Will next day crumble to dust,
On this same spot will be heard
Loud cries and lamentations.*

* * *

*Walk slowly and breathe gently
For you tread a tricky path;
At the first touch it will break,
This fragile house, made of glass.²*

And Ghalib (1796-1869) cries aloud :

*I long to live in utter loneliness,
With none to speak to, none to share my thoughts
In a sheer dwelling, without roofs and walls,
Or neighbours guarding against fate and thieves,
With none to tend me if I'm sick and prostrate,
And none to mourn me if I pass away.*

* * *

*I'm not a melody bursting like a flower
Or a string with tunes replete;
I am a chord that has just snapped:
The image of defeat.³*

It may seem strange but nevertheless it is a fact that *Sufism* came to the

rescue of the Urdu poet in this situation and helped him to see the world from a philosophical point of view and to avoid being dragged into the abyss of despondency. Different schools of *Sufism* were well established by the time Urdu took a definite shape as a literary language. Though Arabic in its origin *Sufism* found a fertile soil in India and had an attraction both for the intellectual and the masses. Its appeal lay in its attitude to man. All human beings were the creation of God and were a part of God. To sing the praise of Man was in fact to praise God. The material world was transient. Those who hankered after worldly comforts were living in an illusory world. "The metaphysical doctrines of the *Sufis* were concerned mainly with the nature of God and the means whereby He manifested Himself... The doctrine of immanence and Unity of Existence (*Wahdah-al-wajud*) was fervently proclaimed and freely disseminated ... The shift of emphasis towards the metaphysical ... opened the flood-gates of speculation at a point where all religions and all theistic philosophies necessarily converge. This coincided with the rise of the *Bhakti* movement, and promoted the emergence of beliefs that challenged the exclusiveness of the historical religious communities through a direct appeal to God, and through the postulation of a relationship with Him that could dispense with prophets, revelation, ritual and law. . . ."

Translated into poetic idiom this philosophical attitude created its own symbols like the wine, the rose, the nightingale, the censer etc. Love became a perennial theme. The upholders of orthodoxy, who had the support of the state, came into constant conflict with *Sufism* which preached universal brotherhood without any distinction of caste and creed. The poet sang of Man, be he of the faith or a *kafir*.

Shah Gesoo Daraz, a *Sufi* poet of the sixteenth century wrote :

*Let the Kafir be happy with his Kufr
and the Sheikh with his Islam.
The lovers are happy with themselves
and their beloved.*

And Ghalib threw the challenge :

*Do not argue with me oh father
See the son of Azar,
The one with vision never follows
the religion of his forefathers.*

Ghalib was proud of even the sins committed by man. For Man would not be Man if he did not have a lust for life.

*I have man's nature, I am born of man
And proud that I commit the sin I can.*

The orthodox insisted that man was created only to sing the praise of God and his only mission in this world was to pray to Him. But Ghalib disagreed :

*Even in obedience I'm so free, so proud,
Upon the Ka'bah I have turned my back
Unless I found its door in welcome open.⁵*

*

*

*

Meer and Ghalib represented the consummation of the humanistic tradition in Urdu poetry. To trace its origin one has to trace the development of Urdu as a language. Various called Hindvi, Rekhta and Urdu, the language was used by the *Sufis* for preaching their message of love and brotherhood of man. If we leave aside the Hindi poems attributed to Amir Khusro, the first major Urdu poet is Mohammad Quli Qutub Shah (1580-1611), the ruler of Golconda. Those who say that Urdu verse is only a blind imitation of Persian poetry, will do well to read not only Qutub Shah but other early poets from Deccan as well. Their poetry abounds in local colour. Their language is simple and direct. As an example one can quote Qutub Shah's famous *Ghazal*, now made popular through a film:

*Piya baj piala piya jae na
Piya bin to ek tal jiya jaena.*

The poets of seventeenth and eighteenth centuries like Wali (1667-1741), Hatim (1699-1799), Mazhar (1698-1781), Dard (1719-85), Sauda (1713-81), Insha (d. 1817) and others developed the language and the poetic idiom to give the *ghazal* a dominant place in Urdu literature. It is true that the symbols they used in their *ghazals* were almost the same as those used and developed by the earlier Persian poets. But the changing social scene gave new social meaning and significance to these oft-repeated symbols. If for Qutub Shah the cup was only a cup of wine, for Ghalib it became the poetic image of aesthetic enjoyment, spiritual exaltation and man's quest for uninhibited self-fulfilment.

But it was not a gradual process of transformation. From Quli Qutub Shah to Ghalib is a qualitative leap. Urdu *Ghazal* despite its broad humanistic appeal had become the prisoner of the theme of love, wine and mysticism. As a poet, Ghalib was an iconoclast and a rebel. To him goes the credit of striking a new path and giving a new dimension to the *Ghazal*. He demolished old myths and created new values. His *Ghazals* or couplets became part of every day speech and thus he can be regarded as a people's poet. But his experiments with new diction and imagery, his deeply philosophical approach, the free flights of his imagination make him one of the most difficult poets to understand.

Ghalib left a lasting impact on the generations which came after him. The post-mutiny period produced some of the most outstanding poets like Hali (1837-1914), Dagh (1831-1905) and others. But notwithstanding their contribution to the development and refinement of the language, they remain comparatively minor poets, who remained far below the lofty heights scaled by Ghalib.

Iqbal started from where Ghalib had left. Iqbal introduced modern sensibility in Urdu poetry. His life coincided with the resurgence of the Indian people in general and the Muslims in particular. He had the unique opportunity of deeply imbibing the philosophies of the East and the West. His education and travels in Europe broadened his horizon. He was a man given to philosophy and in his own way he tried to "reconstruct" the philosophy of Islam.

Iqbal started composing *Ghazals* in a purely traditional way and sent them to his mentor Dagh. But very soon he gave up the medium of *Ghazal* and adopted other forms to convey his message. For, let us not forget, Iqbal thought that he had a message to preach. Later on, in the last phase of his creative life, Iqbal again came back to *Ghazal* and in a way completely transformed it in its form and content.

Iqbal also sang of love and man but he gave a new meaning to these terms. His Man is an ever active being who, through love, becomes, if not God, at least His equal. The man is proud of being a man and he tells his God "you created the darkness; I the lamp. You created wilderness; I turned it into a garden." He can stand up to God and tell Him :

*Why didst Thou me command to journey forth
From Paradise? Now wait for my return: the work
of building a whole world takes time.*⁶

Iqbal, through his magnificent compositions, proved that the delicate form of *Ghazal* could be used as a vehicle to express modern thought and feelings.

*

*

*

Hasrat, Fani, Jigar, Yagana and others made a rich contribution to the treasure-store of *Ghazal*. But the creative development of the legacy left by Ghalib and Iqbal in the field of *Ghazal* fell to the lot of the modern poets like Firaq, Faiz, Majaz, Majrooh, Makhdoom, Jan Nisar, Kaifi, etc. It was being debated again whether *Ghazal* could fulfil the need of the time. These poets showed that it could.

The ideas of equality and socialism had taken roots in Indian soil.

The humanism of these radical poets was more encompassing and broader than that of the earlier poets. Their's was basically the poetry of protest. They raised their voice against injustice and exploitation of man by man. They introduced new concepts, new symbols and new images in *Ghazal*. They sang of love and beauty and the pain of separation and the joys of union with the beloved. They retained the lyricism which distinguishes the *Ghazal* from other forms of poetry. And yet their social consciousness gave a new dimension to the *Ghazal*. Majrooh is conscious of the tragedy of a writer in a consumer society : "We are like commodities in the market place. Every one sizes us up as a buyer." Kaifi points to the massacre of the millions in the world : "They found the dagger that killed me. But it bears no finger-prints." A few lines from Faiz would help to illustrate how these modern poets used the old symbol but gave new meaning to them.

*This hour of chain and gibbet and of rejoicing,
Hour of necessity and hour of choice*

*At your command the cage, but not the garden's
Red rose-fire, when its freshest hour begins;
No noose can catch the dawn-wind's whirling feet,
The spring's bright hour falls prisoner to no net.*

*Others will see, if I do not, that hour
Of singing nightingale and splendid flower.⁷*

Those familiar with this particular *Ghazal* will remember that Faiz wrote it in solitary confinement in 1951, waiting for his trial. The symbols and the phraseology used is theological like *Jabr*, *Ikhtiyar*, *Junun* etc. But Faiz gives them political meaning and yet the *Ghazal* retains all its lyricism.

Young poets are doing some daring experiments. Some have failed but many have succeeded. The future of the Urdu *Ghazal* is safe in their hands.

* * *

The *Ghazal* singing had started in India even before the birth of Urdu. The *Sufis*, despite the ban put on singing by the exponent of the orthodoxy, had made singing of *Ghazal* popular and the name given to these gatherings was *sama*. Persian *Ghazals* were sung in these gatherings and later the Hindi compositions of Amir Khusro's.

The Urdu *Ghazal*, when it made its appearance, became a part of repertoire of the *qawwal* as well as the *tavef*. Many of the *tavaef* were poets in their own right.

We are familiar with the *Ghazals* sung by Zohra Bai, Kamla Jharia, K.L. Sehgal and others. But probably it was Begum Akhtar who gave a definite shape to *Ghazal*-singing — what might be called *ghazal-gayeki*.

She started singing *Ghazal* at an early age when she could hardly appreciate the literary value of a *Ghazal*. Pains takingly she equipped herself with the rich tradition of Urdu poetry and tried to fathom the mood of a particular *Ghazal* in all its nuances. In her repertoire one could find the best selections of *Ghazals* from the great masters as well as the modern poets. Her favourites, of course, were Ghalib, Dagh, Jigar, Faiz and Kaifi. In the later phase of her life it was only the generosity of her spirit that made her sing the compositions of relatively unknown and often ordinary poets. She would go miles out of her way to help those who asked for her help. And many among them were poets who sought her patronage to gain recognition. In her death Indian music has lost a peerless exponent of *ghazal-gayeki* and many of us a charming and loving friend.

NOTES

1. Karl Marx: Marx, Engels, Lenin on India, Perspective Publications, New Delhi, p. 20.
2. Translation by B.L. Chak: *The Broken Flute*, Delhi, 1969.
3. Translation by Prof. M. Mujeeb: *The Indian Muslims*, George Allen & Unwin, 1967.
4. M. Mujeeb : Ibid, p. 289.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. V.G. Kiernan : *Poems by Faiz*, People's Publishing House, 1958.

S.M. MEHDI graduated from Christ Church College, Kanpur and took up Journalism as a career. He worked with 'Naya Zamana' a Bombay weekly and later was Editor of 'Ilm-o-Danish', thereafter, Editor of 'Awam', a Hyderabad daily. He joined the editorial staff of Soviet Land in 1956. He has written several plays and translated major Russian classics into Urdu.