

Ghalib and metaphor



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The sheer lyrical power of metaphor can be found throughout Ghalib's poetry. Ghalib utilizes this figure of speech, I believe, to help us connect to and really experience what he is trying to tell us about life, love, and hardship. It seems that, through metaphor, he implores us to delve deeper into his writings and enter into the suffering, heartache, alienation, and ambition that marked his entire life. Using ghazal's from the Joy of the Drop website, I will examine and discuss the verses that I thought to be the most profound and inspiring. 'I have taken to grave the deep scar of happiness while she stands above in her hundred colors' Happiness, in this line, has left Ghalib critically wounded. Whether in his pursuit of an ideal life or a society's ideal life, whatever 'happiness' is to him, he has not only failed to achieve it, but it has succeeded in ruining him. The beloved seems to stand, unscathed and lofty, above the defeated Ghalib, still adorned with the pristine and elaborate clothing that Ghalib has ascribed to her. We know from historical accounts of Ghalib's life that he searched, unsuccessfully, for influence, status, and financial stability, none of which he would be able to grasp in his lifetime. This may be the ever-unreachable 'happiness' he is referring to here. The beloved seems to have not only found this happiness but fully abides in this state of being. 'As a boy I almost threw stones at that crazed lover trapped always in desire but at last I remembered Leaving I bear the scars of an unfulfilled longing to exist like an extinguished candle I know no place offriendship... .. Pursuit has unraveled the strings of beauty's veil leaving nothing but threads for those who can see' These lines, rich with metaphor, point to a beaten and existentially muzzled Ghalib.

Married at thirteen and without a proper education or monetary income; Ghalib's inner struggle with this life, that had seemingly been thrust upon him, can be seen in the above verses (Ahmad). Feeling subdued, Ghalib seems to flee from his boyish desires, but he is not able to fully recover from the unfulfilled dreams and aspirations that were the sum of his longings. An 'extinguished candle' is used here as simile concerning friendship and community. An 'extinguished candle' does not have purpose and is discarded or overlooked when it no longer gives, or is able to give, light.

After fleeing desire and experiencing loss of purpose and meaning, Ghalib uses metaphor to reveal something philosophically profound. Pursuit 'unraveling the veil' of beauty to uncover nothing can be seen as a moment where Ghalib wonders if his desire and longing to exist mean anything at all. What if, in the chasing of a pre-conceived notion of a beautiful life, we find that the 'beauty' in that particular life doesn't exist. How devastating! Maybe this verse's metaphor of beauty's veil shows us that unless we can learn to free ourselves from that desire-driven pursuit, we will be forever tormented in life.

This can be found in Buddhist teachings and although, Buddhism wasn't as large in India at the time, it still might have had subtle influences on a well-versed and knowledgeable Ghalib. Ghalib somewhat hints at religiously-influenced, philosophical concepts, at times while communicating it using metaphor; as can be seen in these verses: 'Who has seen the single face of the beloved if one of us glimpsed her shadow she unravels' One could surmise from Ghalib's verses, like this one, that his life was one of spiritual

seeking and questioning. The unraveling of the shadow of the beloved points towards the idea that we cannot pigeonhole God.

Seemingly, God, according to Ghalib, is elusive and ‘beyond’ what we know of Her. As soon as we have developed a theological rule about who God is; She vanishes and we are left with only a glimpse of the smallest speck of understand. His deep devotion to religious mystery and unknowing was juxtaposed with his brilliant subversiveness concerning fundamental views of God in Islamic influenced, 19th century, India. ‘At every step I am closer only to knowing the distance as fast as I run the desert runs on’ This metaphor of a running desert leads one to believe that Ghalib realized that very few things are graspable in this life.

It seems the more you learn the more you realized you don’t know. The desert is in a sense, dead, and the barren wasteland can be hard to travel. This sheds light on the early maturity of Ghalib. It sounds like the wisdom of an old man but he was probably very young when he wrote this. In all his searching and coming up unfulfilled, Ghalib probably turned to abusing drink at an early age. Some of his most comical and sorrowful lines involve wine. ‘You should always be drunk that too is wisdom the self holds a cabinet for every liquor, Viewing the ‘self’ as a ‘cabinet for every liquor’ is a clever way of saying that you are a lush.

And in this particular verse, Ghalib, doesn’t just mention wine. He is willing to fill his cupboards with all types of liquor; possibly to numb his sorrows. Wine or drink also ‘loosened or freed Ghalib to be himself. Wine, ‘melting a bottle’ that he is hiding in, can be a reference to the release of the stranglehold of inhibitions that comes when one drinks. No telling how many ghazals

were written under the influence. This verse also seems to hint at the dangerously intoxicating power of love. Both have the ability to destroy. ' If love burns more than the heart avoid love ven wine melts the bottle I hide in' Ghalib was a genius, a lover, a seeker, a drinker, and probably had a better grasp on what the effects of longing-love, as apposed to emotional romance, had on a person(Ahmad). ' No longer ask about those seekers of love time has illuminated their bodies of grief' We see this grief reflected in his ghazals and we learn about his personal experiences through his biographies. The power he evokes in his verses by using metaphor is what inspires me to keep reading and studying this great poet. Ahmad, Aijaz, ed. Ghazals of Ghalib. Columbia University Press, 1971.