



## Same Tropes, Different Meanings: A Study on the Poetic Aesthetic of Khusrau, Ghalib and Faiz

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### Abstract:

The study attempts to gain an understanding of the aesthetics of Amir Khusrau, Ghalib, and Faiz Ahmed Faiz's Urdu-Persian ghazals in the context of their socio-political backgrounds and to outline a brief history of the literary culture through a metaphorical analysis. To analyze modern Urdu literature, critics often divide poets into the categories of progressive writers who support "adab

barā-e adab” (literature for literature’s sake) and modernist writers who favor “adab barā-e zindagī” (literature for life’s sake). However, this dichotomy gained popularity only in the 1930s and 40s. Through an analysis of the works of three poets who belonged to different centuries and are regarded as some of the most celebrated Urdu-Persian poets in present time, the study seeks to attain knowledge about the quintessential features of their poems and the development of political undertones in the traditional ghazal universe. It also attempts to draw a comparison between them by tracing the history of the same resemblance-based metaphors used in their poems.

**Keywords:** Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Ghalib, Amir Khusrau, Ghazal, Urdu Poetry.

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## Introduction

Owing to its immense popular appeal in the Urdu-Persian literary field, the ghazal has managed to maintain a position of prominence that is more evident than any other form of poetry such as the masnavi, qasida, marsiya, or the rubai. The literary style has come to be associated with the names of renowned poets like Zuq, Faiz, Ghalib, and Mir, leading many readers to remark that these poets owe their reputation to their strong grasp in this genre.

Even though well-known Sufi poets like Amir Khusrau are attributed to be the torchbearers of the 'ghazal culture', the form of the ghazal actually originated in Iran in 10th Century A.D and made its way into India with the arrival of the Muslim influence from 12th century onwards.

Soon, the ghazal established a culture of its own as it became an object of adoration for the poets and an aesthetic respite and tradition for common folks, in which the musalsal rivāyat (continuous tradition) that used rozmarrah kī bol chāl (everyday common language) played a crucial part. Due to its inherited image

as an interlaced element of intricate thought and aesthetic sensibilities, the ghazal style used by Urdu-Persian poets offers a fitting case of a literary genre that existed in a contained aesthetic universe.

## **Aim**

The author attempts to metaphorically analyse the works of Amir Khusrau, Ghalib and Faiz Ahmed Faiz in order to trace the evolution of Urdu-Persian poetics from an enclosed aesthetic universe to greater political awareness.

## **Conventions in the Ghazal Universe**

The ghazal form made a distinction between mazmun (theme/content of the poem) and man'i (the deeper meaning of the poem) which offered a wide range of poetic possibilities for the poet. For instance, the poet and the voice of the poem became separate entities. This allowed space for the contrast between the lover in the poem and the poet himself. Similarly, the beloved didn't have to be a real-like person either. The ghazal form became a 'poetry of notions' where regular cliches and metaphors became stand-ins for conventions. According to these accepted rules, the ghazal always existed in a world of absolute beauty, misery, and dedication. The lover was bound to drown in misery and become removed from society. The lover's raqeebs (rivals) in this love-fuelled feud deserved no recognition for their love because unlike the protagonist, they were given to havas (lust) rather than ishq (love).

In this manner, an entire universe of comparable metaphors and ideas got established over the centuries and a cryptic language came into existence. The poets and their audiences (the ahl-e-zabaan or the sah-hridaya) shared knowledge of this coded world and hence could communicate with a mutual understanding.

This system of using mazmuns that were suitable for a ghazal rather than a real-life object of interest or experience, carried the key of unlocking the poet from the shackles of realism. This resulted in the production of *adab barā-e adab* (literature for literature's sake), a phenomenon which can further be explored through the ghazals of Amir Khusrau Dehlavi and Ghalib.

### **Amir Khusrau Dehlavi**

Amir Khusrau Dehlavi was a thirteenth-century Sufi poet, a renowned mystic, a courtier, a musician, and a spiritual disciple of Nizamuddin Auliya. To purify the self from materialistic desires, Sufi poets across the world are guided to find ultimate devotion in God. Naturally, his ghazals revolve around metaphysical themes that focus on the *bātinī* (internal, spiritual essence rather than outward representations) aspects of poetry.

They incorporate themes such as blind devotion to the divine, mortal nature of life, and cleansing of the heart. In his verses, the *mehboob* (beloved) takes the form of divine power. God's love is like *sharab* (wine) which he gets lost in, to find a cure for the problems of the self.



## **Mirza Asadullah Khan**

Mirza Asadullah Khan, popularly known by the takhallus (pen-name) “Ghalib”, was born in Agra on 27 December 1797. Asad, as he was known in his childhood, lost his father when he was five years old and was cared for by his uncle, Nasirulla Baig. However, his uncle died three years later and he was raised under the tutelage of his maternal grandfather. Asad showed a keen interest and talent in Persian literature from a young age. However, even though his Persian Divan is no less than five times longer than his Urdu Divan, his present popularity owes itself mostly to his Urdu work.



After his marriage at the age of thirteen, Ghalib moved to Delhi with his brother who did not survive the turmoil of the revolt of 1857. Ghalib also lost seven of his children in their infancy. Facing bereavement, socio-political turmoil, and financial difficulties in his lifetime, his poems took a turn from previous mystical themes of Urdu-Persian poetry and introduced undertones of existentialism.

## **Faiz Ahmed Faiz**

Faiz was a Marxist, trade unionist, journalist, and thinker. He was an active proponent of the Progressive Writers Movement and his radical views were influenced by the trauma of partition, communal riots, and the corrupt political apparatus of newly formed Pakistan.

The government in Pakistan was overthrown by the military several times and the last government that Faiz witnessed in his lifetime was led by Mohammed Zia-ul-Haq who Faiz regarded as an autocratic ruler. In such times of political chaos, Faiz's poems emerged as an



anthem of hope and rebellion.

## **An Enclosed Aesthetic Universe**

In the context of Amir Khusrau's background, consider the standardized tropes of the ghazal universe that are used in the following Sher (couplet):

## Ghazal 278: Mast-i-Tura Bi-Hich May-i- Ihtiyaj Neest

ای مہ مشو مقابل چشم کہ با رخس

ما را بہ ہیچ وجہ بہ تو احتیاج نیست

"

*"Moon don't rise before my eyes,*

*For with his face*

*I have no need for you at all."*

Here, Khusrau compares the moon's beauty with the divine, only to conclude that the latter's transcendental refinement is unparalleled. This Sher is symbolic of the final stage of annihilation in Sufism wherein the mystic sees nothing, but God.

If the following Sher written by Ghalib is examined, it can be seen that the metaphor of the moon remains the same but now it is not directed towards *ishq-e haqiqi* (divinely love) but rather *ishq-e majazi* (worldly love).

**"chun ba-Khabar ke na aaNast bakaahad az sharam**

**maah yak chand babaalad ke jabeen-e-to shaved"**

*"When it thinks it is not that, then it diminishes in shame*

*The moon waxes big so that it might become your forehead"*

In this Sher, the *maah* (moon) is compared to the beloved's *jabeen* (forehead). The moon waxes in an attempt to challenge the beloved and then wanes when it realizes with shame that the task is unachievable.



Even though Khusrau and Ghalib are poets who lived centuries apart, it is intriguing to note that both of them preserve the intrinsic aesthetic significance of the ghazal.

Ghalib added more different nuances, yet still stayed within the conditions of a suitable *mazmun* and *man'i* for a ghazal. In his works, the beloved continued to remain like the flame of the lamp (*sham'a*), the lover the moth (*parwaana*), and a reference to heaven naturally reminded one about the beloved's lane (*kuucha*).

This becomes even more fascinating if you consider that Ghalib lived through immensely turbulent socio-political times. He lived in Delhi where he witnessed the 1857 mutiny and the ensuing bloodshed and brutality that left a traumatic impact on everyone who stayed in the capital. Nonetheless, Ghalib's aesthetic universe of the ghazal never retreated from these carefully defined boundaries of "*tilismī haqīqat*" (illusory reality).

## **Redefining the Ghazal Universe While Retaining its Elements**

Through an analysis of the following lines written by Faiz Ahmed Faiz, it can be noticed that the *mehboob* (beloved) mentioned here is not just a symbol for carnal/ worldly/ divinely love but is an enlarged metaphor that encompasses Faiz's political faith and awareness. It is the projection of a poet whose heart is being tugged in two different directions of love and dissent.

**मुझ से पहली सी मोहब्बत मिरी महबूब न माँग**

“और भी दुख हैं ज़माने में मोहब्बत के सिवा

राहतेँ और भी हैं वस्ल की राहत के सिवा

मुझ से पहली सी मोहब्बत मिरी महबूब न माँग”

*Don't ask me, my love, for that love again*

*"There are other sorrows in this world,*

*Comforts other than love*

*Don't ask me, my love, for that love again."*

"Don't ask me, my love, for that love again" is the first poem that appears in the second section of Faiz Ahmed Faiz's book 'Naksh-e-Fariyadi'. This collection marked a clear metamorphosis of Faiz's poetry from *adab barā-e adab* (literature for literature's sake) to *adab barā-e zindagī* (literature for life's sake) or as some would call it "literature with a conscience".

As it happens, Faiz quotes the following lines by the Persian poet Nizami right at the beginning of this section:

**"Dil-e-ba-farokhtam jaan-e-khareedam"**

*(I have sold my heart and bought a soul)*

In his 1941 introduction to *Naksh-e-Fariyadi*, N.M.Rashed, an influential Pakistani poet, described Faiz as standing at the "junction of romance and reality". Faiz appeared to be a poet who still had romanticism instilled in his heart but who was now being forced to stare into life's bitter and cruel reality. He had come to a fork in the road and eventually chose the path that allowed him to lend his voice to the subalterns. This gradual instalment of a vocal political conscience in Faiz's poetry might come as no surprise to many people, considering the extremely unstable socio-political underpinnings of the system that became the subject of his revolutionary poems.

Professor Khawaja Masood, commenting on the era of Faiz Ahmed Faiz said:

*"The twentieth century witnessed those depressing moments when fascism crushed freedom of writing. Wars, revolutions, denial of revolutions, the courageous struggle to save humanity, and haunting crimes against humanity-Faiz saw all of it and he deeply felt everything."*

Faiz never completely abandoned the traditional aesthetic elements of a ghazal form. He even gained criticism for being an "unprogressive poet" (ġhair-taraqqī pasand shā'ir) for "putting curtains of metaphors into his poems such that no one knows who is sitting behind them".

However, the difference in his utilization of the classic tropes is apparent when you notice that these age-old images were not just being employed as a cathartic outlet by the poet. Rather, now they worked to evoke a sense of pathos that could unite the entire humanity.

For instance, the raqeeb evolved to become more than just a rival in a romantic feud, he was recast as a fellow fighter for a cause. The restrictions that were put upon the lover by his mehboob (beloved) implied the impositions of a fundamentalist leader. The agony of the lone lover now reached across to encapsulate the entire mankind. The chaman (rose garden) and the gul (rose) now stood for his homeland and its people. Sharaab (wine) was translated into the wine of political transparency or the self-sacrificing allegiance to a politically progressive cause.

## **Transforming the Language of Traditional Metaphors**

In the observation of the following verses by Amir Khusrau, Ghalib, and Faiz Ahmed Faiz, the stark difference in the suggested meaning of the same metaphor will become apparent. In all these contexts, the metaphor "sahar" (dawn) has been used to imply extremely different images and viewpoints.

## Ghazal 1011: “Biyar Bada-Yi Raushan Ki Subh Roi Nimud” – Amir Khusrau

بیار بادہ روشن کہ صبح روی نمود

کہ در چنین نفسی بی شراب نتوان بود

*“Bring bright wine for dawn has shown its face.*

*At a moment like this, there’s no being without wine.”*

Here, ‘Dawn’ is a symbol of spiritual enlightenment and awakening. The protagonist is intoxicated in the love of God, and through this means discovers an eye-opening path.

### तुम न आए तो क्या सहर न हुई - Ghalib

“तुम न आए तो क्या सहर न हुई

हाँ मगर चैन से बसर न हुई”

*“When you did not come, did the dawn not arrive,*

*Yes, but it did not pass as peacefully.”*

Here, dawn is symbolic of a sense of upliftment and hope that the lover feels when he is acknowledged in the eyes of his beloved. He claims that dawn did arrive physically without her arrival as well, but metaphorically he is yet to experience the sense of hope that comes with a new day.

### सुबह-ए-आज़ादी - Faiz Ahmed Faiz

“ये दाग़ दाग़ उजाला,

ये शब-गज़ीदा सहर

वो इन्तज़ार था जिसका,

ये वो सहर तो नहीं

*"The weight of the night hasn't lifted yet*

*The moment for the emancipation of the eyes*

*and the heart hasn't come yet*

*Let's go on, we haven't reached the destination yet"*

In these verses, "dawn" refers to the social and political freedom that the voice in the poem waited for with eagerness.

Dawn symbolizes a sense of freedom and liberty that the poet expected to witness. However, he ends up encountering a pseudo-dawn that is an empty barrel of false promises which offers suffering and misery at every twist and turn.

As it can be observed, by employing these conventional metaphors in a socio-political backdrop, Faiz Ahmed Faiz transformed ornamental symbols into utilitarian aesthetical symbols. He didn't just reuse traditional metaphors but also introduced novel ones that presented hints of socialist philosophy and optimism.

"Yeh galion ke aware bekar kutte" (on every street, these good-for-nothing dogs) was a call for the oppressed to rise from their slumber and revolt against their exploitation. The poem "Ek Manzar" (A Scene) is a poignant representation of the misery shared by the silenced subalterns. The poem "Intesab" is a rebellious anthem for the forgotten people of the society who are stepped upon time and again by the system. "Bol, kih lab āzād haiñ tere bol" (Speak, for your lips are free) is an attempt to ignite people's conscience and moral sense.

## Conclusion

Just like Khusrau and Ghalib, Faiz Ahmed Faiz also created a paradise of metaphors and beauty in his poems. However, unlike them, he chose to withdraw from that decorative world to speak

about the ugliness he saw in his personal reality. Naturally, in a world like that, his poetry expanded far beyond an enclosed aesthetic universe that differentiated between the "personal" and the "poetic", to accept what existed beyond– the truth which must be uttered.

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