

Deewaan-E-Ghalib – Sariir-e-Khaama Q/A Round
Najeeb Jung with Press

I am requesting you if you can give response to these please.

- 1) Deewaan-E-Ghalib – Sariir-e-Khaama is the outcome of the lifetime of devotion to the work of Mirza Ghalib from the time your mother recited his poetry to you to the time your daughters helped you with the translation by finding the closest words to do justice to the original. Could you expand on this journey?
- 2) You write in the Preface that the book is meant for those who read and understand Urdu but might not appreciate its nuances. For the uninitiated, what is Mirza Ghalib's message to the world at large, particularly in these troubled times?
- 3) Has Mirza Ghalib received his due in India? If not, what else to your mind needs to be done?
- 4) Is there anything I might have missed out that you might like to add?

Replies:

1: As I recall, I was around 4 years old when my late mother (Ammi) made me learn Ghalib. We also did a bit of Iqbal but Ghalib was her passion. So while my friends in class were reciting English nursery rhymes, I was spouting Ghalib---not that I understood the meanings!! I was a popular child in family gatherings for this. In fact, my mother often told a story how Maulana Azad, who was a family friend and we often visited his home at Edward Road, now renamed the Maulana Azad Rd., would insist on listening Ghalib being recited by a 4/5 years old child.

As time went by and school (St Columba's) gained importance, Ghalib receded into the background but Ammi and I continued reciting once in a while to each other. I kept reading the Deewan whenever I could having acquired many editions and prints over time.

In early 2000, I was at Oxford as a Visiting Fellow and had access to some outstanding libraries. I thought I had read enough and should try my hand at translating the Master for English speaking people or those who understood Urdu but did not have an adequate vocabulary. It did not take anytime to realise I was not equipped for the task-----neither was my vocabulary so good, nor did I fully comprehend the nuances and depth of his thought. I needed to read much more, and research the various "sharas" (commentaries) by other well know thinkers and writers and therefore to find the right Ustad. The big question was how to get THAT person.

As luck would have it, I came to the Jamia Millia Islamia in August 2009 and here began my search for the Ustab. My Secretary Zafar Hashmi sahib introduced me to Prof Khalid Mahmood who, at that time, was the Head of the Urdu dept at Jamia. My first interaction with Khalid sahib and something clicked. I knew I had found my teacher.

Khalid sahib is not just an extremely good human being, but a profound thinker. He knew Ghalib, but above all, was happy to read and re-read Ghalib, and spend time with me. Let me add, this was a labour of love by him too----and all the hours and years we worked together, there was never any fee paid or even expected. It was a sacred relationship between a master and pupil on a subject they loved and therefore enjoyed working on together.

From mid 2010 to the end of 2016, every day we read Ghalib; re read Ghalib, discussed the ashaar, looked at commentaries and different interpretations, agreed and at times disagreed. By this time I felt ready to attempt a translation. The big question before me whether I should translate the whole Deewan or pick out the popular ghazals, already well known through films and popular ghazals sung by the greats like Saigal, Begum Akhtar, Jagjit Singh etc. and stick to translating them. I do not know why I decided to translate the entire Deewan.

It has taken me 4 years to do this. It has been a back breaking labour of love, a dream I have lived with. Sometimes , a couplet would not be difficult but some would be back breaking. For instance, I spent months agonising over the first couplet in the Deewan:

“naqsh faryadi hai kis kii shokhi e tahreer ka

Kaaghazi hai pairahan har paikar e tasweer ka”

I find it impossible to give true impression to this. So one would wake up at night and think over it, think on it during long walks, during long flights-----and never be satisfied. There were more like this and during these years, hours were spent looking for words that would convey the most appropriate meaning to what Ghalib meant. I would seek out my daughters, discuss the couplet and more often than not, they came up with the right expression. It is difficult for a family to be with a husband or parent obsessed with a passion but play along with him with patience and fortitude. In fact for the latter half of 2020, we were all together in New York with everyone contributing to complete the work. I guess everyone of us wished to complete this work as soon as possible. 10 years was enough.

2: Ghalib is multi-layered. We can derive different meanings from the same couplet.

Take the popular couplet couplet:

“aah ko chahiye ik umr asar hone tak

Kaun jiita hai teri zulf ke sar hone tak”

The simplest interpretation is of a lover moaning how long it would take for his sighs to take effect and whether he would even live till the beloved was ready. But could it not be a question to God that how long would a person wait for his prayer to be answered, whether he would not be dead till the prayer was answered.

Or

“Humne maana ke taghaaful na karoge lekin

Khaak ho jaayenge hum tumko khabar hone tak”

Again a similar interpretation can be made as of the couplet quoted first.

These are simple ones by way of illustration because the Deewan is full of more complex ones.

Ghalib has a strange informal relationship with God. He is a Muslim believing in Allah and his Prophet, but rejects dogma and ritualism and opens a world of modern thought and iconoclasm.

“bandagi mein bhi vo azada o khud biin hain ke ham
Ulte phir aaye dar e Kaaba agar vaa na hua”

(While being a believer, I am so independent and proud, that I would turn back from the Kaaba were its door not open)

Or even challenging established Islamic belief:

“Hum ko maloom hai Jannat ki haqeeqat lekin
Dil ke khush rakhne ko Ghalib ye khayaal achha hai
(I hardly need to translate this).

In these disturbed times Ghalib’s open discourse, his compassion and understanding, and his plurality assume huge importance. He demolishes routinely held views on man, and his relationship with God, or the existence of heaven or hell, or man’s allurements for heaven and his fear of hell, sin and goodness. For him truth was not the monopoly of any religion or dogma and the path to truth was open to all. To this end he is critical for our times.

3: To answer whether Ghalib has received his due in India, well despite Urdu not being widely read in India, and most people having inadequate vocabularies, Ghalib’s ghazals have been sung manifold by the best in India. While it is near impossible to sing a ghazal in Qawali form, even that has happened. Masterpiece films have been made commencing from the 1940s when Saigal sahib played Ghalib, to Sohrab Modi’s successful film in the early 1950s to the recent TV serial by Gulzar sahib--- which will always remain a pure masterpiece bringing Ghalib into our homes. In 1969, Ghalib’s death centenary was celebrated by the Govt of India, with seminars, discussions and even a Mushaira held at the Red Fort in Delhi. Rekhta Foundation has brought him to the public and vast numbers of non- Urdu speaking people attend these recitations, and talks on him each year. So while the poetry may not be understood with its subtleties and nuances, Ghalib is most certainly heard, and admired by millions in India-----and with time his popularity grows.

This is precisely why I have done this translation---a step to bring him closer to those who speak Urdu/Hindustani but their vocabulary is limited, or those who know English and wish to read and understand him. The Roman script needs a bit of practice to familiarise and make reading easy, and the translation gives meaning to the words. I have not provided a commentary to the translations because that would make the book too complex and more of a commentary.

