

Illuminating forgotten pasts: English translations of Ghalib's Chirag-e-Dair

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The rediscovery of Ghalib in the English translation of Chirag-e-Dair as a modern cosmopolitan man who can appreciate the port town of Calcutta, find spirituality in the Hindu temple town of Banaras, and firmly situate himself in Persianate traditions of West Asia opens up a history of cultural exchange to the contemporary South Asian reader



By Srimati Ghosal Dec 08, 2022

Mirza Ghalib (Photo: AmarUjala)

Mirza Asadullah Beg Khan, popularly known by his pen name Ghalib, lived in Delhi during the decline and demise of the Mughal Empire among the Persian-speaking ruling elite of the city even though his personal life was riddled with financial difficulties and debt. Ghalib wrote in both Persian and Urdu, though his popularity today rests more on his Urdu oeuvre than the much larger body of work he composed in Persian. Having witnessed and lived through the Revolt of 1857 that saw the end of the Mughal Empire, Ghalib mourned extensively for his beloved Delhi fallen to foreign rule.

A largely nonpracticing Muslim, he has been seen as one capable of questioning his faith through much of his Urdu oeuvre. This has often resulted in his neat assimilation into the narrative of secular nationalism born during the anti-imperialist struggle and arduously disseminated by the governments of independent India in the second half of the twentieth century. For example, a TV series on Ghalib produced by Doordarshan, the only state-run television channel in pre-liberalization India, often has him express great pain at “division among Shias and Sunnis, Hindus and Muslims, Delhi and Agra”. Despite being born to the ruling elite and having lived through a revolt that changed the fate of the subcontinent, great financial hardships, and professional failures and some brilliant success, it is ironic that his after-life went on to assume even more interesting political and cultural significance than his own.

Maaz Bin Bilal, a thorough and recognized scholar, accomplished translator, and gifted poet, seeks to deconstruct this Ghalib that South Asians across the globe have grown up with and re-introduce them to the poet. This is his third book after authoring Ghazalnama: Poems from Delhi, Belfast and Urdu and a translation of Fikr Tausvi's Urdu diary into English, The Sixth River: A Journal from the Partition of India. He has been variedly trained under various prestigious fellowships including the Charles Wallace India Trust Fellowship in Translation and Writing (Nov. 2018–Feb 2019) and brings his clear understanding of the language and poetics of Persianate poetry to this work, often meticulously describing poetic form- meters, construction of distiches, refrain and rhyme- and context for the uninitiated reader.

Chirag-e-Dair, or Temple Lamp, was written by Ghalib as a tribute to the city of Banaras on his stay there en route from Delhi to Calcutta. It is a masnavi belonging to his Persian legacy and a testimony to the city's spiritual and natural beauty. Bilal's translation recreates Ghalib's rapture with the city faithfully and critically into English for the first time though the poem has been translated into Urdu and Hindi earlier. He brings together a long introduction on the context and poetics of Ghalib's work and intervenes with parenthetical comments wherever required pointing toward an audience largely uninitiated into Ghalib's world. Yet, the translation is not only for a western Anglophone audience, for Bilaal clearly mentions "most Indian audiences" in his discussion on the translating process. This begs the question of if and why this audience from India, or South Asia, familiar with Ghalib, and largely familiar with Urdu and Hindi (languages of previous translation) would prefer the English one by Bilaal to discover Ghalib as a Persian poet? The answer lies in the very moment of the demise of Delhi that Ghalib extensively mourns and the colonial past of the subcontinent.

Rhyming couplets

Temple Lamp is a masnavi (mathnawi in Arabic) composed with the traditional rhyming couplets that form independent beyts (sher in Urdu) and uses the aa/bb/cc rhyme scheme. True to Ghalib's usual style, the first line of the verse introduces an exposition or problem which is resolved in the following line. The poem often uses a refrain at the end of both the lines to enhance the rhyme. Bilaal notes his attempt to keep Ghalib's poetic structure intact, this is imperative because the poetics form as important rhetoric device in the cultural sphere of Persianate poetry as the words and the language.

Further, he notes the use of "they" instead of a gendered pronoun to preserve the fluidity that is accommodated by Persian and would be absolutely lost even with the use of "she/her" in the English language. Further, Bilaal often introduces parenthetical or footnoted explanations of concepts and implicit meanings that would be familiar to Ghalib's contemporary audience.

The poem can be divided into four broad parts thematically. Beginning with Ghalib's lament for Delhi and the people he has left behind, Ghalib's tone is elegiac. He pines for his friends in that city and complains that they have entirely forgotten him. The poem is written after he arrives in Banaras having fled Allahabad by taking a boat and crossing the Ganges, and Ghalib is bewildered by the hostility he had narrowly escaped. This might have been the impetus for his lament yet it is far more politically complicated than simply that. Take for example the verse 11

"Not one of my fellow citizens
partakes in my pain.
it is as if I had no country
in the whole world."

Effervescent political atmosphere

Bilal notes that the Persian word for country is “watan”, and it could be Delhi (his city), Hindustan (the subcontinent) and even the entire Persosphere. However, when Ghalib writes of a lack of home and a lack of country, a loss of both, he demonstrates a keen awareness of the effervescent political atmosphere in the subcontinent. The last Mughal ruler, Bahadur Shah Zafar, a notable poet himself, was a cultural patron to Ghalib in the last four years before the Revolt, with the fall of the empire to British hands, Ghalib’s access to the ruling elite of Delhi is limited. In fact, this trip he undertakes to Calcutta is to meet with the governor-general and clear a dispute regarding his pension. Ghalib, however, is not anti-imperialist or averse to the establishment of British rule. He does not scruple to claim the pension that he should be receiving for the service his uncle rendered in the British army’s war to subjugate the Marathas. Concepts of nationalism, loyalty and anti-imperialism are nascent, if not absent, at this stage in the history of the South Asian subcontinent and as Bilal rightly points out, Ghalib might merely be referring to the city of Delhi. He possibly mourns more empathically the passing of a known way of life, like his contemporaries in Ray’s film *Satranj Ki Khiladi*.

In the second part of the masnavi, Ghalib describes Banaras and its spiritual and natural beauty. Aided by the photographs Bilal provides for his reader one can see that the gardens and natural ecology of Banaras would have enthralled Ghalib. It is the spirituality that he finds in the city that mystifies the reader in modern South Asia. Banaras is perceived as a Hindu temple town today. The Kashi-Vishwanath temple is said to be the permanent seat of the Hindu lord Shiva and the city is associated with a number of Hindu cultural practices and myths not least of which involve death, cremation, and moksha (liberation from the cycle of rebirth). Ghalib is a Muslim man belonging to the Islamic ruling elite yet he is fluent in Hindu cultural practices and describes a *janeu* (holy sacred thread worn by Brahmanical Hindus) made of flowers that adorn the city of Banaras. Spirituality for Ghalib was clearly beyond the structures of organised religion but one wonders if that was a function of a man who refused to be a practicing member of his religion as subsequent narratives about him has emphasized or if he was merely a subject of his times undefined by rigidity of religious differences that has often been attributed the subsequent colonial governance.

In the third part Ghalib eroticises the beauty of the city with elegance and possibly the gaze of a male lover towards his feminine beloved. This is a critical translating dilemma for Bilal, since gender and sexual fluidity in oral poetry of the Perso-Urdu sphere is as much a function of its linguistic structure as its cultural proclivity, can a culture ever be perceived except through the language it chooses to express itself in? Bilal navigates this by using the contemporary device of the “they” pronoun and makes us question if indeed the contemporary politics around gender fluidity did not always exist in the languages of South Asia?

Finally, in the last section, Ghalib chastises himself for enjoying the privileges of Banaras, its natural and spiritual haven, while his friends and loved ones suffer. Circling back to his discomfort with the changing political and social dynamics of the mid-nineteenth century

South Asia after a brief respite offered to him by Banaras, that seems to be untouched by this upheaval.

Bilal's translation and his extensive introductory commentary on *Temple Lamp* is important for the way it liberates both Banaras and Ghalib from the clutches of discursive constructs that have held them captive in colonial and postcolonial politics. The reputation of Banaras as a Hindu temple town center of the Sanskrit world has been a consequence of colonial inquiry by British Orientalists from the early nineteenth century and it went on to be the home the Sanskritic Hindi sphere during the split in the Hindi-Urdu public spheres a century later during the crescendo of the nationalist movement. *Temple Lamp* challenges these narratives around Banaras and puts it on the map of the global Persosphere that stretched from Turkey to Bengal and beyond in the mid-nineteenth century when Ghalib visits it. Ghalib's poem allows us to reframe it as an important node in the fluid exchange of cultural and spiritual practices not restricted by the regimentation of organised linguistic and religious structures. As Ghalib calls it, "the Kaaba of Hindustan".

Fluid global exchange

Ghalib himself is released from the straitjackets of a secular Muslim and therefore an ideal forefather within the nationalist rhetoric consciously cultivated in post-colonial India. Bilal's Ghalib is fallible, he is too proud to accept jobs that will pay his debt, and he is too disdainful of fellow poets in the Indo-Persian traditions preferring to boast of a cultural and scholarly lineage from Iran. His nationalist consciousness barely resembles that of the twentieth century, and he actively seeks a British pension awarded for subduing another Indian state. He finds the cosmopolitan environment of Calcutta fascinating, and he is prouder of his Persian composition than his Urdu ones, Urdu a language more native to the subcontinent. Ghalib is "the last of the conservatives and the first of the modernists". He laments the passing of a known cultural structure but bears the foresight to see his work through print in an era when much of the poetic traditions are oral. Ghalib belongs to the fluid global exchange within the Persian world and with Europe that characterised his era but was subsequently and rapidly lost in the following decades as changing colonial politics and the resistant nationalist consciousness crystallised by the close of the century. Today, both Ghalib and Banaras are viewed as opposing ends of the binary but framed within this political epistemology that finds its provenance in the late nineteenth-century colonialist and nationalist traditions. Bilal's work on the Persian Ghalib, rather than the canonical Urdu compositions, is an important device to return to those early years of colonisation.

However, if it is indeed Persian, as a language, that enables this illumination of a different historical reality, then why must it be translated at all? After all, one could argue that to use English to dismantle a political narrative influenced by mistaken translations and misinterpretations by colonial authorities is simply repeating and reinforcing the mistake. Postcolonial criticisms of translation by the stalwarts like wa' Thiongo and Spivak have often argued for translating into European languages with as much care towards the political rhetoric and context as the linguistic and structural integrity. Maaz Bin Bilal has

indeed excelled in both aspects but it is not a translation, he is conscious, for only an Anglophone audience, it is also for his Indian and South Asian readers who would have been expected to know much of this context. That is, however, simply not true. The perceptions of South Asian reader are as much a product of Anglophone discourses and colonial linguistic impositions.

Persian was the language of high politics and legal discourse in the subcontinent well into the nineteenth century, when Ghalib composes his works. Yet, it has come to be perceived as a foreign and distant tongue of West Asia, while Hindi and Urdu became the dominant political languages in the subcontinent often accompanied by the simultaneous marginalisation of other regional languages. There is extensive scholarship to suggest that this could be paralleled with the rise of a political nationalist consciousness in the northern part of the subcontinent. Further, the spread of English education among the middle-class, that dominated the public sphere and politics in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century right up to the moment of decolonisation and later, was instrumental in the articulation of this nationalist politics. In other words, the changing linguistic topology of this century can be effectively mapped on the emerging nationalist consciousness. The distancing of Persian from the gamut of Indian languages is both a cause and result of the political distancing of the western parts of the Persosphere with the South Asian subcontinent. The colonial and postcolonial subject is defined by this hybridity of cultural nationalism that finds its provenance in the colonial interactions of the early twentieth century. He cannot access Persian with as much ease as he does Hindi, Urdu and English. He is in many ways closer to the Anglophone reader of Bilal's translation than might appear at first glance.

Acknowledging this while engaging with the English text, however, is not to negate decolonial and postcolonial conversations in translation studies, it is indeed to nuance it with greater subversive force. The anti-colonial movement has often used nationalist and pre-colonial traditions to assert itself, and Ghalib with his Urdu oeuvre and secular image has often been an integral part of this. Yet both the nationalist consciousness and its interpretation of the pre-colonial past are coloured by the lenses of colonial knowledge built on mistranslation of Orientalist scholars. Accessing Ghalib's Persian oeuvre with English implodes this structure of hierarchies to re-establishes the fluid cultural exchange both within the Persosphere and between Europe and Asia. In other words, it puts the postcolonial South Asian reader in conversation with his past and its cultural volatility using the same lens of the English language that was instrumental in limiting it.

Rediscovery of Ghalib

Translation has been an instrumental practice in the creation of conversations among and within world literature but has always been discussed as a dialogue between geographies rather than histories. This is not particularly bewildering since languages tend to be attached firmly to their geographical loci. However, Ghalib's Persian poem shows us the ability of histories, especially that of colonial rule, to displace languages from their geographies over time and it is important to explore this temporal aspect of translations.

The rediscovery of Ghalib in the English translation of *Chirag-e-Dair* as a modern cosmopolitan man who can appreciate the port town of Calcutta, find spirituality in the Hindu temple town of Banaras, and firmly situate himself in Persianate traditions of West Asia opens up a history of cultural exchange to the contemporary South Asian reader. The South Asian reader, riddled by colonial and postcolonial constructions around Ghalib and Banaras, narratives built on the nationalist consciousness of the twentieth-century print public sphere is introduced to the fluidity of religious practices, cultural dialogues and cosmopolitan spaces in pre-colonial and early colonial India. It is only right that it this can be accessed by tracing it through the same lenses of English language and Western scholarly narratives that were responsible, if only as a moment of inception, for its termination.

To read Ghalib's Persian poetry in English is to step in through a historical magic mirror to discover a wonderland of cultural extravagance unrestricted by the later structures and political discourses of either colonialism or anti-colonial nationalism on the other side.

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