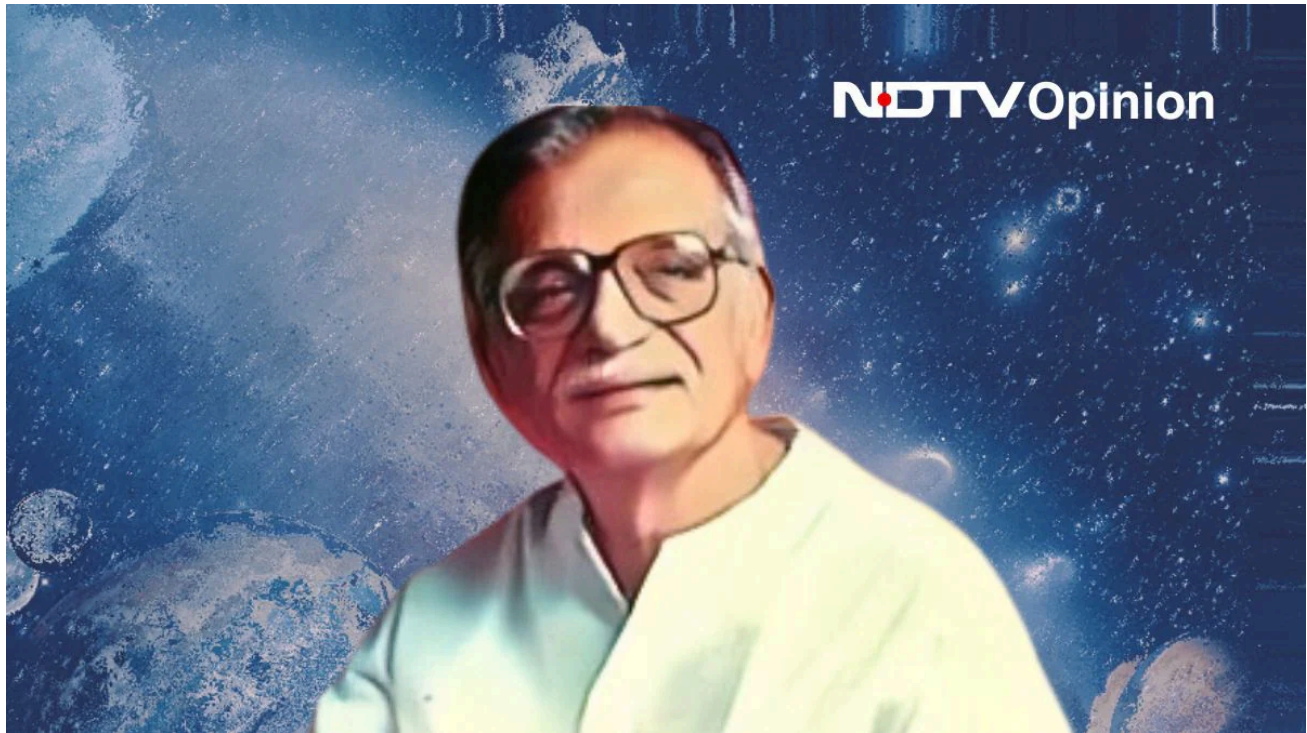


Presenting Gulzar, A Poet Of Love

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July 26, 2024



Writing in the *Times Literary Supplement* in October 1921, English poet and critic Thomas Stearns Eliot remembered John Donne thus: "Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think, but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience; it modified his sensibility."

Eliot's assessment of Donne was true of some others too whom Samuel Johnson had in the eighteenth century called the the-extinct "race" of metaphysical poets. Not incidentally, however, the crown of thinking-as-experience is also befitting for Indian poet, lyricist, author, and filmmaker, the Sahitya, Oscar and Jnanpith awardee, Sampooran Singh Kalra, better known by his *takhallus* (pen name), 'Gulzar'.

Renowned Indian poet and novelist Padma Sachdev once called Gulzar saab the Pablo Neruda of Urdu poetry. But it would be as precise to call him the John Donne of 'Indian popular culture'. And I use this composite phrase instead of 'Hindi cinema' or 'Bollywood'

because a bulk of Gulzar saab's unexplored philosophical insights far exceed his filmography, poetry, and writings. What is often missed in his language and poetics are his metaphors from quantum mechanics.

A 'Phenomenological' Poet

Born in 1934 in Deena, now in the Jhelum district of present-day Pakistan, Gulzar saab's early life and his harrowing journey to India before the Partition of 1947 - memories that found lauded expressions in Shyam Benegal's 1994 classic, *Mammo* - would make for a fertile backdrop for many a biographer. But not many may pay attention to the cosmic and quantum-like figures of speech that decorate his perceptions of reality. "NASA is my favourite website," Gulzar once acknowledged. "The universe with its abstract nature attracts me. The abstract element in my poetry comes from there."

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Had Gulzar saab's modesty allowed him, instead of calling his poetry "abstract," he might have called it "phenomenological". The word 'phenomenology' means the study of experience, along with studying the nuances 'qualia', that is, the way fundamental units of reality are experienced. Gulzar saab's poetry often represents reality in minuscule slices. "*Qatra qatra milti hai*" ("droplets and droplets appear to us"; *Ijaazat*, 1987), or "*jale qatra qatra, gale qatra qatra*" ("the kindling of slivers, the melting of slivers"; *Saathiya*, 2002).

In certain other cases-as in "*main chaand nigal gayi, daiyya re*" ("I swallowed the moon, my gosh!"; *Om kara*, 2006)-Gulzar saab appears to swap the microscopic reality for the cosmic, where swallowing the moon signifies the quest of a mythical oscillatory body, or, in worldly terms, a lover in heat who swallowed the moon to soothe herself. However, his deeper aesthetic sense resurfaces in moon-related metaphors elsewhere, as in "*dhaage tod laao chandni se noor ke*" ("pluck slivers of moonlight from the cosmic ray"; *Jhoom Barabar Jhoom*, 2007). The metaphor reminds one of that famous 'double slit' science experiment, where photons split to reveal wave-particle duality. Gulzar saab's words are nowhere 'abstract'. In a liminal way, they escort the listener into a scientific world.

Reality, Bite-Sized

This miniaturisation of reality or spacetime has over the last century come to be known to physicists as 'quantisation'. Neither poets nor quantum mechanics have a monopoly over the art of quantising. However, both enchant us by deconstructing and experiencing reality at a subatomic level. Among physicists and mathematicians who did that with ease and panache, we recall James Maxwell, Werner Heisenberg, Erwin Schrödinger, Wolfgang Pauli, Paul Dirac, David Bohm, and even modern-day names like Sean Carroll and Jim Al-Khalili. Among psychologists and cultural thinkers, we find Carl Jung and Jiddu Krishnamurti at the helm.

And, among poets, Gulzar saab qualifies as a natural citizen of a sphere that was once dominated by Albert Einstein's contemporaries, W.B. Yeats, T.S. Eliot, and Ezra Pound (to take a reference from Daniel Albright's 1997 study, *Quantum Poetics*).

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It is amusing and staggering at once to witness how quantum entities-whether with conscious will or subconscious genius-inform Gulzar saab's figures of speech. "*Ik baar waqt se lamha gira kahin/ wahan daastan mili, lamha kahin nahin*" ("once upon a fickle time, a moment dropped somewhere/ there a legend sprouted its wings, and blurred the moment in air"; *Gol Maal*, 1979). Heisenberg's uncertainty principle-that is, the limits of human measurements in calculating the momentum and position of subatomic particles simultaneously-is writ large upon this couplet.

Revelling In Uncertainty

This scheme of uncertainty becomes both ambivalent and yet emboldened in "*yaar misaal-e-os chale, paayon ke tale firdaus chale/ kabhi daal daal, kabhi paat paat, main hawa pe dhundun uske nishaan/ sar-e-ishq ki chaaon chal/ chhaiyan chhaiyan*" ("my beloved trails a dewy guise, as her toes sail aloft paradise/ from branch to branch, from leaf to leaf, I search the wind for her trace/walk in the shade of heavenly love"; *Dil Se*, 1998). Undoubtedly, these words are addressed to a cosmic being personified as the beloved. The uncertainty about the beloved's shapeshifting forms reminds one of Biblical, Quranic and Upanishadic figures of speech. But in these words is again embedded that poetical quantisation: the ransacking of woods and the wind to spot and accord a location to a formless beloved. If this were science itself, it would almost be akin to the despair of the observers of the double-slit experiment, struggling to measure quantum entities in waves, particles, or definable units of spacetime.

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Then there are these two couplets: "*humne dekhi hai un aankhon ki mahakti khushbu*" ("I have seen the wafting fragrance of those eyes"; *Khamoshi*, 1969), and "*apki aankhon me kuchh, mahke huye se raaz hain*" ("your eyes are the home of fragrant mysteries"; *Ghar*, 1978). There are critics who could never understand how "eyes" and "vision" could be compared to the senses of smell and odour. Yet, these lines contain scintillating lessons for those studying the philosophy of quantum mechanics. As Al-Khalili explains in his documentary *Secrets of Quantum Physics* (2015), the human perception of smell is processed through a "quantum nose", which interprets molecular oscillations as particles, not waves. Essentially, our "quantum nose" is capable of evoking certain memories through certain odours, which are, in turn, produced by molecular configurations that are of a highly visual nature.

Love, Longing, And Everything Else

The critics who fail to sense Gulzar saab's brilliance are, in Eliot's words, like "the ordinary" being whose "experience is chaotic, irregular, fragmentary", to whom reading great philosophy and falling in love "have nothing to do with each other, or with the noise of the typewriter or the smell of cooking"; nevertheless, in "the mind of the poet these experiences are always forming new wholes".

Another Indian poet, the legendary Rabindranath Tagore, took science very, very seriously. He had once met Einstein to discuss a scheme of galactic union between science and poetry; the West and the East; the human and the divine; the quantum and the cosmic. One such union also appears in Gulzar saab's famous ghazal, "*ruke ruke se qadam, ruk ke baar baar chalen*" ("these hesitant feet have again hesitated, and they have walked again"; *Mausam*, 1975, and *Mammo*, 1994). There is an unmistakable Upanishadic allegory in the lines that follow: "*uthaaye phirte hain ehsaan jism ka jaan par/ chalen jahaan se to ye pairahan utaar ke chalen*" ("I have carried the burden of my flesh on my being/ when I leave the world, I'll take off this garb"). In *Mausam*, this divide between the garb and the soul symbolises a permanent truth against the backdrop of the separation of lovers. In *Mammo*, it symbolises the enduring pangs of the Partition. Like logic and love, like waves and particles, the lines distinguish between the 'garb', the material aspect, and 'soul', the immaterial aspect of human life. One cannot exist without the other.

Small Things In A Big World

This non-duality is brought to life magnificently in these lines: "*aadmi bulbula hai paani ka*" ("humanity is a bubble in water") ... "*na samundar nigal saka usko/ na tvareekh tod paayi hai/ waqt ki hatheli par behta/ aadmi bulbula hai*" ("neither the ocean has engulfed it/ nor has history deconstructed it/ like lines that crisscross the palm of time/ humanity is a bubble in water"). Gulzar saab refrains from ascribing primacy to the ocean, the origin of life, or to human life itself. Instead, Gulzar, the poet of cosmic and quantum consciousness, is like the microscopists of philosopher G.K. Chesterton, who "study small things and live in a large world".

Feeling bedazzled, bemused, belittled before Gulzar's poetical expressions is a sign of us coming to terms with our infinitesimal place in the universe, and understanding it in infinite metaphysical feelings.

(The author is thankful to Harshita Mishra and Nitin Thakur for their valuable insights.)

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