

Play Of Opposite In Ghalib

October 8, 1989

As a philosophical concept unity and struggle of opposites was born earlier than Marxism, which made the concept popular. Two thousand years ago, Thales in Greece noted that the river Tiber changed with every moment of its flow and yet remained the Tiber. A mundane juridical statement of the same idea can be found in the story of the black pair of socks that was stolen. The thief darned the holes as they appeared. He used white wool with the result that eventually the socks became snow-white. The question asked was whether these were the stolen socks.

In Urdu poetry the play of opposites found expression before as well as after Ghalib. But in Ghalib the variety and intensity of political thought is unparalleled. A single line perhaps contains the essence of how he felt the inner conflict:

"Ibadat barq ki karta hoon aur afsos haasil ka"

I worship lightning and mourn the loss of what I gather (the store grain that the lightning destroys).

He uses the same metaphor in greater richness in his couplet:

*'Meri taamir men muzmar hai ek soorat
kharaabi ki
'Hoyula barq-e khirman kaa hai khoon-e garm
dehqaan ka'.*

**'... I found today my heart, the lost heart; I
saw it drenched in blood.**



(In my very making is hidden a way of ruin, as though the warm blood of the peasant is the content he lightning that falls on his grain store.)

Lightning as an imagery exercised a magnetic pull on Ghalib's imagination. He apparently saw in his own passion, unease and restless changes of mood; it came like a flaming sword and disappeared in a flash. Let us see how he uses the image even when he expresses his yearning for a joyful moment:

*"Dhoonde hai us mughanni-e aatash nafas ko ji
"Jiski sada ho jalwa-e barq-e fina mujhe!"*

(I seek a singer with the breath of fire in his voice; a singer whose impassioned call turns into a vision of fatal lightning.)

Leaving the blackness of night and flashes of lightning, when Ghalib goes into a garden he finds that the spring has come:

*"Ghuncha phir laga khilne aaj hamne apna dil
Khun kiya hua dekha gum kiya hua paya".*

(The buds are opening again, I found today my heart, the lost heart; I saw it drenched in blood.)

The couplet has a lilt, a swing like 'Kathak' dance of love. The opening rose bud is the poet's heart, which has lost his love. He rejoices when he finds it and laments when he sees it drenched in blood. This mixing, rather interpenetration, of the opposites and his choice of a rhythmic meter and poetic imagery impart to Ghalib's couplets a high degree of aesthetic value.

This fragment of an essay is already burdened with many verses. Let us say a word about Ghalib as a person. He lived in times of cataclysmic changes. Descendant of great Mughals, Bahadurshah 'Zafar' was confined to his Red Fort, like China's last emperor, while the British ruled Delhi and almost the whole country. Ghalib witnessed Zafar's last convulsive attempt to regain his kingdom, his defeat, humiliation and final banishment. He mourned the death of his dear friends. His domestic life was racked with pain and unfulfilled desires. All his children died in infancy and his wife turned to God and unending prayers. Turning his sorrow into a joke, Ghalib once remarked: My good lady you changed our house into a house of God and I should now take off my slippers when I enter the zenana!

But amidst the ruins of his world Ghalib also saw

with a clear vision the new life, based on technology and administrative efficiency, that was being built by the foreign rulers. He advised Sir Syed not to spend his precious time on the study of ancient monuments, but learn how the new era was beginning to assert itself. He looked deep into himself, as every great poet does, and found a strange conflict between joy and sorrow that tore his heart and created out of it his immortal poetry.

Poets, who were by nature thoughtful and philosophical, often turned to mystic expression like Dard in Urdu and Donne in English. Ghalib was too rational and sceptical to do so. His thought found expression in intellectual diction, imbued with aesthetic value, all the same:

*“Dair-o haram aaina-e takraar-e tamannaa;
“Waamandagi-e shauq taraashe hai panahen”.*

A rough translation would be: be it the temple or the mosque, they reflect the recurring yearning (of man); when the seeking is overcome by fatigue it carves out heavens (for itself). Two religious terms are used (mosque and temple) but the thought crosses the boundaries set by these and enters the realm of all human institutions - churches, if you will. To Ghalib all religious or temporal institutions are contradictory symbols. They stand for human advance when

they are new (aaina-e takraar-e tamannaa) and after a time become symbols of rest (panahen) when conservative men mark time and hold up progress. In all fields of seeking there comes a time when some people cling to the old. Even a great seeker of scientific truth, Einstein, clung to the traditional understanding of causality and refused to accept the principle of uncertainty, revealed by quantum physics. God does not play dice, he said, irritably, and was aptly admonished by an outward looking contemporary not to don the mantle of God. In our India, Ramjanma Bhoomi and Babri Masjid display the most tragic expression of the dead past burying the future.

Turning away from sombre matters let us recall a light hearted couplet from Ghalib, that contains a treasure of practical wisdom, again in the form of the conjunction of opposites:

*“Bhaage the ham bahut so usi ki saza hai yeh”
“Ho kar aseer daabte hain raahzan ke paon”.*

(I fled for too long and I am punished for it. When caught, I had to press the (tired) feet of the highwayman.)

The run for safety ended in arrest and added penalty - as happens when simple souls attempt evasion.