Mirza Ghalib: A Self-Actualizing Poet with Poetry of Nihilism

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Literary criticism is a distinctive discipline that evaluates, explores, and elucidates the merits of all aspects of literature which includes the piece of literature, the characters or concepts there in, and the author. As a discipline it is as old as literature itself. There are several approaches to criticize literature, amongst which the psychological approach is the most popular and relatively modern especially while analyzing poetry of mystic and philosophical nature. Psychological criticism investigates the creative process of the artist, analyzing not only his literary genius but the biographical circumstances that seem to influence his work. It explores the ulterior meaning as well as motive of an art, the nature of creation, the selection of words, the psychological makeup of the author, and his bio-social circumstances all of which influence his creation.

Abundant work of this critical analysis has been extensively carried out in western literature, both Prose and poetry, which threw light on the psyche of the authors, their writings, thereby enabling common readers to gain insight into the hitherto mystic works at the same time contributing to flourishing of a literary culture. The common reader rejoices with pleasure in acquiring new depths into the creation which was adorable but elusive in its meaning.

Historically, Plato (Greece 384-322 BC) and Aristotle (427-347BC) have known to observe critical aspects of literature. Especially Aristotle is quoted for his thought on tragedies as a combination of pity and terror to produce catharsis. But undoubtedly it was Sigmund Freud who initiated a new form of critical approach to the masterpieces of western literature when he applied principles of psychoanalysis to the works of the likes of Shakespeare, Edgar Allen Poe, Emily Dickinson etc. The psychoanalytic school of thought further found the likes of Melanie Klein, Jacques Lacan, Karen Horney, and John Lukas who analyzed master pieces in literature exploring its Psychic depths while Carl Jung applied his own concepts of Archetypes in critical comprehension of mythological epics.

Indian literary world, rich in epics and philosophy, has had a historical tradition of critical treatise. Bharatmuni wrote an all encompassing master piece on dramatics while Dandi, Poet Jagannath, wrote abundant critical literature. However instances of purely psychological approach are rare. After the establishment of Psychology as a modern discipline, there have been few noteworthy attempts to evaluate aspects of Indian mythology and literature in the light of modern Psychological principles, which include Sudhir Kakar, O. Somusundaram, Rajan S.K., to name a few. Considering the rich heritage of prose and poetry in Indian languages from time immemorial, there appears to be a dearth of Psychological appraisal of these literary works.

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Aim
The author attempts to analyze an all-time legendary poet belonging to the 19th century, Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib's Urdu poetry from his famous compilation “Diwan-E-Ghalib” using psychological theories of Humanism and Existential Nihilism.

Biography
Mirza Asadullah Khan “Ghalib” was born in Agra on 27 December 1797. His ancestors belonged to the family of army men from Samarkand in central Asia who came to India to serve the prevalent dynasties and later served the British. “Asad,” as he was known in childhood, lost his father when he was just 5 years old and was looked after by his uncle Nasirulla Baig who served the British. However, his uncle died when Asad was 9 years old, leaving him almost an orphan from the father's side. However, he was looked after by his maternal grandfather and had a comfortable childhood. From the age of 5, he was tutored in all the important subjects of those times, which included astronomy, medicine, philosophy, and theology. Young Asad excelled in all of them, but his liking was in language, especially the Persian literature. He started writing poems (sher and ghazals) in Persian, and later in Urdu, right from the age of 8 years; He had written a Masnavi (long narrative poem) at the age of 10.

At the age of 13, he married Umrao Begum who belonged to a reputed family that served the Mughal royalty in Delhi. After the marriage, he left Agra and shifted to Delhi. After changing several tenancies in quick succession, he finally settled in the Ballimaran area where he spent the rest of his life.13

Asad was a broad built, fair complexioned, handsome man. Outwardly, he had a hedonic pleasure-seeking disposition and indulged in drinking and gambling. However, he was a genius with gifted prowess in poetry and prose. By the age of 19, he had become an accomplished poet. Quite a few of his verses written at this age found a place in the final collection published in later life. He had seven children from Umrao Begum, none of whom survived for more than 15 months. Thus, death constantly followed him in Delhi too.14 He was a Sunni Muslim but greatly admired the Shia Hazarat Imam and borrowed from him his pen name Asad, which means a lion. However, later, on knowing that there is another poet of the same pen name, he changed it to Ghalib, meaning “the superior.” He was influenced by his predecessor poets Abdul-Qadir “Bedil” (1642–1720) and Mir Taqi Mir (1723–1810).

Following his uncle's death, Ghalib had been receiving a pension from the British government, which was his only source of income. This was later cut down to half and then withheld, on suspicion of his loyalty to the British. To plead the governor, Ghalib traveled to Kolkata around 1825 and for almost 8 years, was away from Delhi. He met and interacted with many Urdu poets in Lucknow, Banaras, and Kolkata, but he did not succeed in restoring his pension. Ghalib wrote extensively to his friends. The collection of these letters is also an important part of his literature. The last 12 years of his life were extremely stressful, being witness to the 1857 mutiny and its aftermath, when there were extensive destruction and bloodshed following British accession to power. Delhi was in ruins; his own younger brother Mirza Yusuf Ali, who was mentally afflicted, was a victim of a bullet and had to be buried surreptitiously. Greatly in debt, frail and in health, and mentally stressed, Ghalib died on 15 February 1869, at the age of 71 years.15 In all forms of poetry combined, he had penned around 4000 lines. However, he gained colossal fame for his 276 ghazals that are available today. The rest of his creation was lost in the mayhem that followed the Indian mutiny in 1857. His Persian poetry amounts to four volumes throughout his life, starting from childhood. The family pension, his main source of subsistence, was cut down drastically, leading to a never-ending economic instability. Such events are likely to complicate the grief process. Studies have reported a link between losing a significant person and substance use.19 Early parental death is a powerful experience that can alter emotional or behavioral responses to the environment and later-life stressors. Losses at an early age have an important impact on the development of people, in relation to addiction and other disorders. The diagnoses most frequently associated with early bereavement were depression and alcoholism.20 However, Ghalib was an inborn creative litterateur. Creative crafts have known cathartic capabilities in resolving grief, loss of loved ones, and separation. They are, in fact, known tools of therapeutic intervention.21 Vincent Van Gogh, the legendary

Creativity in Adversity
Bereavement is a life event often associated with a period of intense suffering and an increased risk of developing mental and physical problems.18 Death and grief had chased Ghalib throughout his life, starting from childhood. The family pension, his main source of subsistence, was cut down drastically, leading to a never-ending economic instability. Such events are likely to complicate the grief process. Studies have reported a link between losing a significant person and substance use. Early parental death is a powerful experience that can alter emotional or behavioral responses to the environment and later-life stressors. Losses at an early age have an important impact on the development of people, in relation to addiction and other disorders. The diagnoses most frequently associated with early bereavement were depression and alcoholism. However, Ghalib was an inborn creative litterateur. Creative crafts have known cathartic capabilities in resolving grief, loss of loved ones, and separation. They are, in fact, known tools of therapeutic intervention. Vincent Van Gogh, the legendary
Transcending the Deficit Needs

Ghalib belonged to a family of professional servicemen, but his innate ability to express human cognitive conflicts and existential anguish in masterly crafted words had thrust a pen instead of a sword in his hands.21

Ghalib was always indebted financially as the honorarium he received from the British was a paltry sum that was insufficient to meet his expenses. Throughout his life, Ghalib was ridiculed by the poets in the king's court for his obscure compositions. However, he continued to express his philosophy in his masterly crafted poetry and received accolades from all over the country, though much later. Here he appears to be ascending to a state of self-actualization while struggling to meet his physiological and security needs in terms of the hierarchy of needs as described by Abraham Maslow.

Self-actualization represents a concept derived from the humanistic psychological theory, especially from Abraham Maslow. Maslow created a psychological hierarchy of needs in which, starting with physiological, security, and belonging needs (which he called deficit needs), a man ascends to the ultimate need to find his artistic potential in the quest for the true nature of life. In a couplet, he writes,

क्यों ख़ाइयो मत फ़रेब-ए-हसती/हर-चंद खें लि ह़ै नहीं हया.

The ease of things is next to impossible/Even a man is not able to be a Human

If the deficit needs are difficult (दुश़ार), then the being needs are not easy (आस़ा), and the journey from mortal manhood to subtle humanity is next to impossible.

Existential Nihilism

Influenced by the Sufi philosophy from a very young age, Ghalib was in search of the meaning of life and human existence. His special artistic prowess in poetry led him to express his quest in poetry par excellence. Before Ghalib, Urdu poetry was mostly about affairs of heart, amour, Sufi spirituality, or traditional ethics.28 Faced with multiple deaths in his own life, Ghalib tried to express the inexplicable predicament of a man. Thus, a thin undertone of nihilism appears to significantly pervade his poetry.

The term nihilism, first used by Fredrich Jacobi (1743–1819),29 comes from Latin Nihil, meaning “nothing.” Though interpreted in different ways, it most commonly is existential nihilism, which says that life is without objective meaning, purpose, or intrinsic value.23 It is often associated with extreme pessimism and a radical skepticism, which condemns existence. Ghalib depicts this emotion in a verse,

न भा कुछ तो खुदा था कुछ न होता तो खुदा होता/हुयोया मुखाहो ने न होता में तो क्या होता?

If nothing existed, the creator existed/I was condemned to being, had I not, what else?

The subtle meaning is that I had been part of the creator. The creator is, in reality, creation. Man's existence is irrelevant to creation and meaningless. This is in keeping with the existential nihilistic view, which says that each individual is an isolated being born into the universe, barred from knowing why, yet compelled to invent a meaning to his being.24 This being or existence precedes the meaning given to oneself during life, which is the hasti or persona in Carl Jung’s words. In a couplet, Ghalib pens these thoughts:

हो खाइयो मत फ़रेब-ए-हसती/हर-चंद खें लि ह़ै नहीं हया.

Mistake me not for my Personality / Which, although exists, does not exist! Neither the Persona nor the other world exists/Who are you, Oh, the “Nonexistent?”

Yalom describes the existential depression that rises when an individual confronts certain basic values of existence like death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness.24 As Ghalib writes in a ghazal,

कोई उम्मीद बर नहीं आती/कोई सुंदर नजर नहीं आती/मौत का एक दिन मुभयम्य है-सीन/कभी रातभर नहीं आती.

No Hope is in sight/No solution to my plight/Death is a certainty someday/why do days end in sleepless night?

For Ghalib, this existential depression takes the form of pain and sorrow, which is unavoidable and destined to
Creativity is a hallmark of a self-actualizing person, which may be perceived to reside within a dialectical relationship. A creative person is also more likely to be subject to a state of existential depression that arises from the perceived inconsistencies in life, which upset a gifted individual. Ghalib had a unique quality of expressing these contradictions of life in a dialectical form in the most artistic way. The most stressful of all stresses of life is the state of uncertainty, a state of suspension between getting there and not getting, between ability and inability, between living and dying. Ghalib taps this excruciatingly painful stress in many of his couplets. This pain is like a half-drawn arrow stuck in the heart, which neither kills you nor allows you to live peacefully. 

There is a tinge of hopelessness that stems from existential quandary in Ghalib's poetry, which yearns for death.

In a truly nihilistic sense, he was acute! Ghalib was an avid letter writer. He wrote to Munshi Hargopal "Tafta," a friend: 

"Dear friend, You are learning the art of poetry while I am learning to die. Now I realize that all the scholarly knowledge and all the poetic epics are illusory and meaningless. At the most they lend you a little extra time to lead the life. All things are futile. Whether some god reincarnates for the Hindus or some prophet takes birth for the Muslims, what change will it bring? Whether someone becomes world-famous or someone remains anonymous, what difference does it make? What is important is a healthy body and the bare minimum to keep the wolf at bay! The rest is all illusory. Shall I tell you something? Whatever I have said (just now) is also not the ultimate truth. Maybe it's my illusion! It may just be my loud thinking. It's all an illusion. This world is a mirage. It does not exist!"

Ghalib lived his death every moment. In a truly nihilistic sense, he was acutely aware of the emptiness of human existence. Struggling for the securities of life and caught in the mayhem of mutiny and the epic disintegration of the socio-political system, he went through every shade of depression, like:
Self-deprecation:
हमेरे शेर हैं अब तक दिल्लीगी के “असल”-खुना, कि
फायदा उन्हें हुआ हाॅ है?
My verses are now a matter of derision “Asad”? No gain in my ingenuity, I discern

Hopelessness:
न गुल-ए-नगम़ा हूँ न पद़ा्द-ए-स़ाज/मैं हूँ अपनी लशिसत िी
“A death of defame would better end with burial in river/Neither a funeral nor a tomb anywhere

But Ghalib’s tomb still stands witness to the great excellence of words, a poet-philosopher par excellence, and a meta-critic of the existential tragedy of human fate.

Conclusion
Mirza Ghalib was a gifted poet of nineteenth-century India, who continues to be an enigma for study and research even after more than a century. This analysis of his ingenious creations with a humanistic psychological approach reveals that he was in a state of self-actualization while struggling to meet his security needs. His poetry reflects his existential nihilistic frame of mind, a theme that recurs throughout his ghazals and sher. The author finds his obscure poetry a challenge for further psychological exploration.

(All the Sher quoted in the text have been from the book “Diwan-e-Ghalib.”

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