Recently we had a small workshop here at Columbia University about Urdu poetry, as we do every spring. Both scholars and poetry-lovers in other fields came. Everybody had received a packet of materials to read in advance, and this formed the basis for discussion. As usual, in the morning we did close readings of poems, and in the afternoon we discussed the poetry in larger social and historical perspectives. This year, our topic was a special kind of ghazal that purports to speak in a feminine voice, a form of ghazal called rextii. (For an explanation of the transliteration system used for Urdu words, please see the “note on transliteration” at the end). In the morning, we read and analysed rextii ghazals by Insha, Rangin, and Jan Sahib. The afternoon’s discussion was based on several recent theoretical articles we had read; the most significant ones—Naim 2001, Petievich 2001, Vanita and Kidwai 2001—are listed in the brief bibliography at the end.

Men Impersonating Women

The rextii tradition was created entirely by male poets: rextii ghazals were recited in mushairahs, and met with both disapproval from the more puritanical as well as amused appreciation from others. These ghazals purported to be in the voice of women involved in lesbian love affairs and expressing affection, vexation, longing, etc. toward their beloveds; but then the last verse contained the poet’s pen-name, and this deliberately broke the illusion. Undoubtedly rextii poetry did incorporate real women’s language of the time (idioms, expressions, turns of phrase), especially that of courtesans. But did this amount to a form of tribute offered by male poets who were friendly with courtesans, spent time with them and learned to reflect their concerns in verse? Or did it represent a cooption of women’s language into a satirical subgenre that sought only to amuse voyeuristic male audiences?

In the course of the discussion, the observation was made that at least rextii was a refreshing change from the sexism of the “regular” ghazal. This brief, casual remark gave me an unexpected shock. It made me realize that I myself, having studied the ghazal for decades now, had never even thought of it—much less reacted to it—as “sexist” poetry. It astonished me to realize that others might perceive it this way. (If you want to see irritating sexism and male chauvinism in classical Urdu literature, head straight for the daastaan or romance tradition (Pritchett 1991) where it is very much in evidence).

Quest for Union

Yet it shouldn’t have astonished me that people might read the ghazal in this way. After all, the case for “sexism” in the classical ghazal looks, on the face of it, like a strong one. The poet always assumes the voice of an (aristocratic) adult male, a passionate lover who is determinedly pursuing a beloved who may be an unavailable respectable lady, a fickle courtesan, a beautiful boy just about to reach puberty, or of course God. The poet may tease, reproach, blackmail, beseech, or scold the beloved, but his constant quest is always for vasl, a directly sexual term which is usually discreetly translated as “union.” When the voice of the beloved is briefly reproduced, the beloved is never allowed to emerge as a person, but is made to say only flirtatious, disdainful, or fickle things suitable to the role of sex object. Rejected ten times or a hundred times, the lover refuses to accept the beloved’s will; his is the sensibility of a stalker. He is sure that the beloved who says no is merely testing him; the beloved who chooses other lovers is only testing his faithfulness. The lover’s quest for “union” is carried to the point of obsession: he cannot take no for an answer, he cannot leave the beloved alone. Nor is he really sorry for his infuriating behavior: he feels vindicated by the strength of his love and desire. In short, he sounds like the raw material for a “crime of passion;” we expect violence to appear in the story somehow. Does the beloved, silenced and objectified, deserve to endure this harassment? If this isn’t arrogantly sexist and male chauvinist behavior, what is it?

If you want to see irritating sexism and male chauvinism in classical Urdu literature, head straight for the daastaan or romance tradition.
humans walking around the streets of Delhi. But such literal-minded readings of the ghazal do have a long history. People began to read ghazals as though they were versified reportage of social reality soon after the Rebellion of 1857; before 1857, such readings are not to be found. The reason for this abrupt change is pretty clear. It came from a convergence of interests. The Rebellion made the British realize that they needed to take precautions against any such upsets in the future, and that these precautions should include a greater hand in education, cultural life, and social reform. The Rebellion also made the Indo-Muslim elite realise that they had suffered a crushing defeat, and that they needed to modernise and generally rethink their culture, including the poetry that was at its heart. The convergence of these two interests resulted in efforts to “reform” the ghazal, to make it correspond to a vision of “natural poetry” along Wordsworthian lines (Pritchett 1994).

For after all, if you believe (as the British and Indian reformists and “natural poetry” advocates did) that poetry both is and ought to be a mirror of society, then the classical ghazal indeed depicts a “decadent” society.

Decadent, Bizarre Lives?

The lover in the ghazal is always likely to behave as a real reprobate: he will frequent courtesans; covet respectable and unavailable ladies; pursue beautiful pre-pubertal boys; get drunk and pass out beside the road; ruin his home and wander off into the desert; go mad and tear off their clothes, sneering at religious persons, chased women indiscriminately, and pursued beautiful boys—although there’s no more reason to believe they did these things than to believe they went mad and tore off their clothes, etc., since the poetic evidence is exactly the same for all such activities.

Wordsworthifying Ghalib!

Taking the ghazal as a mirror of society is thus, in its extreme forms, upsetting, since the society it would correspond to would be a bizarre and unhealthy one. But for the same reason it’s also logically self-limiting, since anybody who looks closely at the wilder kinds of ghazal behavior can easily see that they’re unreal.

The Lover and Beloved

But now I want to get down to the most fundamental level: the basic situation of the lover and beloved. The poet assumes the persona of a certain kind of lover, and that lover is definitely an adult male. In almost all classical ghazal verses the poet speaks in the voice of that lover, freely referring to himself as “I” (maiN), or colloquially as “we” (ham). The beloved is never an adult male, but is a woman, a youth, or God. Grammatically, however, the beloved is always treated as masculine, even if clearly feminine traits are being described. Various theories have been advanced to explain this fact. Probably the simplest explanation is the ghazal’s mystical tradition: in principle the beloved can (almost) always be God, and it would be theologically undesirable to refer to God in the feminine. Most of the time, of course, in a two-line ghazal verse it’s impossible to identify the beloved with any precision at all: neither male/ female nor human/divine distinctions can be made.

But one generalisation can be made, and I want to make it strongly: the power distribution in the ghazal is radically unequal, and the overwhelmingly powerful one is the
beloved, not the lover. The lover suffers and dies; the beloved lives and thrives. This basic truth shapes the ghazal world in countless ways. For one thing, it at once removes the ghazal from the realm of normal social convention, in which, as we all know, adult males (especially aristocratic ones, such as the lover generally seems to be) are still at the top of the hierarchy. In the ghazal, the (aristocratic) adult male lover is so far inferior in power to the non-adult-male beloved that the difference is almost inexpressible. (Think of the proverb kahaana bhoj kahaan gangun telii, which translates to how can you compare a King Bhoj to a Gangu oilman?) This extreme imbalance of power is sufficient in itself to cause accusations of “sexism” and “male chauvinism” to miss their mark.

Let me illustrate this point with a few verses. Since I’m now working on a commentary on Ghalib (available online at http://www.columbia.edu/~fp7), I will draw my examples from Ghalib. This verse is germane to the discussion, because it’s directly about submission (10,3 in my enumeration, composed after 1826):

nah aa jiii si:vat-e qautil bhih maana (mere naaloN ko liyaa daaNtoN meN jo tinkaa hu) aa reshah nayastaaN kaa

(Not even the grandeur of the murderer could forbid my laments, the straw that I took in my teeth became a vein of a reed-thicket)

Here is one influential commentator’s explanation of the verse: The custom is that when someone is oppressed by someone’s grandeur and overbearingness, he takes up a piece of grass or straw and holds it between his teeth, so that the person will take him for an obedient and conquered one and no longer seek to kill him. The poet says that not even the grandeur and overbearingness of the murderer caused my laments to cease. The straw that I took in my teeth as an expression of submission became a vein of a reed-thicket, and it’s obvious that the flute grows in a reed-thicket, and the flute is a master of lament; in short, that straw became the root of lamentation [naalah-kashii kii jaR]. (Nazm 1900:10-11)

Surrender in Suffering

Here the seed of poetry itself is found in the lover’s suffering, almost as in the Sanskrit epic account of how shoka, or grief, gave rise to the shloka, or verse. Not only suffering occurs, but suffering accepted without protest, as shown by the straw taken between the teeth as a sign of surrender. Suffering results in laments that the lover tries his best to stifle, and that are expressed only, paradoxically, through the reed he has taken in his teeth in very extreme submission.

Another form of extreme submission is to kiss someone’s feet. This example is built on that image (in my numbering system, it’s 25,3, and was composed in 1821):

le to luuN sote meN us ke paaNv kaa bosah magar aisii baatoon se vuh kaaﬁr bad-gumaaN ho jaa) ega

(I would kiss his/her foot in sleep, but, from such things that infidel will become distrustful/disaffected/ arrogant).

As Hasrat Mohani (Hasrat 1905:26-7) has pointed out, the verse doesn’t make clear in whose sleep I might kiss her foot—in her sleep, or in mine? (Please note that I’m saying “her” only for convenience and clarity; the verb is, as always in classical ghazal, masculine.)

If we take the first reading, so that the sleep is hers, then the lover seems to be in a position of utter submission—the beloved is so disdainful of him, and so confident of his helplessness, that she is willing to go to sleep in his presence, undisturbed by any thought that he might take advantage of the situation. As in fact he will not, because he knows he will risk her distrust and anger if he does. Since she is asleep, though, perhaps he could kiss her foot without waking her? Maybe he is too intimidated to risk it. Or maybe her omniscience (and her deep though subliminal interest in dominating the lover) extend even to the realm of sleep? Of course, kissing someone’s foot is itself a sign of complete subservience—and not even that is permitted to the lover.

If we take the second reading, and the sleep is his, we locate the whole scene in the lover’s dream. He dreams of the beloved, but even in his dream he’s afraid to kiss her foot, for fear of vexing her. Because she so dominates his imagination, he doesn’t dare take liberties even with a dream-image of her. Because she’s so mysteriously powerful, her real self will know if he kisses her dream-self’s foot. In the latter case, doesn’t it imply a deep, strange bond between beloved and lover despite everything, since she monitors (and dominates) even his dreams?

Beloved as God

The beloved is here affectionately called a kaafir, an infidel. She is also often called an idol but, sanam, and many verses play on her resemblance to God—and replacement of God in the lover’s imagination. Here’s a
notable example (27,8 in my ordering, composed in 1821):

falak ko dekh ke kartaa huuN us ko yaad asad
jafaa meN us kii hai andaaz kaar-farmaa kaa

(Having looked at the sky, I remember him/her, Asad, in anger he/she has the manner of a ruler commander)

“Asad” was Ghalib’s early pen-name. When I first read this verse, I kept expecting “bhii,” (too), to be there somewhere in the second line, to quietly make the point that the beloved was being compared to God. But in fact there is no bhii. Thus either the verse is a pious commonplace, which is how some commentators read it, or else the beloved has entirely displaced God from the lover’s horizon. Ghalib has of course arranged it to permit both readings. When the lover looks at the heavens, the proper domain of God alone, he doesn’t think of God at all, it’s the beloved whom he thinks of—for she, like the heavens, has deadly, commanding power when she’s angry. God, in short, is nowhere, since not even looking at the heavens serves to evoke him, and the very quality he is famous for—being powerful and dangerous when angered—is effortlessly transferred to the beloved. Her status as a sort of alternative God has rarely been so unselfconsciously confirmed.

**Gender Identity Hidden**

Verses like these are of course illustrative rather than definitive. Verses could also be cited that suggest a less direly skewed power balance between beloved and lover—but for every one such verse, a much larger number of this radically inegalitarian kind would be found. And of course so much more is going on in good ghazal verses (not to speak of great ones like Ghalib’s) that usually the nuances and subtleties and wordplay are what’s fascinating, not just the prose content. The ghazal is open to everybody, of all ages and classes and genders and conditions, and its very stylization and complexity are what make it so. Classical ghazals composed by women poets are virtually indistinguishable from those composed by men.

Women can, in short, enter the ghazal world just as intimately and accessibly and identifying as men, without being put off by sexism. For it contains no real men and women, but only the lovers and beloveds and rivals and advisors and other stylized characters who are needed for the great “passion play” of the ghazal world. Humans long to live, and know they will die; they long for ideal love, and know they will not find it; they long for joy, and find sorrow. This world of inhuman pressure on the human (suffering, death) and human pressure on the inhuman (vain demands, protests, the consolations of great poetry) is the world of the ghazal; it’s a world deeper than that of social conventions, and it’s a world we all know all too well.

**Bibliography**


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