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'Creating Afresh': A Look at Ghani's Poetic Genius¹

*har dam azgushay-ekhatirsarjastandarad
ma'nayetazahghazalistkibastandarad*

*Every moment it seeks to slip from the mind's nook
Fresh poetic meaning is a gazelle to be captured. (Ghani)*

Mullah Tahir Ghani Kashmiri is undoubtedly the most outstanding Persian poet of Kashmir and among the best who wrote in a style which is commonly known as *sabk-e hindi* or the Indian Style. In fact, the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries witnessed the flowering of this new style in the Persian ghazal, which its practitioners and earliest critics preferred to call '*tazahguyi*' or '*speaking afresh*'. Although many scholars have rightly argued that there is nothing specifically Indian about the style, it is well-established that it flourished during the Mughal period when a great influx of poets from Iran and other regions to India took place. Thus, Urfi (d. 999), Naziri (d. 1519), Talib Amuli (d. 1626-7), Abu Talib Kalim (d. 1651), Salim (d. 1647-8) and numerous others made India their home

and achieved distinction in Indian courts. In addition to these, countless poets of Indian origin made their mark in Persian and earned applause and admiration from their Iranian counterparts. For its detractors, the Indian style poetry marks a departure from the earlier more indigenous and hence 'purer' styles in its excessive reliance on rhetorical devices such as conceit, pun, ambiguity and paradox. Alleging that the poets of this style employed a hypercerebral and convoluted diction, some Iranian critics of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries held the Indian and Indian domiciled Iranian poets responsible for turning their backs on the fluent, simple and mellifluous style of the earlier Persian masters. These opinions gained acceptance due to the emergence of a new literary movement in Iran in the eighteenth century known as *adabibazgasht* or 'literary revival'. The movement, not unlike most other literary movements, largely defined itself in contradistinction to what it held to be the characteristic features of the earlier period dominated by the Indian style. The Iranian critics such as Azar Beg, Raza Quli Khan and Taqi Bahar wrote disapprovingly of the style which they rather pejoratively called the 'Indian Style'. In India, Shibli Naumani followed his Iranian counterparts in giving an overall negative estimation of this style. Shibli prefers the term *tarz-e tazah* or 'new style' to *sabk-e hindi* and regards with disfavour its intellectual ingenuity. Echoing the Romantic fallacy which locates the origin of poetry in the intensity of the poet's feelings and

evaluates it by its capacity to affect the readers' emotions, he discredited much of the Indian style poetry holding that it was not suitable for the ghazal which is essentially a love lyric. To quote S R Faruqi, "Shibli's disapproval of abstraction, complex metaphoricity, ambiguity and high imaginativeness particularly recalls the prevalent Victorian literary bias against these things."² One is also tempted to echo Faruqi's swipe at Shibli, "given such friends one doesn't need enemies."³ Although Shibli criticized what he called the new style in poetry, he thoroughly discussed Sai'b and Abu Talib Kalim, especially the former whom he, in a clear instance of what seems no less than a self-contradiction, regarded as one of the most remarkable poets of the seventeenth century. Shibli, however, rightly identified two main features which he thought were typical of the Indian Style, *tamsil* or exemplification and *diham* or wordplay. Critical assessment has generally regarded Indian and Indian-domiciled poets the finest practitioners of the Indian Style and Shibli too, notwithstanding his somewhat adverse judgment, credits them with refining the 'new style'.

After suffering neglect and disapprobation for a long time, the poets of the Indian Style are now being reconsidered both in Iran and India and the tendency to regard them as preoccupied with artificiality and unhealthy intellectualism is being reconsidered. To take an example, Mirza Abdul Qadir Bedil (1644-1720), of Azimabad, India, a poet whose name has become almost a

byword for the complexity of style and who according to many critics is the foremost representative of the Indian style, has recently earned his due share of approbation from Iranian critics. Sa'ib too is now widely recognized as one of the most brilliant poets of his age. His use of metaphors, conceits and other sophisticated poetical devices has found appeal with many modern critics. Paul Losensky remarks thus about Sa'ib:

Sa'ib is best known for his figures of thought. He frequently refers to his *šiva-ye tza* or "fresh style" and boasts of its *ma,na-ye bigana* (unfamiliar or alien conceit), *ma,na-ye rangin* (colorful or variegated idea), and *ma?mun-e barjasta* (outstanding conceit). This "poetics of the new" prizes the unexpected turn of thought or startling connection between image and idea.⁴

And about the artistic merits of his use of *tamsil* he writes:

Sa'ib is particularly renowned for his mastery of a device called *tamsil* or *ersal-e matal*, in which a claim is made in one half of the verse and an exemplum is adduced to support it in the other, as in this opening verse: "When a man grows old, his greed grows young: sleep grows heavy just before the dawn" (*adamipircošodhershavanmigardad/ kvabdarwaqt-e sahgahgeranmigardad*). This technique produces a compound metaphor, a miniature allegory.⁵ Long before Losensky, the renowned Orientalist E G Browne in his *A Literary History of Persia* had expressed his admiration for Sa'ib in unequivocal terms and attributed it to his brilliant use of various poetic

devices. 6

Not only Sa'ib, but Kalim too derives his strength from using similes and metaphors in ways which quite often result in delightful poetry.

*zud raft ankiziasrar-ejahanagahshud
azdabistanbirawadharkisabaqraushankard*

*He who learns the mysteries of existence
leaves the world forthwith.*

*When one has learned one's lessons well,
one bids farewell to the school.*

*azhunarhal-ekharabamnashudislahpazir
hamchuwiranahkiazganj-e khudabadnashud*

*My skill delivers me not from my wretched state.
Like the ruin which does not flourish by the treasure it hides.*

*ba man amizish-e u ulfat-e maujast u kinar
damba dam ba man u paivastahgurizanaz man*

Her union with me is like the wave's fondness for the shore.

Always with me, yet ever receding away from me.

Ghani stands out as one of the best practitioners of tazahguyi or 'speaking afresh'. Known to his contemporaries and the later

critics as a remarkable mazmunaafreen or 'creator of fresh meanings', Ghani's verse is especially appealing to the modern reader who readily accepts linguistic and intellectual ingenuity in poetry rather than dismiss them as unsavoury or downright unpoetic. It will be worthwhile to look at some of the verses of Ghani as an illustration of his craftsmanship in the use of poetic image:

kunaddarpish-e-anpayenigarinsajdaha zulfash

bali kari bihazatashparasti nisthindu ra

Her decked vermillion feet; his endless prostrations.

What act, for a Hindu, can excel the worship of fire?

falakdargardishastazbahr-e khwab-ebakht e nasazam

buvaddarjumbish-e gahwarahrahattifl-e badkhu ra

The skies are in motion to put my ill-luck to sleep.

The rocking cradle brings comfort to the fretful child.

nisthusn-e bi baqa shayista-edilbastgi

ba chiragh-ebarq yak parvanahamrahinakard

Fleeting beauty is unworthy of love.

The lamp of lightning's flash attracts no moth.

az rah-e varastagipaivastahamchungirdbad
khanah bar dushamnamī bashadgham-e manzilmara

Like the whirlwind, I am always free from bonds.

Abode on back, I have no worries of settling down.

bagushaminsada azmuqriyetasbih mi ayad
ki sad dilmuztaribgardadchu yak dilyabadarami

*From the teller of beads a whisper comes into my ears.
'A hundred hearts lose their peace to bring solace to one.'*

Ghanichu saya-emurgh-e parindadarshauq
agarbakhakbiyaftamnayaftamazparvaz

*Ghani, like the shadow of the bird flying in the course of love
Falling into the dust does not disrupt my flight.*

shudamazikhtilat-ezulf-e u mashhurdar 'alam
barawardimakhirazsiyahi chunniginami

The company of her tresses made me famous throughout.

Like the seal's mark that owes its fame to black ink.

These verses, chosen randomly from different ghazals,
are just a few examples of the delightful use of metaphors and

similes which characterize much of poetry practiced by Ghani. As is instantly evident, they bring out a connection between the idea and the image, thereby bringing about a new set of connotations to bear upon the image. They suggest what Wordsworth described as a process of:

*...observation of affinities
In objects where no brotherhood exists
To passive minds.⁷*

Far from reflecting a lack of organic sensibility which would enable a poet to fuse disparate experiences into an artistic unity, presenting an abstract idea in the first hemistich and following it with a concrete exemplification in the second, creates a fine balance between a direct abstract proposition and its concretization and helps bring a compactly built world of distich or she'r into existence. The striking manner of linking thought with image is a way of startling the reader, and wonder, surprise and revelation have always been accepted as important functions of poetry. The technique also foregrounds an aspect of reality which tends to be overlaid with familiarity and custom. In fact, modern criticism has recognized defamiliarization as the primary aim of all poetry. Paul Losensky rightly comments on the significance of bigana or unfamiliar poetic meanings:

Bigana suggests the Russian formalist concept of "making it strange" (ostranenie), according to which the power of poetry

resides in its ability to disrupt our normal perceptions of literature, language, and reality.⁸

In addition to verses where a poetic proof is presented in the second hemistich of an affirmation stated in the first one of the distich, Ghani also displays a remarkable dexterity in producing verses which are themselves compound or extended metaphors. Some examples are as follows:

kunaddarharqadamfaryadkhalkhal
kihusn-e gulrukhan pa darrikabast

At every moment the anklet cries out:
'Beauty, O fair-faced hasits feet in the stirrup.'

dartalab-e buy-etu ay gul'izar
ablahpayastzishabnambahar

To catch your fragrance, O rosy-cheeked,
The feet of the spring are blistered with dew.

chighamazinki bat-e badahsustparvazast
kidargiriftan-e rang-e paridahshahbazast

Why grieve if wine's water-bird is slow to take off.
In capturing the colour that has fled, it becomes a royal falcon.

*raushanzi man jahan u man azbakht-e tirahdagh
kaysaya-echiragshavadmahavazchira?h*

*I illuminate the world, myself darkened by ill-luck.
How can the lamp rid itself of its shadow?*

*chu mil-esurma bar amadzichashm-e jananguft
kisair-e maykadahshuyadghubar-ekhatir ha*

Coming out of the beloved's eye the kohl stick remarked.

'A stroll through the tavern wipes off the dust of thoughts'.

These and many other such verses testify to Ghani's ability to imagine situations which are not just embroidered with certain figurative devices, but where the fundamental imaginative process reveals itself to be metaphorical. The metaphors used, at least in some verses, give the indication of a way of experiencing the facts rather than an embellishment of a prior known fact.

Moreover, fresh poetic meanings can be created from a well-worn image only by using it in contexts which bring its different connotative aspects into play. Ghani, working with the conventional repertoire of images of Persian ghazal, invests some of them with multiple and often contradictory meanings. An example of this is the image of habab or 'bubble' which is used to suggest diverse ideas in the following verses:

*libas-e ma sabuksaran ta alluq bar nami tabad
buvadhamchunhababazbakhyahkhalipairahan ma ra*

Too flimsy to bear ties are the apparels of the burdenless.

Like an airbubble our robes are without a stitch.

*bastahshudharchanddar yak bahrman'ahai tar
ma'nay-emardumhabab u ma'anay-e man gauharast*

Though the seaharbours meanings in plenty

Mine is a pearl, theirs' a bubble.

*gush-eghavasshunidaz lab-e khamush-ehabab
damnigahdarkazinbihguhri natavanyaft*

The silent lips of the bubble whispered into the diver's ears:

'A pearl more precious you shall never find.'

*chu man babahr-e tajarrudkasashna nabvad
yaki astpairhan-u-pustchunhababmara*

None fathoms the secret of nakedness like me.

Like the bubble my skin and apparel are one.

*bi faham agar chashmbiduzadbakitab
natavanaddidruyema'ani darkhwab
kayghaurkunanddarsukhan bi maghzan
ghawwasiyebahnistmaqdur-ehabab*

*A dull mind may fix its gaze on the book
Yet meaning shall ever remain beyond his grasp.
Empty-headed fail to fathom the depths
Like a hollow bubble they can never plunge the sea.*

*afsuski raft nashaye 'ahd-e shabab
sarkhushnashudim yak dam azbadayenab
azbahr-e tamashayejahanhamchu habab
ta wa kardimchashmraftimbakhwab*

*Alas! so swiftly did youth's ebriety pass
Before we could savour fully the ruby wine.
We opened our eyes to behold the world
And the bubble burst ...*

*babahr-e purkhatr-e 'ishqchunkushayimchashm
kichunhababnigahikunadkharabmara
As I open my eyes in love's tumultuous sea
Like a bubble I perish in an instant.*

The bubble thus becomes a symbol for such diverse ideas as hollowness, incapacity, lightness, transience, perfection and nakedness.

Among the earlier Persian poets *Iham*, i.e. double entendre or wordplay, were used by Amir Khusraw to achieve great poetical effects. But in the hands of the later poets such as Sa'ib, Kalim and Ghani, the technique was further refined and used with remarkable dexterity. As S R Faruqi remarks, "wordplay infuses new life into old themes, expands the horizon of meaning, and often makes for an ambiguity of tone which enriches the total feel of the poem."⁹ A few examples from Ghani's poetry will illustrate how he employs this device to produce what may be called 'multi-layered poetry.'

azkinaramdukhtar-e razkard ta pahlū tihi
kar-e man aknunGhanibatifl-e ashkuffadahast

Since the daughter of vine has slipped

away from my embrace,

I am left to deal with the child of tears.

In this verse the Persian 'dukhtar-e raz' in the first hemistich denotes wine but literally means 'daughter of vine'. Likewise, *tifl-e ashk* in the second hemistich means both a crying child and a droplet of tear. The verse exploits the double meaning of these words to conjure up two different situations: one in which the speaker laments his separation from wine and says that

constant crying is now his lot and the other where he mourns the separation from a woman who has left behind a crying child.

*bastahshudharchanddar yak bahrman'ahai tar
ma'anay-emardumhabab u ma'anay-e man gauharast*

Though the seaharbours meanings in plenty

Mine is a pearl, theirs' a bubble.

The original for sea is bahr which also means metre in which verse is written. The verse simultaneously brings both meanings into play.

*nadar-eakhirat nay dar-edunyadarnazardaram
zi 'ishqatkarchunMansurba dar-edigardaram*

Neither this abode I desire nor the next one.

Like Mansur, in your love, I desire one beyond both.

Again, the original dar means both abode and gibbet. In the context of the verse both are simultaneously implied, as Mansur by preferring to die on a gibbet also chose an abode beyond this world and the paradise of the orthodox.

*hichgah lab nakunadbazbadushnam-eraqib
manba tang amdamaziyarkipurbidahanast*

Not once did she open her mouth to curse the rival.

I am fed up with a love so tightlipped.

bidahan, translated here as tightlipped, literally means 'mouthless' and in Persian poetry the smallness of the beloved's mouth is a mark of her beauty which, in keeping with the conventions of hyperbole, is sometimes compared to just a tiny dot. The verse draws on both meanings of hi?dahan, thus meaning: would that she were not so beautiful to attract the rival; and, would that she had the will to curse him! By this device the poet makes use of a verbal nuance which in the words of William Empson, "gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language."¹⁰ Unfortunately, the beauty of punning and wordplay is one among those things which are lost in translation.¹¹

Yet another outstanding feature of Ghani is his brilliant use of paradox. As the noted American critic Cleanth Brooks has observed, it is generally, and wrongly, assumed that paradox has no place in poetry. On the contrary, he argues, much of good poetry is fundamentally paradoxical. Brooks and some other New Critics regarded paradox central to poetry because of its ability to embody a truth about reality which a scientific or rational discourse is unable to capture. Reality, in other words, is not wholly amenable to a purely logical analysis and poetry by dealing with its contradictory and paradoxical aspects performs a very important function. Ghani, again, offers fascinating instances of the use of paradox:

janba lab azzu'fnatavanadrasid
ma bazur-enatavanizindah am

*Enfeebled such that the soul finds no way to my lips
The strength of infirmity thus keeps me alive.*

gardidraz-e'ishqzipushidanashkar
dandan-ebakhyahpardaye ma ra daridahast

*Attempting to conceal, I revealed my love's secret.
The teeth of the stitch tore asunder my veil.*

tishna-e pa bus-ekhudzinbishmaguzarabra
aynihal-ebagh-ehusnazkhakbardarabra

*How much more will water thirst for a kiss at your feet?
O sapling of the garden of beauty, raise it from dust.*

muhtasibkhwahikuni bikar gar khammarra
shishahayedanayeangurmibayadshikast

*Prohibitor ! Want to make the wine-maker redundant?
Better that you crush thegrape-cups.*

daf'ashudwaswas-ekhatiraznamaz-eba huzur
ma ba-dast-e bastahwa kardimqufl-e bastahra

Deep prayer checks the wandering mind.

Many locks are unlocked by locked hands.

It is not difficult to see why Ghani enjoyed a great reputation down to the modern times. If Mir claimed to have honed his skills on Ghani's divan, Iqbal paid rich tributes to him in *JavidNamah* and *Payam-e Mashriq*, not only as a model of the Islamic ideal of faqr or poverty, but also as a master craftsman 'rich in the realm of meaning'.

Notes and References

1. This paper draws on my work on Ghani published under the title *The Captured Gazelle: Poems of Ghani Kashmiri*. Penguin Publishers, 2013. The book (co-translated with NusratBazaz) is the first ever English translation of Ghani Kashmiri and a Penguin Classic.
2. S R Faruqi. "A Stranger in The City: The Poetics of Sabk-e Hindi." *The Annual of Urdu Studies*. 19:1-93. 2004.
3. *ibid.*
4. Paul Losensky. "Sa?ebTabrizi" 2003. *Encyclopedialranica*, On line Edition. <http://www.iranica.com>
5. *ibid.*
6. E G Browne. *A Literary History of Persia*. Vol IV. reprint Goodword Books. New Delhi. 265-276: 2002.
7. William Wordsworth. *The Prelude* Book II, lines 384-6.
8. Paul Losensky, *Welcoming Fighani, Imitation and Poetic Individuality in the Safavid-Mughal Ghazal*, Costa Mesa, CA, 214:1998.

9. S R Faruqi. "Conventions of Love, Love of Conventions: Urdu Love Poetry in the Eighteenth Century." *The Annual of Urdu Studies*. 14:3-32. 1999.

10. William Empson. *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth. 19: 1961.

11. I am fully aware that the most difficult challenge facing any translator is to render in translation the subtleties and multivalence which the poet has deliberately cultivated and which account for richness and beauty of his work. This is especially so in case of a poet like Ghani whose verses are multilayered and polysemic (i.e. a word's property of having more than one meaning). Ideally, every verse which exploits multiple meanings of one or more words should be rendered in variant translations but since this is extremely difficult given the conditions governing book publishing these days, I think that a good job is done even if one of the possible meanings is rendered in translation. As for my own practice in *The Captured Gazelle*, I tried to make up for this loss in some ways; for example, by explaining in the introduction how polysemy works in some verses, by combining more than one meaning in the translation where it was possible, and by adding endnotes giving alternate readings to a few verses

