

“Whispers of the Angel”

By

Munir Pervaiz Saami

I begin my note with the introduction of my title that I have borrowed from a collection of translations of Ghalib published under the same title.

It is in my opinion, one of the most sublime translations of Ghalib’s eternal phrase, *Nawa e Suroosh* from Ghalib’s couplet that defines his entire poetry, and places him among the finest poets of all times. The couplet that includes this phrase is:

آتے ہیں غیب سے یہ مضامیں خیال میں
غالب صریحاً خامہ، نوائے سروش ہے

It may be simply translated as, “these ideas emanate from the realm of imagination, Ghalib the cry of your pen is the whisper of the angel”.

It should be noted that the phrase “Whispers of the Angel” has not been used even by one of the finer translators of Ghalib, Prof. Ahmad Ali, a scholar of high repute, and also a mentor and precursor of Zia Ahmad whose book based on his understanding of Ghalib, we discuss today.

The phrase, “Whispers of the Angel”, also indicates the fact that translation of Ghalib into a Western language is a delicate, difficult, and challenging task. That is why we do not find many translations of Ghalib in English or other foreign languages.

Ghalib’s entire oeuvre consists of poetry and prose in Farsi and Urdu languages. Like Iqbal some of his finest poetry is in Farsi, and I will share just one example of his Farsi poetry to understand the great works of Ghalib the value of which we are simply unable to grasp.

The following two couplets are from a Farsi ghazal translated by none other than the doyen of Urdu literature, Qurat ul Ain Haider:

بیا کہ قاصدہ آسمان بہ گردانیم
قضا بہ گردش رطل گراں بہ گردانیم
ز حیدریم من و تو زما عجب نہ بود

گر آفتاب سوئے خاوراں بہ گردانیم

Qurat ul Ain Haider has translated the first couplet as:

“Come, let’s alter the course of the heavens...

Let the roving cup change our fate.”

And she translates the second couplet as:

You and I, my love are the devotees of Haider

we can send the sun hurtling back to the East.

It is suggested that, to translate the poetry of one language into a different language one must have absolute expertise of not only both languages, but must also be fully familiar with the myths, metaphors, archetypes, nuances, and literary and social traditions of both the languages and cultures.

To understand and to explain Ghalib is even a bigger challenge since Ghalib fuses Urdu, Farsi, Hindi, and other languages with such uncanny expertise and adds much complexity of meaning into his verse.

Explaining this challenge, Annemarie Schimmel writes, “Urdu poetry employs the highly developed play on words, which can add inimitable charm by the clever use of Arabic, Persian, and Indian elements of the poetical language, each of which bears not only its simple meaning but also different accessory notions. From this springs the peculiar art of oscillation between mystical and profane meanings, or between sensuality and spirituality.... Who knows whether the wine is real or is the wine of love? Who knows whether the beloved is a handsome young boy, wearing his silken cap awry on his head, his curls hanging down besides his moonlike face, or whether this description is only a symbol of the Devine Beloved, whose beauty surpasses everything and is yet to be expressed only in terms of the human attributes?”

“Translators have therefore always trembled in their attempts to translate Urdu poetry, and that explains the insignificant number of Urdu poetical works that have seen the light.”

Writing about translating and understanding Ghalib, Prof. Ahmad Ali writes, “The translator had to face the greatest difficulty in translating a poet like Ghalib, whose language and ideas are most difficult, and even in Urdu have been thought by less comprehensive minds to be

ambiguous, or meaning less. If I had allowed my interpretations to enter, the translated poems would not have remained Ghalib, as Fitzgerald's translations are not Omar Khayam. So, I have left the translations, like the originals unexplained, so that each reader can interpret the poet in accordance with his own sensibility, as he does the poetry of T.S. Eliot."

It is said that great poetry is not heard but overheard. The realm of imagination of a great poet is the entire human sub-conscious.

Ghalib writes:

قطرہ میں دجلہ دکھائی نہ دے، اور جزو میں گل

تھیل لڑکوں کا ہوا، دیدہء بینانہ ہوا

Ralph Russell has translated this couplet as, (in my opinion a very profane translation of a very philosophical idea.)

"Unless the sea within the drop, the whole within the part
Appear, you play like children, you still lack the Seeing Eye."

The same thought appears in William Blake, a major mystical and romantic poet, when he writes:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour

Any attempts to explain the art of Masters like Ghalib require great courage, determination, and depth of understanding since these Masters capture our souls, and encourage us by offering the "collyrium for men's eyes" to make our visions clearer, as Ghalib said in one of his verses.

Through his collection, Ghalib—(As I understand him), Ziauddin Ahmed has entered into the select company of his predecessors some of whom are major names of Urdu literature, like Ahmad Ali, Qurat ul Ain Haider, Ali Sirdar Jafri, Khurshid ul Islam, Ralph Russel, and several others who are not as well known.

He is fully aware of the challenges that his precursors faced despite being major scholars of Urdu, English, and other languages, and acknowledges this with humility, and writes, “I am attempting to present some of Ghalib’s poetry and its English translations for you to browse through and perhaps enjoy and appreciate the depth of thought of one of the great thinkers of all times. I may not be able to capture the beauty of the original, as no translation can ever equal it, yet if it narrates the ideas and perhaps the thought process of the genius, it would have fulfilled the underlying purpose. I have thus taken the precaution and titled the presentation, “Ghalib...as I understand him’, for his intellect and thought is so deep and sometimes obscure, that different meaning can be drawn by different people. You are free to comprehend him to the extent and depth of your own desire and ability.”

It is not the place and time to offer a comparison of Ziauddin Ahmed’s translation with some that have been attempted before him. However I would like to leave with you two examples of translations, to comprehend, the ‘Whispers of the Angel’ that I have used in my title.

Ghalib’s couplet:

آتے ہیں غیب سے یہ مضامین، خیال میں
غالب، صریرِ خامہ نوائے سروش ہے

has been translated by Ralph Russell as:

“The themes I write of, come into my mind from the unseen
Ghalib, the sound of my moving pen makes it an angel’s voice”

And Ziauddin Ahmed presents that same as:

“These topics in the mind are of heavenly descent
Ghalib is sound of the moving pen and voices of angels sent.”

In closing I would like to share a couplet from Ghalib as translated by J.L. Kaul, whose translations were praised by none other than Abul Kalam Azad, and that also sums up the stature of Ghalib.

سُرمہءِ مفتِ نظر ہوں میری قیمت یہ ہے
کہ رہے چشمِ خریدار پہ احساں میرا

I am collyrium for men’s eyes
which doth their range of vision increase
Come, have it free of cost from me
and grateful be.

Sources:

(Kejariwal, 2002)
 (Khan) (Kaul, 1957)
 (Whispers of the Angel, 1969)
 (Ahmed, 2014)
 (Kuldip, 1967)
 (Ali, 1992)
 (Russel, 2000)
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