

TWOAAH KO CHAHIYE EK UMR ASAR
HONE TAK*Introduction*

In this remarkable ghazal, Ghalib achieves, in the space of seven shers, a range of aesthetics and metaphysics that leave even the most educated reader reeling. Each sher switches space, turning from conventional tropes of ghazals into philosophical questions that have as much to do with culture as with classical traditions of love poetry. One of the key questions raised in this poem is the conflict between infinitude and the actuality of temporality. In almost every sher, the reader will note a tension between vistas of desire and the reality of mortality, presented in exquisitely beautiful metaphors of either the transience of a lock of hair, a dewdrop, or ultimately, the burning of a candle. Existence, in other words, is by no means denied its vitality, but neither is it segregated from its tragedy.



آہ کو چاہیے اک عمر اثر ہونے تک
کون جیتا ہے تری زلف کے سر ہونے تک

Aah ko chahiye ek umr asar hone tak
Kaun jeeta hai teri zulf ke sar hone tak

A sigh requires a lifetime to take effect
Who lives to reach the source of your mystery

In this sher, the poet states that a sigh or—in conventional terms, a lover's lament—needs a lifetime to have any effect at all. As readers, it is immaterial, given the ambivalence of the ghazal, whether the poet is addressing a beloved or the Almighty, although knowing Ghalib, it is probably a beloved. He then proceeds to say, in a remarkable swerve from infinity into the finite, that no one will live long enough to reach and pluck out the heart of your mystery. Here, the reader witnesses the brevity and elegance of Ghalib's poetry because in two short lines, he takes one from the impact of a lifetime to that of a day. What we see in this sher is also his great manipulation of irony because his second misra is by no means forlorn but, in fact, somewhat chides the object of his desire.



دام ہر موج میں ہے حلقہ صد کام نہنگ
دیکھیں کیا گزرے ہے قطرے پہ گہر ہونے تک

Dam har mauj mein hai halqa-e-sad kaam-e-nihang
Dekhein kya guzre hai qatre pe guhar hone tak

The gaping mouths of a hundred crocodiles form netted traps in each wave
Consider the labour within the sea-change of a raindrop to a pearl

In regarding nature, Ghalib was certainly unafraid of taking into account its dangers. The above couplet is convoluted in

that it seems to put together man's work and nature's work—every wave is also a fisherman's net so there is no real separation between nature and the trappings of humanity. Furthermore, every wave also brings with it another opening which is a hundred gaping mouths of crocodiles. With a brilliant metaphoric twist, Ghalib moves on to suggest that with all these hazards, consider how difficult it must be for any raindrop to fall and become a pearl, given that in Urdu mythology only the first raindrops that fall into the ocean become pearls. The analogy here, of course, is that survival of any kind is next to impossible, with the world being as treacherous as it is. Yet, however, pearls are produced. The reader is meant to understand that Ghalib is one of them.



عاشقی صبر طلب اور تمنا بیتاب
دل کا کیا رنگ کروں خون جگر ہو نے تک

Aashiqi sabr talab aur tamanna betaab
Dil ka kya rang karoon khooon-e-jigar hone tak

Love demands endurance, while desire is consuming
What should be my state until obsession devours patience

What Ghalib represents in this sher is an extraordinary tension between devotion and desire. Whereas in much of his poetry the two terms are coterminous, here he makes a strange separation between the stillness of love and the movement of passion. The question is which energy is going to take over body and soul.



ہم نے مانا کہ تغافل نہ کرو گے لیکن
خاک ہو جائینگے ہم تم کو خبر ہونے تک

Hum ne maana ke taghaful na karoge lekin
Khaak ho jayenge hum tumko khabar hone tak

I agree that you will not remain indifferent, but
I will be dust by the time you become aware of me

This sher is a brilliant example of Ghalib's hidden linguistic arrogance. He concedes that the object of his desire will not remain indifferent, although we as readers have no idea how the poet is convinced of that. But, then in a tragic switch, he declares that 'by the time you notice me, I shall be dust'. One of the complexities of this ghazal is its shifts in tonality not only from sher to sher, but even from misra to misra; you cannot determine where the poet's language is going to lead you. And the reader is left in amazement.



پرتو خور سے ہے شبنم کو فنا کی تعلیم
میں بھی ہوں ایک عنایت کی نظر ہونے تک

Partawe-e-khur se hai shabnam ko fanaa ki taaleem
Main bhi hoon ek inayat ki nazar hone tak

The sun's ray teaches a dewdrop how to vanish
I live because you have not bestowed the grace of your attention upon me

Here, Ghalib turns his poetry to a beautifully instructed didacticism. He presents the object of his desire with a lesson of the dewdrop that melts with the first ray of the sun and turns into nothingness, and further suggests he is alive

only because the desired has not graced him with one gaze until now. Again, Ghalib draws from classical imagery of the dew, the sunrise and the gaze and yet casts it in a sophisticated social setting that allows for wit, irony, as well as poignancy.



یک نظر بیش نہیں فرصتِ ہستی غافل
گرمی بزم ہے اک رقصِ شرر ہوئے تک

Yak nazar besh nahin fursat-e-hasti ghafil
Garmi-e-bazm hai ek raqs-e-sharar hone tak

Leisure for life is no more than the flash of a glance, o ignorant!
The warmth of festivity is one dance of the flame

Having gestured towards lifetimes, the concluding shers of this ghazal return us with great uncanniness to ideas of transience. The humour and the irony vanishes, the tone assumes a solemnity to suggest that existence is no more than the blink of an eyelid—an admonishment that is addressed to the ignorant. The metaphor employed is that the gathering of people is no more than one dance of a flame.



غم ہستی کا اسد کس سے ہو جز مرگِ علاج
شمع ہر رنگ میں جلتی ہے سحر ہوئے تک

Gham-e-hasti ka Asad kisse ho juz marg ilaj
Shama har rang mein jalti hai sahar hone tak

Asad, what can cure the grief of existence, except dying
The candle is obliged to burn before extinguishing at dawn

In the maqta, Ghalib turns to a medical metaphor: who can cure the grief of existence? He then poses a most curious point to his readers: that a candle has to burn in all splendour before it dies at dawn. The candle is a moment of performance in that it will flourish in true variegation before it accepts death: the beholder is riveted by this display of transience and fragility that will inevitably be extinguished by the worldliness of the dawn. We as readers are forced to ask ourselves: what were the psychic and emotional colours the poet is referring to about his own work, his own times and himself?