

Instituted in 1986, Sahitya Akademi's annual Samvatsar lectures provide a forum to leading creative writers and critics to present the quintessence of their thoughts on topics of universal and lasting relevance. The present volume featuring the seventh lecture in the series contains lectures delivered by Professor Ale Ahmed Suroor, distinguished Urdu critic and scholar.

In the first lecture *Has Literature Failed?* Professor Suroor argues that great literature never fails; but literature which is impelled by considerations of fashion and affirmation of endless meanderings into the unconscious has indeed, failed.

In the second part of the lecture *The Universal Element in Literature and the Relevance of Ghalib*, Professor Suroor emphasises the need of the present times to make a sustained effort at locating the universal elements in literature and the importance of Ghalib's contribution in this context.

Dr. Suroor's wide reading of the classics and his literary acumen are evident throughout the lectures.

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**Literature : The Question & the Answer**

The sculpture reproduced on the endpaper depicts a scene where three soothsayers are interpreting to King Suddhodana the dream of Queen Maya, mother of Lord Buddha. Below them is seated a scribe recording the interpretation. This is perhaps the earliest available pictorial record of the art of writing in India.

From Nagarjunakonda, 2nd century A.D

*Courtesy* : National Museum, New Delhi.

Samvatsar Lectures VII

**Literature : The Question  
& the Answer**

Ale Ahmed Suroor



**Sahitya Akademi**

**Sahitya Akademi**

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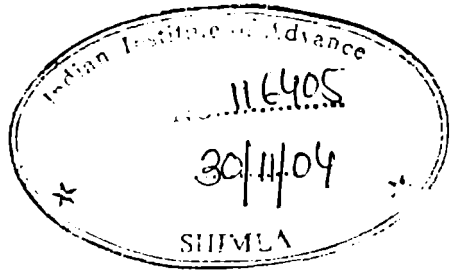
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## ***Foreword to the Series***

The Executive Board of the Sahitya Akademi passed a resolution on 24 February 1985 accepting the recommendations of the Committee set up for the establishment of a series of lectures in literary criticism called the Samvatsar lectures. A procedure was prescribed by the Board for the selection of the annual Samvatsar lectures. The Samvatsar lecturer is expected to deliver two or three lectures on a theme chosen by him. It has also been laid down that these Samvatsar lectures would be published after they are delivered. The crucial clauses in the resolution relating to the Samvatsar Lectures read as follows:

These lectures should reflect a deep concern for values. They should open up new vistas of thinking regarding a literary movement, a current literary trend, some original thinking about a great classic or a new path in literary criticism or literary creation, etc. The presentation should be from a larger perspective while the subject matter could be drawn from the regional or comparative sources within the speaker's experience.

I have great pleasure in writing this brief foreword.

New Delhi  
1987

**Vinayak Krishna Gokak**  
President  
Sahitya Akademi



Lecture I

**Has Literature Failed?**

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Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen,

I thank the authorities of the Sahitya Akademi for inviting me to deliver the Samvatsar Lectures for this year. I am aware of my limitations and yet as one, who has been engaged in literary pursuits, writing poetry, prose, literary criticism, in my humble way, for the last sixty years or so, I considered it worthwhile to share my thoughts with you on the growing impatience not merely with certain forms of literature, but with literature itself. When T.S. Eliot said nearly seventy years ago that the novel was dead, when Edmond Wilson later declared that verse was a 'dying technique', they meant that other forms and modalities would take their place. They did not say that literature was a dying art. But more recently, not a particular form or genre, but the entire medium of 'structured verbal discourse' has come under attack. The printed word is losing its appeal in the face of television and the other technological marvels of today. According to some people, there is a real danger of books becoming obsolete and print serving a bare minimum of strictly utilitarian functions.

Norman Podhoretz, Editor of *Commentary*, one of the liveliest intellectual journals in the United States, conceded in an article in *Saturday Review* in 1974, that "the new generation, though the best educated of all generations the world has ever seen, cares less about books than about films, less about reason than about feeling, less about words than about images, less about high culture than about low. Thus they are already 'tuned in' to a future in which literature will simply cease to exist."

But the fact remains that more books are being published and sold than ever before and presumably they are read also. It is true that most of them may be 'trash', as a reviewer in *Times Literary Supplement* pointed out some years ago. The position in India may be worse, but one could claim with some confidence that some excellent

books are still coming out in most Indian languages and that significant experiments are being made in poetry and prose. More translations from other Indian languages and from Western literature can be seen. The so-called barriers between forms and modes of writing are getting blurred. Language itself is changing, moral issues are still debated, though moral solutions are no longer in vogue, the grip of ideology is loosening, scepticism, doubts and despair are taking the place of blind faith, cock-sure assertions and vague generalizations. There are no great names in the Indian literary scene like those of Tagore and Iqbal and Premchand. The age of giants is over. Poets no longer dominate the horizon. This is the age of prose, the novel, short story, auto-biography and criticism. Some creative writers have strongly protested at the position occupied by critics today. Critics have in some cases failed to notice the spark in the younger writers, they have often taken refuge in pandering to the earlier tastes, have sometimes failed to judge literature in their quest for ideology, but the importance of the critics' role remains, in giving a perspective, a sense of values, a quest for culture, in the growing barbarism of the age, a social awareness, a moral fibre and a respect for the mystery that is language. There is a change in literary sensibility and it is the critic who points out why 'making it new' is important. There are now nuances and explorations in expression which seem obscure to the larger public, which is ill-equipped with language due to faulty teaching, breaking-up of the home, growing economic strains, migration, and the alienation from the environment and with nature. It is the task of the critic to make the general reader aware of the rich possibilities of the new and to test its significance in comparison with the familiar and the old, to enlarge his mental horizon, to enable him to develop an empathy, as well as judgment of the continuity in the change, to enable him to see life steadily and see it whole. Readers are by and large conservative, they want an affirmation of their established norms in literature, or an escape into their dream-world. Literature shocks them

into awareness of what is happening to people around them, to which they usually shut their eyes. Ostriches are not only the feature of the wastelands of Africa, they abound everywhere. This age of technology, has resulted in a craze for cash-crops in very sphere of life. And our politicians, our brokers of power, our business barons, our bureaucrats, have driven people to scramble for getting there, to do as the Joneses do, to join in the rat-race, to strive to arrive anywhere, anyhow. We have forgotten to stand and stare, to pause, to take a breath and look around, to see the lovely patterns which the leaves make when the breeze sweeps through the trees, to take in the rich magic colours of the flowers, the bright yellow of the mustard in bloom, the dark green of the lush fields, the beauty born of murmuring sound, the glory of the snow-clad peaks, and the roar of the waves, as they lash themselves on the sea-shore.

Some people think that modernism in the West and the neo-colonial thinking in India and most of the third world, with its accompanying drift from a sense of our roots, and a fatal plunge into unbridled individualism, alienation, the image of the unconscious, the revolt against the intellect, the proclamation that 'the mind is at the end of its tether', realism run riot, sex becoming a matter of orgasm, commercialization and vulgarization of human feelings, is responsible for this impasse. But they forget modernization is a fact of history, that modernization though bringing in new problems and making life more complex, is in a way, the destiny of mankind. They also forget that modernization need not mean full-fledged Westernization, but going along one's own path after a certain point. We should ponder over the fact that the Indian renaissance was highjacked by the rising bourgeoisie to serve its growing needs and remained incomplete. We should also see the growing displacement of the man by the machine, the megapolis creating a jungle and the politics of power in the name of progress. Modernity has many dimensions but learning from the role of capitalism in the West, in India also it has discouraged



thinking and feeling about the whole man and encouraged futile exercises in the dreary desert of dismal forebodings, into boredom, into the abyss of the animal in man. Humanity and humaneness have given place to barbarism and bestiality. In the quest of 'nowness', a term used by Stephen Spender, there were some people who considered good writing 'counter revolutionary'. In their opinion literature blunts our outrage at the status quo and encourages us to make peace with things of the mind.

I am suggesting that in spite of the risks inherent in mindless modernity, there should be a cool and calculated endeavour in the direction of modernity. Realism should not mean pointless detail, healthy eroticism should not degenerate into pornography. We should remember that classicism took sexual behaviour into its stride, but did not gloat over it. A critic may peep into a drain but he is not a drain inspector. The writers' task is not to change the world, but to understand it. Literature does not create revolutions, it changes men's minds and makes them aware of the need for a revolution. We must remember that partisan literature is only one kind of literature, that ideology can at times restrict creative vision, though it can also give it a direction. "Ought" in literature may be kept in view but literature deals largely with "is". When the reader feels that he is being admitted into a show-room he feels cramped; when he is looking out of a window to the world, he is curious and eager to see everything. Literature can be political, religious, mystic, philosophical but it should not hammer a philosophy or an ideology. Dostoevsky once said that only "Beauty can save the world." I think he did not mean beauty in the sense that some decadent poets and writers have used it, or in the narrow sense of beauty as utility, as preached by Caudwell. What he probably meant was the beauty that is man, in his quest for fulfilment, beauty in the familiar and the unfamiliar, in the joy of life and in its sadness, in symmetry and asymmetry, the beauty of curves and lines, of luminous ideas, uplifting thoughts, of hoping against hope, of glowing youth and withered

and weather-beaten age, of the stirrings of the divine in man, and planting a tree today, in the words of Martin Luther, "knowing that the world may end tomorrow." The quest for beauty is a quest for the universal, always remembering that universality is not in the abstract but concrete, it is the local made unique and meaningful for all. It is the market and politics, in the narrow sense, and show business, which tries to pass off tinsel for gold which results in debasing literature. Both the modernist, as distinguished from modern, and the well-meaning but naive peddler of ancient wisdom and nostalgia for a misty Golden Age, are like the XB engines of the forties which used to distort the railway track and cause derailment. It is saddening to think how we have treated culture and language in our endeavour to march into the age of technology. Paying lip service to folk culture and arranging some cultural functions for the sake of entertainment is no service to culture. Folk art is still neglected, patronage of art has political overtones. It is rarely that men like Swaminathan discover talent in Bastur, as Mark Tully has reported in his recent book. The fact that Husain, Gujral and a few others sell and are known abroad, does not mean that art has really become part of the life of the people. There is no worthwhile teaching of art and the teaching of literature is lifeless and soulless. The present generation is actually half dumb. It has a poor vocabulary and has no access to the vast stock of words which earlier generations possessed. In Hindi there is a misplaced zeal for Tatsam words, in Urdu Persianization is still too much in vogue. We are not likely to see another Ismat Chughtai in Urdu. The language — enriched by the use of centuries, with meat, with a clang, pregnant with meaning, the language chiselled, sharpened, made pointed, the language of a whisper, a whimper and a bang, the language of love, passion, anger, the language of stirring and rippling emotion, the language of heroic thoughts and fleeting ideas, the language of converse with man and God — is being made stilted, artificial, snobbish, elitist, exclusive and high-brow, serv-

ing the purpose of a few at the cost of the many. One reason why literature does not have its due impact, is that the language is not crystal clear, precise, simple, based on currency and usage. The common language, the language of everyday speech may use new, foreign, or metaphorical expressions, but only by way of enrichment. It may even distort the syntax to extract more juice from it, but should be able to communicate. It may say more to the learned, but it should say a great deal to the common man, the average reader. The history of all literatures shows that the best is usually simple. T.S. Eliot and Bertrand Russell have written the best prose in the twentieth century and yet they can easily be understood by all who know some English. The case of poetry is slightly different. Here making it new is mainly concerned with discarding words out of which the juice is gone and only the husk remains, words which do not create vibrations in the mind, words which have become slippery and do not establish any contact. The case of Ghalib in Urdu, will serve as an illustration of the point I wish to make. He used a fairly archaic language, in his early days and though there were flashes of genius even at that stage, his later poetry returns to the tradition and adds a new flavour to it.

I strongly feel that this cavalier attitude towards language in India today is the greatest stumbling block to the development of our literature. The careless teaching of language by persons who are themselves not merely ill-equipped but casual about the whole affair, the mistaken notion that language and literature are not that important in the age of science and technology, that humanities and classics do not help us to build industry, run an establishment, use a computer and harness energy, has resulted in lop-sided growth, lack of ideas, murky thinking, herd mentality, single-track lives. The close link of language with ideas is obvious. The stronger the language base, the clearer the vision and the insight. The wrangling over languages in India makes me wonder whether it is not a plot by the vested interests to thwart

the growth of the whole personality, cultural consciousness and sense of value of the people. With the mother-tongue and/or regional language as the medium at the primary and secondary stage, along with familiarity in one other Indian language and fair knowledge of English as the window to the world, at the secondary stage, the genius of the people can blossom. How can we develop an Indian consciousness, an Indian personality, an Indian outlook, if we teach our students through the English medium from the primary stage. English should be there from the secondary stage and as a subject only. It could be the medium for Higher Education in some colleges and schools. The recent craze for English especially in the upper middle stratum of our society is dangerous and the agitation against English is also short-sighted. We still have a simplistic attitude towards important things. The days of either/or are over. We have to bring up the new generation as Indians who also aspire to be citizens of the world, whose nationalism is not narrow and only concerned with their past, but who think in terms of India in the world of today. And not merely the teaching of Indian languages and Indian literature, but the teaching of English language and literature has to be geared to this end. Scientists would be better scientists if they have greater command over their languages and develop greater insight into their own literature and world literature, as writers, poets and men of literature would be better if they know the basics of sciences. I visited Hungary some twenty years ago, where people told me that Shakespeare was the greatest Hungarian poet, as all their best poets had translated Shakespeare, and their scientists could talk about Brecht and Becket and Eliot and Lucaks. Some people decry the merits of translations and insist that we should only think in terms of original writing. This view is deplorable. We need more and more translations from one Indian language to another, and many from world languages. Who can deny the influence of Bankimchandra Chatterjee and Tagore on Hindi and other Indian languages, or the impact of Meer and Ghalib,

apart from that of some outstanding Urdu short story writers, or the influence of Goethe, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Dostoevsky, Eliot, W.B Yeats, Thomas Mann, Mollere, Sartre, Camus, Kafka, Brecht and Becket on Indian literature, or even the influence of oriental literature on Goethe, Coleridge, Arnold and others. It is a fact of history. Actually translations of some world classics, should form part of the teaching of Indian literatures, and comparative studies of selected authors or trends should invariably be included in our syllabi. I admit that teaching a literature does not necessarily lead to greater creative activity, but the creative spark also needs some kind of oxygen to kindle into a flame and lead to a dazzling spectacle of 'the world in a word'.

Since independence a great deal has been done by the government to develop Indian literature, but State support is no guarantee for development of this kind, whatever some people might say. It helps a little but not much, but it can harm a great deal, if it leads to the patronage of 'safe' literature or recognition of established names only and looks askance at all voices of dissent, fails to discover new talent, panders to populist sentiment or is prone to favouritism. The boom in publishing is not a true index of the growth of literature in India. Many books are subsidized by the State Academies and dumped into libraries through bulk purchase. If statistics are collected, they would show that the number of readers, or of those who purchase books, has not appreciably increased. I am saying all this because the entire set-up discourages "good literature" and encourages what Aldous Huxley has called "bad literature". Bad literature, literature of Escape, titillating stuff, digests with inviting illustrations, bad history and half baked sermons on social reform, sell. It is said that this is what the people want. But it is not true. A market is created for such books, purely from the profit motive. I do not favour state control, but state guidance, encouragement of writers' cooperatives, facilities for printing and marketing books by promising writers, payment of royalty, easy availability

of paper, regular review of books and trends in Indian languages, in journals and periodicals reports on the literary scene in the Indian languages by the English press, transformation of literary programmes on T.V. and Radio from singing of poems to recitation by the poets, critical analysis and not merely praise in profusion. T.V. is a very good medium, but as yet it is preoccupied with political trivia, advertisements for promoting consumerism, or formula ridden serials, with only occasional glimpses of literary excellence or significant action. It has a poor view of the general viewers' intelligence and instead of using irony uses rhetoric. People don't talk there, they only make speeches. They think that the inauguration of some function by a minister or his tribute to a departed soul, is all that matters.

Literature has not failed. There is some kind of conspiracy going on all the time against literature in the name of attention to literature or attention to social needs. Big changes are taking place in the world. India cannot escape these changes. The powers that be, knowing that in the last analysis, literature is the conscience of the people, pay lip service to literature, but as literature poses some inconvenient questions and exposes many skeletons in the cupboard, its voice has to be drowned, its arrows blunted, in several ways. There are the official media, there are the currents set up by big business, there are sermons, there is the carrot of patronage, the imperatives of progress, of industrialization, of development. In the home, parents have no time for their children. Except for the public schools, teachers at the primary and secondary level are an ill-equipped, frustrated lot and many supplement their income with private tuitions. Of course, there are some exceptions, but this is the general situation. There should be general education up to the High School stage and diversification should begin only from the Higher Secondary level. While more professional courses and polytechnics should be provided, the mindless rush to Higher Education should be checked. We do not need so many universities, what

we need is better universities, with better teachers. As it is, our best minds are attracted by professional courses, civil services and business organizations. Those who study literature, do not do it because they have an aptitude for it but because they have no choice. There is a rush for science courses but not for mathematics. In a world which wants quick returns, literature has no takers. Language is neglected and therefore there is confused thinking. Literature gives a sense of values. Science is neutral. I am not against the emphasis on science, I want that scientists should also know literature. They should also be "touched by the alter fire". And literature should not be neglected. It should be taught in such a way that the human and the humane, the feeling for beauty, the quest for truth, should be able to inspire them in their lives. Further, this study should not be confined to the classics, but include contemporary literature also and give a peep into the world situation as well.

The Bulgarian linguist, Todorov, said in one of his books that prose is the norm, while poetry with its pauses and gaps is a deviation. He further stated after a random survey that classical poetry had fewer gaps and deviations. This deviation increased after the renaissance and in modern poetry, the percentage of pauses and gaps is much greater. If we accept this estimate for a while, it may give us a clue to the comparative decline of poetry and the rise of prose. "Making it new" is necessary, but obscurity cannot be praised as a virtue. Clough said in the nineteenth century that "there is joy in singing when none hear beside the singer." The Romantics (and according to Alvarez, modern poetry is an extension of the Romantic impulse) did believe in this, but actually this was a path of truth seen by themselves and not given truth. And they used words which expressed their feeling and emotion better and squeezed and twisted some words, so that their many-layered splendour could be brought out. Poetry is certainly 'a game of words' as C. Day Lewis has said, but one has to observe the rules of the game. And 'confessional poetry' has become quite a

torrent. The universe of the poet in many cases has become too narrow, his probing of the self and its hidden depths too elaborate to stir and move others and to enable the common reader to share his spiritual odyssey. The self in a void does not make a contact, the man in an abyss does. The poet has not merely his cross to carry, but the crosses of his generation, not his sorrow alone but sorrows of all suffering humanity. The way he carries his cross enables others to carry theirs. The uniqueness of a poet's experience should enable the reader to understand the ever-changing and ever-new universe of which he was unaware, or unconscious due to the pressing demands of daily life. There is poetry in pity, poetry in anger and even in a 'howl', but poetry is not just an endless outburst of anger or a persistent howl in pain. The bouts of anger and the bouts of despair should lead us to a world which was there but which we did not know. In the words of F.R. Leavis, it should have a link with "our central humanity". When Leavis criticised C.P. Snow, he was criticising the tilt in Snow towards one-sidedness. Snow was cheering the winning side, ignoring the fact that we have lost something in the race which we are supposed to have won, something precious and vital, the quest for values, the aesthetic thrill, the social and moral vision, the humanity that literature gives in our conquest of nature and the bravado of the machine man. I submit that the preservation and progress of the central humanity of man is necessary, to avoid the monotony of the Brave New World, and its goal of one-dimensional man.

But we must not dwell too much on the fact that poetry is becoming specialized and pre-occupied with the "hidden taverns measureless to man", we must be able to see how prose is fast becoming the vehicle of the entire story of man. Fiction is doing even what poetry did once, showing the poetry of life in all its ugliness and beauty, its sordidness and sorrow, its doubt and despair, its joy and ecstasy. When Eliot pronounced the death of the novel, he forgot that in the sixteenth and early seven-



teenth century both fact and fiction formed part of the novel. The zig-zag plot, or even no plot and the petering out of characterization, does not sound the death-knell of the novel. Narration can employ several devices. The novel has epic dimensions and can portray the spirit of a whole civilization or an age. The short story has also not yet exhausted its possibilities. The paucity of good novels in many Indian languages in the past indicated that prose had not reached its maturity, but after Independence there has been a notable advance in the field. Autobiography reveals in-depth study of the mind. The lines between different kinds of writing are getting blurred. If the autobiographical novel is being replaced by the novel in autobiography, as we find in many American writers of fiction, this is no cause for alarm. 'Modernism', according to Podhoretz, 'meant formal experimentation, but it also meant a certain attitude towards the modern world'. The crusade against middle-class values and hostility towards bourgeois society became the common-place poetics of the literary world in course of time, and while Leslie Fielder was complaining about the decline of the avant-garde in fiction, Lionel Trilling began to complain that literature had voluntarily surrendered what had been one of its most characteristic functions, viz. the investigation and criticism of morals and manners. The same thing can be said of the trend of modernity (*jadidiat*) in Indian literature, which began as a revolt against the clichés of the Progressive Writing and its restricting and restrictive political formulations, but soon exhausted itself in the sands of alienation and the seas of the sterile soul through deliberate use of symbols, and a frequent recourse to a myth-kitty. The emphasis on realism was shifted from the novel to what may be termed as new journalism, but it was short-lived. And so the discerning minds began to see that the cultural and the moral scene, in short, man in his quest for fulfilment, the sanity as well as the mental quirks, the sadness and beauty of life, to use Charlie Chaplin's phrase has to occupy the centre of stage in literature. There is a dialectic process in litera-

ture. A new vision seeing the possibilities of a new genre or form tries to compress the new insight into it, altering language in the process. When it exhausts itself, or a shift in the opposite direction is necessary and when it begins to exhaust its possibilities, there is an attempt at a new synthesis. This is a cause for alarm to those who feel committed to one kind of vision, the manner of looking at things, or those who feel that literature is all about dissent and revolt, about 'undoing and unknowing' in Kathleen Raine's words. The undoing is in order to do things another way. Those who are committed to literature accept the writer's right to feel free to probe this way and that, to reject the old truth in order to search and find a new one and come to a new centre embodying the whole truth. Literature in its sincere efforts to see life steadily and see it whole, has been attacked from both sides, from those who want it to serve narrow political goals, or the new found religious enthusiasm, or the right of the individual to smash things and himself in a fit of anger. Literature takes it all in its stride but goes on for its quest of the whole man. It may be noticed that of the laments that came, the loudest were from those who wanted it to be an instrument of revolution or from those who somehow or other preferred either a status-quo or a return to a fabled past. You have to adjust your sights when you are seeing in the dark or in the distance. Literature changes as life changes and it develops new forms to give flesh to new meanings. But it always comes back to its central humanity with new elan and greater insight.

Literature asks the right questions, sometimes inconvenient to us. It is not its job to provide answers. In *Brave New World* Aldous Huxley asked the right questions. It is good literature. But in the *Island* he tried to provide a solution. It is not ranked highly. It is not commonly realized that asking the right questions does give a clue to the right answers. Literature hints, suggests, insinuates through its devices of metaphor symbol, myth. Given solutions are not attractive. One has to arrive at these solutions in one's own way. It is a mistake to

imagine that the growth of science and technology is inimical to the development of literature. Both are seekers of truth. Science is more concerned with how, literature with what and why. Literature needs new metaphor, new symbols, and who knows it may find some in Astrophysics or Microbiology. Literature is not merely new wine in old bottle it can be both old wine in new bottles and new wine in old bottles. In America, the Establishment often drowns the voice of dissent by making a voice of dissent a bestseller. The writer is never the same disturbed soul. He is caught up in the maze of affluence. In the Soviet Union they used to order thinking and produced literature which was mostly propaganda. The writer should never be a part of the government, nor a permanent leader of opposition. He has to raise his voice of dissent, when there is a cacophony of assent. But he has also to nod his head and assent, when the situation demands, when dissent becomes destructive in the extreme. What he cannot and should not do is to treat himself as a world in itself. He may break the shackles of his society to pave the way for a better society, he may attack the morality of the day in order to lead to a higher morality. He may look into the past but to discover its relevance for today. But he must also try to rise above mere 'nowness'. He has to have a perspective of the past, present and the future. If not checked in time, Science and Technology may lead us into a new barbarism. Consumerism and affluence find literature an obstacle. They encourage Elitism in order to break up the whole field of creative endeavour into debates on Structuralism, Post-Structuralism and De-construction, linguistic analysis and Semiotics. Literary criticism has moved from its central role — to discriminate between experience and experience and to evaluate it, to create taste, to find meaning in the eternal quest of man. Value judgement is necessary, though new values continue to come into view and operate. Literature is not a hand-maiden of religion, nor a mere social documentary, nor a political exercise. Its special insight and haunting form seeks beauty everywhere, in faith, in

the struggle of the individual to find himself and his place in society. The writer and poet destroys to build and in order to build anew destroys. A good deal which passes for literature is not literature, it is raw sentiment, crude philosophy, sermonizing, day-dreaming, political indoctrination, but it would not do to say that literature has no moral, social and political vision. Literature reveals, it does not order us about. By depicting man in all his glory and all his misery, all his vices and virtues, his moods and feelings, his hope and despair, his enthusiasm and his disillusionment, the writer allows us to understand ourselves better and to cope with life more effectively. There will always be a great deal of bad literature, the literature of clichés and stereotypes, of preaching pontification and it is the job of the critic to enable the reader to distinguish between the real stuff and the spurious one. Too specialized criticism about words and meanings, about theory, about the intent of the writer, or readers' response can lead us astray. Language has its imperfections, but it is the best tool that the civilized man has, to explore and understand himself. All the time, a lot of confusion is being created by interested parties to marginalize man and his central concerns, to create hierarchies, to sidetrack his energies, to veil the truth, and the reality and complexity of life around him. Hence this tirade against literature, hence the urge to create a smoke screen, to label it anti-modern, anti-progress, anti-science, the so-called saviour and benefactor of mankind. Alexander Solzhenitsyn said in his acceptance speech of the Nobel Prize, "Woe to the nation whose literature is disturbed by the intervention of power. Because that is not just a violation against freedom of print. It is the closing down of the heart of the nation, a slashing to pieces of its memory." Thankfully we have freedom of expression in our country, but all the time we are being subjected to talk on certain familiar lines, write about the roots and basis of our culture, about the dim recesses of our past or to repeat the nightmare of the West, to join the mad race of consumerism and armaments, to

mortgage our creative energy either to the magic world of a remote age or an ugly and soulless, dehumanizing pattern of life, which, though attractive is ushering in a new barbarism. "Ours is a big mansion", said Gandhiji, "with many windows. We want all windows to be open, so that fresh wind should come from all sides. But we do not want it to blow us off our feet."

Saul Bellow said in 1971 (*Dialogue*, vol. 4, 1971) "Isolated professionalism is death. Mechanization and bureaucracy are permanently with us. We cannot pretend that the technological revolution has not occurred. We are its beneficiaries, we may also become its slaves. The first necessity, therefore, is to fight for justice and equality. The artist along with everyone else, must fight for his life, for his freedom. This is not to advise the novelist to rush immediately into the political sphere. But for a start, he must begin to use his intelligence, long unused. If he is to reject politics he must understand what he is rejecting. He must begin to think and to think not merely of his own narrower interests and needs, but of the common world he has for so long failed to see. If he thinks his alienation has much significance, he is wrong. It is nine-tenth cant. If he thinks his rebellion significant, he is wrong again because the world is far more revolutionary in being simply what it is. In their attempts to imitate power, 'Realpolitik' by violence or vehemence, writers simply make themselves foolish. The 'romantic criminal' or desperado cannot get within miles of the significant human truth. It is with this truth that the writer must be concerned."

Literature has not failed us, but literature of fashion and formula, literature of sex and violence, mindless affirmation and endless wanderings into the underworld of the unconscious, the portayal of boredom, the frustrations of a mindless rage, have. Criticism has become an elitist industry. Leslie Fielder has written about an Editor, who when asked what new things had come, said indifferently, "Only a few short stories." When criticism is only

about critics, it is going astray. When a reader closes a book, after reading the critic, he should be able to open many more books. A critic is no judge pronouncing a death sentence, he is a guide, philosopher and friend. And he talks in a language which has style, which is creative and evocative in its own right. We have used our imagination to build prisons of mind, not visions of suffering and struggling humanity, in counting trees we have forgotten the forest. Literature is not mere 'saying', it is 'making' also and with the kind of making on the rise, this special making becomes all the more pertinent. The fight between the sacred and the profane must go on, in Browning's words:

With life for ever old, yet new  
Changed not in kind, but in degree  
The instant made eternity.

And as with Ghalib:

Zarra Zarra saghar-e-maikhana-e-nairang- hai  
Gardesh-e-majnoon ba chashmak hai Laila aashna

(Every mote is a cup from a magic multi-coloured tavern  
The revolutions of Majnoon are linked with the winks of Laila)

Obviously, Majnoon is literature here and Laila life itself.

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Lecture II

**The Universal Element in  
Literature and the Relevance of  
Ghalib**



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Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today I wish to speak on the universal element in literature and Ghalib's relevance in this regard. This is, in a way, a continuation of the argument of the first lecture that literature has not failed, but certain trends in the life of today encouraging a "new barbarism", in the words of George Steiner, have created a loss of faith in literature. That is why the insight, the reorganization, the delight and the wisdom of poetry as pointed out by Robert Frost, and the exploration of the soul of man in prose, particularly in fiction, have to be borne in mind once again. Post-modernism has shattered many myths of modernism and is already creating new ones. Belief in progress, technological advance, the over-all power of intellect, the search for a new utopia, is no longer the dominant passion of man. Many a god has failed and many shrines have been deserted. The theme of the glory of man has been replaced by glimpses of his contrariness his irrationality and his absurdity. 'The centre has ceased to hold', as Yeats put it. Certainty has given place to uncertainty, devotion to doubt and even despair. The revolution of rising expectations has yielded place to a revolution of rising frustrations. Hence the quest for the universal in literature, becomes all the more vital for us.

What do we mean by the term universal? Obviously, it focuses on effectiveness or application to all places or times, or on relevance in all situations. Kathleen Raine has spoken in a recent interview published in *India International Quarterly* about the search for a perennial philosophy. There is no such philosophy. There are only perennial truths; philosophers and interpreters have emphasized one kind of truth and some another kind. These truths may seem contrary at times, but if we develop a perspective, these blend into a larger truth, the wealth and variety of human perception, the range and depth of vision of life. The universal element in literature lies in its concretization of each human situation. There will always

be some faces that can launch a thousand ships and burn the topless towers of Ilium, the urge towards divinity and the pull of the beast to build and to destroy, to hope and to despair, to dream and to be a prisoner of dreams, to strive for a revolution and to be swallowed by it, to be inspired by nature and to see god in Man. If a poet looks at life from a particular angle, if he emphasizes a particular link between the various strands, in short, if he tries to build a system, or formulate some kind of ideology, there remains the danger that other systems, other ideologies, may seem more attractive, or more significant or meaningful to another generation. What appeared to be bliss, may turn out to be a bore. It may not connect, it may not be relevant. So in the last analysis, holding a mirror to life, seeing it steadily and seeing it whole, seeing with unblinking eyes the agony and the ecstasy, the rock withstanding all storms and the willow bending to every breeze, may have a more universal appeal. Commitment to the whole of life, both in its meaning and absurdity, its noble heights and abysmal depths, should have greater universality. It would not date if some part of it could be rediscovered again and again to give us fresh insight and perhaps greater wisdom.

T.S. Eliot said more than fifty years ago: "The 'greatness' of literature cannot be determined solely by literary standards; though we must remember that whether it is literature or not, can be determined only by literary standards". Some people questioned this criterion by saying that only literary standards should be relevant in this assessment. But the fact remains that good literature becomes great because of its universality, its range and depth, its 'human centrality', as pointed out by F.R. Lewis. Eliot has emphasized religion in this context. I would like to refer to its moral vision, its social awareness, its sense of the past, the present and the future. So poets like Shakespeare and Ghalib, who hold a mirror to the whole of life, could be considered even greater than those who look at it from a particular point of view, who may be considered to have a particular philosophy, who try to

discover a unity in the diversity that is life. Belief in a poet's vision is not necessary, we have to take into account only the validity of his vision, the coherence of his experience, his seeing and not his saying, his poetry and not his philosophy of life.

As far as Urdu poetry is concerned, there is a consensus among critics that Meer, Ghalib, Nazeer Akbarabadi, and Iqbal are great names. Meer is regarded as the greatest, but there are many who consider that Ghalib's poetry is on a higher plane. Even S.R. Faruqi, an eminent Urdu critic, in his admirable selection of Meer's verses called *Sher-e-Shor Angez* (Passionate Poetry) concedes that from an intellectual level, abstraction and subtlety of meaning, Ghalib is superior to Meer. He further points out that Ghalib's imagination soars the skies and Meer's is earthy. In other words, "Ghalib is more abstract, Meer more concrete". I would like to add that Ghalib has more to offer, to every succeeding generation.

The study of any literature has to keep in mind the tradition of that literature. Urdu poetry also has a tradition. It has Ghazal, Gaseeda and Masnavi as its major forms. Ghazal has a formless form. It is not organised like other forms but is a bouquet of many-coloured flowers. Each verse is a miniature painting on a canvas controlled by rhyme and ordered by double rhyme — *Qafia* and *Radeef* respectively. Ghazal has many critics. It is wrong to think that it is the choicest or the best kind of poetry, but its symbolism, its concentrated language, its quotability, the universality and the variety of its expression, ensures its continuing popularity. Each verse of the Ghazal is a short poem, it says little and means a lot. In Persian, from where this form was transplanted into Urdu, in spite of the greatness of Firdausi's epic and Khayyam's quatrains, the Ghazals of Hafiz and Saadi remain great poetry. Hafiz has inspired many in the West also. Ghalib wrote both in Persian and Urdu as many did in his days. He even regarded his Persian poetry as greater than that in Urdu. But poets are not always the best

judges of their own poetry and a certain tradition does influence their judgement. However, we are concerned here with his Urdu poetry which he rightly claimed to be the 'envy of Persian' and we shall dwell at some length on its greatness and significance.

Ghalib (1797-1869) died one hundred and twenty-three years ago. On his death, Hali, his disciple wrote a beautiful elegy and summed up his personality and art in an immortal line: "He gave meaning to the word humanity". But Zaka Ulah, a close friend of Mohammad Husain Aazad and later an associate of Sir Syed, had this to say about the man: "The truth about Ghalib is that but for being a poet, he had no virtue. He was so jealous that he could not bear anyone else being honoured. He was so selfish that he had no scruples about usurping the rights of his relations. When Zauq died, he blurted out that he who versified the speech of the inn-keepers is no more. He was so addicted to wine that he said about Sahbal, a contemporary and a very learned man, What does he know about poetry? He neither drank wine nor had had a taste of the shoes hurled by lovely women, nor did he go to prison." And he was so greedy that he used to send one Qaseeda to ten patrons.

All this is true, but it is also true that he was a good friend, that he had friends and admirers in all communities, that he did not attach too much importance to religious and sectarian differences, that he had great wit and personal charm, and could laugh at himself also. He would not like to hurt the sentiments of people around him. As Northrope Frye has observed "there is no reason why a great poet should be a wise and a good man, or even a tolerable human being, but there is every reason why his reader should be informed in his humanity as result of reading him." Ghalib tried all his life to live according to certain aristocratic standards of living. This living had certain virtues and certain limitations. But he led a rich life, and a full life. He had a zest for living and knew both pleasure and pain in the process. He was a

cultured man, fairly conversant with the learning of his age, but he was not a scholar of repute. His early life was spent in Agra, but he shifted to Delhi after his marriage. He went to Banda, Lucknow, Allahabad, Banaras, and later to Calcutta to plead for the pension which he considered his due and was able to see there, the stirrings of a new age. He started writing poetry at about the age of ten and had completed his first collection of poems in Urdu at the age of nineteen. This collection was first published in 1969, hundred years after his death. Though attached to Persian, he wrote in Persian much later. His early verse shows a rich imagination, a departure from the prevailing tradition, an originality, a magic of flights of fancy, more concerned with extracting meaning from obscurity than communication. The influence of the great Persian poet Bedil is there. It is remarkable that he spent a long time 'polishing his mirror' improving his diction and making his words a treasure-house of meaning. His first Diwan in Urdu, featuring a great deal of the earlier verses was published in 1841. He wrote little poetry in Urdu after this, but a good deal in Persian. It must be mentioned that towards the last twenty years of his life his letters in Urdu occupied a good deal of his time. They set up a new trend and helped a great deal in the development of Urdu prose. They reveal a glimpse of Ghalib the man, rich in experience, broad-minded and tolerant with a rare sense of humour, tasting life in all its flavours, at times down but never out, attached to a culture and environment which represented the best elements of the old, and yet aware of new currents, and the stirrings of a new age. He reminds us of Dr. Johnson who is greater than his work, though the work is also great.

It is now being increasingly realized that the greatness of a poet does not lie in the depth of his philosophy or the quality of his belief, or his advocacy of a particular social order, but in the validity of his vision, its complexity, its having an organisation and an order, a harmony and balance, which is both a selection of life and an improve-

ment, in a way. And this vision has to be expressed in words through image and metaphor, symbol and myth, going beyond the literal meaning of words and changing them with a new and deeper meaning. I think it was Goethe who said that an author whom a lexicon can keep up with is worth nothing. Northrope Frye has pertinently observed that poetry is disinterested use of words, it does not address a reader directly". "The artist is heard, not overheard," as John Stuart Mill put it. So long as the seeing or saying in poetry was considered more important, poets with a message were regarded as greater, but when the special insight or role of the poet, his particular quality of 'making' began to be acknowledged, poets who have left us with rich tapestries of their art, who have created a world in their word, have naturally been duly appreciated.

It was Iqbal who first referred to the special trait of Ghalib, the loftiness and richness of his imagination and his affinity with Goethe. Bijnori referred to Ghalib's versatility, pointing out that all the notes in the symphony of life were to be found in his poetry, but it was actually, after the publication of *Nuskha-e-Hameedia* in 1921, that the true genius of Ghalib revealed itself. It is a goldmine which has both gold and the rock. There is an abandon here with the ecstasy of word magic, the joy of singing alone which is later to appear as the perfected expression for a particular mood or glance. Ghalib constantly reviewed his earlier effort. He discarded a good deal, a little gold was washed away with the mud, but he was constantly on the look out for the right word, the happy expression, the moving music, the multi-layered glory of the choicest expression.

Let us consider some verses of Ghalib, which have an appeal for all ages and times:

1. None is acquainted with the inner life of  
another  
Every individual in this world is an  
unciphered page.





12. Why should I not deviate from the right path  
The pen which wrote my destiny was all  
awry.
13. I have the temperament of Adam, I am  
descended from him  
And indulge in sin openly.
14. As it is difficult to perform any job  
satisfactorily  
The son of Adam too, cannot attain  
the stature of man.
15. A thousand longings, each worth a life  
So many of my yearnings were fulfilled,  
and yet so few.
16. Even thy fidelity cannot compensate us  
We had to put up with tortures other than  
those inflicted by thee.
17. O death, my heart has not yet turned into  
blood and trickled from the eyes  
Let me stay here awhile, for I have still a lot  
to do.
18. He gave me both worlds and thought I would  
be happy  
But I was ashamed to ask for more.
19. O Ghalib, when such has been the pattern of  
our life  
Why do we remind ourselves that we were  
supposed to have a God above us.
20. What countless demands we make from this  
sky  
We consider the robber in debt to us for the  
goods stolen.
21. Those who are free, do not grieve for more  
than a moment  
We light the lamp of our mourning chamber  
from the lightning.
22. We continued to write the gory tales of love  
Even though our hands were chopped off in  
the process.

23. Love's passion to the lowly gives  
Means to exalt themselves.  
  
A grain of sand, the desert holds  
A drop, contains the sea.
24. The God I worship is beyond the bounds of  
the senses  
The Kaaba is only a sign-post for those with  
vision.
25. Constancy in faith is the real thing  
When the Brahmin dies in the temple  
Bury him in the Kaaba.
26. The temple and the Kaaba are mirrors of the  
recurrence of longings  
The fatigue of longing carves shelters.
27. We believe in one God, our faith discards  
ritual  
When religious boundaries vanish  
They merge into real Beliefs.
28. There is the feasting of the eyes at the  
Garden's glory  
And there is the urge to pluck some flowers  
O Creator of Spring, we sure are sinners.
29. O Khizar, we who are known to people are  
really alive  
Not you, who for the sake of immortality,  
remain hidden from view.
30. There is no grip in the knot of the sacred  
thread and the rosary  
The Sheikh and the Brahmin, are on trial  
for their fidelity.
31. We are not impressed by the blood that  
courses through the veins,  
What worth is it, when it does not trickle  
from the eyes.

Ghalib, like Shakespeare, has no one view of life, he knows that life has many truths, many contradictions, many facets. He is aware of the fact that what appears at the surface is often quite different from things inside, that





the coming disintegration in the established order, the break-up of old and cherished values. the peeling of plaster from lofty edifices. But he spoke obliquely, not in direct terms, he hinted rather than dilated on a situation. The terms so far used in poetry were charged with new meaning. Love (Ishq) became more than the mystic's longing for union with the Absolute, or just body's rapture, but a life force, which gives meaning and value to life. He says:

Love imparted to our nature, the real taste of  
 It gave us a cure for pain and a <sup>living</sup> pain which  
 knows no cure.

Love knows no controls, it is that kind of fire,  
 O Ghalib  
 Which cannot be kindled at will, nor put  
 any way.

And he can also laugh at this concept.

The flower laughs at the business of the  
 nightingale  
 What is termed Love, is a distraction of the  
 mind.

He gave a new turn to the story of Shirin and Farhad:

The mountain-digger is a hungry labourer for  
 the pleasure palace of his rival  
 Be Sutoon is a mirror of the deep slumber  
 Shirin.

Words like *tamanna* (desire), *shauq* (taste), *arzo* (yearning) acquire new dimensions in Ghalib. Thirst becomes eternal quest. *Hasrat* is not merely unfulfilled desire, it becomes a lingering memory. He says:

1. I recall the countless scars inflicted by  
 unfulfilled desires  
 Do not ask for an account of my sins,  
 O God.

2. What was there in my house, for thy sorrow  
to destroy  
But that yearning to build a niche, which is  
all I have.

Ghalib knows both the glory of life and its absurdities and its tragedy. He knows that dreams are necessary and he also knows that they are shattered. He is aware of the urge to build systems of thought and also of the compulsion of destroying to build anew, the urge to know and even to realise that knowledge may bring more problems than it solves. But longing to fathom the depths of experience remains, the quest for beauty has to go on. I am reminded of what Hilary, the great mountaineer, said about Everest, when he was asked why he wanted to climb it. "Because it is there." Ghalib can sing of the glory that is Beauty, even when he may not be able to touch it, for it may not be for him. The following lines are unsurpassed in Urdu poetry:

If the beloved does not return our love, so  
what, she is the beloved,  
Sing of her graceful movements and of her  
intoxicating charms.

If this spring cannot linger, so what, it is  
spring after all  
Sing of the luxuriance of the garden and the  
bracing air.

And this beauty for Ghalib is not circumscribed in one label or colour or shade or pattern. It is not confined to an age, faith or situation. It can hold for, say the composite culture of India, or a citizenship of the world. It loves every shade of spring, every manifestation of culture, which is beautiful in itself, is part of the great beauty of living. I am not reading my meaning into Ghalib's verses. The meaning is there. Iqbal once said about the poet Giramī's verse, that even if Giramī did not intend a particular meaning it does not matter, because there is that meaning also there. Tagore, when once questioned about a particular interpretation of his poem, remarked that it had all that and more. Good poetry has layers upon

layers of meaning; it becomes the precious possession of the reader provided he can soar with the poet in his adventure of the mind and be touched by the flame kindled by the poet. Ghalib says:

The Rose, the Tulip and the Jasmine have  
different shades of colour.  
But every colour should have the seal of  
spring.

In the state of intoxication, thy head, should  
touch the pitcher's bottom.  
While praying, one should turn towards  
Kaaba.

So according to the revolution of the cup of  
Attributes  
One who knows, should always be drunk  
with the Wine of the Essence.

Though Ghalib was not a mystic, he was no doubt mystical in his flights of fancy. Someone has said that all great poetry tends to be mystical and Ghalib's poetry is no exception. He was in tune with the prevailing line of thinking in classical Urdu poetry, in which the cult of Wahdat-ul-Wujood (Unity of Existence) first propounded by Ibne Arabi, was the dominant source of inspiration for poets in Urdu, as in Persian. The influence of Sufism and Bhakti movements deepened this trend and the assimilative nature of Indian culture strengthened it. Maikash Akbarabadi, a Sufi and a notable poet, compiled at my request, a list of terms in Sufism used by Urdu poets, with their comprehensive quality of interpretation both in mundane and spiritual terms, and what he told me was startling. He said that all the terms and nuances of Sufism were there in Ghalib, better expressed than in many Sufis. This is what a great poet's imagination accomplishes. Ghalib himself playfully refers to this trait:

These themes of Sufism and this thy style  
We would have regarded thee as a wall,  
were thou not a drunkard.

And again:

Beware if someone quarrels with Ghalib  
He is a hidden sage (Wali) though openly a  
heretic (Kafir).

A few verses would illustrate the point further:

1. It is thee who is not aware of the songs which  
reveal the hidden secret  
For every screen here is a veil of the eternal  
song.
2. Whose playful writing makes the image a  
lament  
And makes every pictorial form paper-clad.
3. Who can say whose luminous revelation is  
this world  
He has let down the veil which cannot be  
lifted.

And this great verse, which also leads to a concept of evolution.

4. Beauty is not yet finished with the perfection  
of its charms  
A mirror is constantly in view in the veil.

Ghalib's interest in the Abstract and his fascination for the metaphysical world is beyond doubt, but nevertheless his joy in the concrete and earthy and this-worldly remains. He ridicules paradise as "just a good idea to beguile the heart". He laughs at the Pure Wine (Sharabe-Tuhoor) which the preacher cannot drink or pass on the others and says in a memorable verse:

That garden of Eden, about which the ascetic  
is in raptures  
Is a bouquet of flowers in the forgotten  
niche of merry-makers like us.

Ghalib is not for a promised Paradise but for the Paradise on Earth, for the joys of senses, for the patter of raindrops, for the breeze that intoxicates, for the beauty that warms and thrills the heart. Comparing the promised Paradise with this world's pleasures he says:



Where is the darkness caused by the  
   rain-laden cloud  
 If there if no autumn how can there be a  
   spring?

What pleadings can avail with the beloved we  
   do not know  
 What pleasure can be gleaned from the  
                                 union for which there is no waiting?

Where is the feasting of the eyes, the joy of a  
   glimpse  
 There is no chink in the walls of Paradise.

Ghalib boldly questions God:

If nothing exists except thee O Lord  
 What is this turmoil?

Why the curves in the amber locks  
 What the glance from eyes brightened by  
   antimony

From where have sprung this verdure, these  
   flowers  
 What is this cloud and this delicious air.

And Ghalib, having tasted the cup of life to the full, having known pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, dreams of radiant splendour and the dark and dreary realities of living, had a sense of humour. He could laugh at all foibles and failings, poses and pretensions of men. He could laugh at himself also. Exposing the hypocrisy of preachers, of the Sheikh and Zahid, was a favourite theme in Urdu, as in other languages. Ghalib was for the here and now, not for an unknown future. So he attacked both their illusions as well as their hidden participation in men's joys which they publicly condemned. But he is not crude in his attack. He reveals a vision:

The gate of the tavern, and the steps of the  
                                 preacher are poles apart. O Ghalib,  
 We only know this, that yesterday when we  
                                 came out, he was coming this way.

There is a laugh at the beloved's expense:

Do not ask me how the air of arrogance  
displayed by beauty was exposed  
The hands were beautiful due to henna, the  
cheeks due to powder and rouge.

Nor does he spare himself:

1. Asad loves beautiful looks  
What cheek he has.
2. I know the rewards of piety and obedience  
But what can I do if I do not feel attracted to  
them.
3. We used to drink on credit, but knew full well  
One day this carefree poverty will bring  
matters to a head.
4. If I had not been way-laid in broad daylight  
How could I have slept so soundly at night.

There is a verse about the beloved looking at himself in the mirror.

When she held up the mirror she was  
humbled  
She was too proud to lose her heart to  
anyone.

His letters in Urdu have more abundant sparkle of this wit, but his poetry is also enlivened by this playfulness, this sense of incongruity in things, this parade of illusions. For Ghalib art is essentially concentrated expression. His compound words like *aashob-e-gham* (ravages of sorrow), *aashob-e-aagahi* (the havoc caused by knowledge) have modern undertones. *Nishat-e-kaar* (the joy of work), *maykhana-e-nairang* (the tavern of change), *mauj-e-gul* (the fragrance of a flower), *andesha-hai-dur daraz* (thoughts of distant possibilities), *raqs-e-sharar* (the dance of the spark), *aalam arai* (decorating the world), *Taoos Shikar* (containing the peacock), show his preference for Persian words, but he is also at times so profound in his very simplicity that some of his verses haunt the memory for a long time. I am reminded of what Arnold said about the immortal lines of Shakespeare,

Wordsworth and Shelley. Some of the lines of Ghalib are quoted by people at large because they sum up a mood, a situation or a turn in one's life.

1. The fragrance of the flower, the lament of the  
heart, the smoke from the candle  
Whoever came out of thy company was  
distraction personified.
2. He repented from cruelty after putting me to  
death  
Woe to the regret and remorse of the swiftly  
repentant me.
3. When was it, that the cup of wine did reach  
me in her assembly  
Saqi has surely mixed something with the  
wine.
4. There is no difference between living and  
dying in love  
We live for seeing her, whose beauty is  
breathtaking.
5. What did Khizar do to Sikander  
Whom should we take as the guide now.
6. Burnt out by the scar of separation from  
nocturnal revels  
Only a candle remains, and that too is  
silent.
7. Life is a children's game in my eyes.  
Day and night a spectacle greets me.
8. A stout snare was hidden near the nest  
We were caught before we could fly away.
9. Man is a congregation of ideas by himself  
Even when alone, we seem to be a crowd.
10. Even when there is talk of beholding God  
One cannot help talking in terms of the cup  
and the wine.

Ghalib's poetry has a child's wonder, the youth's zest and abandon and the serenity and wisdom that comes

from old age. He is not afraid to contradict himself, because life is often full of contradictions. At times it seems to have a meaning and purpose, at others it is the theatre of the absurd. The only test of the validity of the poet's vision is that it should appear to have a truth of its own, the truth of the human soul in coping with the real and striving for an ideal. In life it is the crusade that matters, not victory or defeat. Ghalib is able to see both the glory of the old and the glimmer of the new. As an English poet says:

Both a new world  
And the old, made explicit, understood  
  
In the completion of its partial ecstasy  
The resolution of its partial horror.

Ghalib's Urdu poetry is mostly in the form of Ghazal. He wrote a number of *Qaseedas* and a few *Masnavis* also but his full stature as a poet is revealed in the Ghazal and two *Qaseedas*. He wrote more in Persian and in Persian his Ghazal, *Masnavis* and *Qaseedas* are all of a high standard. His Urdu letters are a landmark in Urdu prose and their appeal will remain, but in his Urdu Ghazal, the language reached a flight of imagination unknown before and a depth of feeling unfathomed earlier. Meer's greatness is acknowledged by all, and even Ghalib pays a rich tribute to him. Meer moves, but Ghalib illumines. Meer is an artist more concerned with emotion, Ghalib with intellect.

In 1969 Ejaz Ahmed invited some American poets to recreate Ghalib with the help of some literal translations of his Ghazals. Robert Bly and Adriene Rich responded enthusiastically. Bly created a poem from Ghalib's well-known Ghazal which has a haunting quality about it. It reveals the fervour, the agony and ecstasy of youth:

A long time has elapsed since my beloved was  
my guest,  
When the assembly was an illumination  
with wine in sparkling cups.



tree in us also grows.”

I will conclude this lecture with two verses — one from Meer and another from Ghalib. They appear to me as admirably summing up the role of the poet in the world of today. So far I have only relied on translations which can at best give us only a little flavour of the original, but now I shall quote the original verses along with their translations. Meer says:

Afsurdgi-e-Sokhta Janan hai qahr Meer

Daman ko tuk hila ke dilon ki bujhi hai aag.

(The dejection of those consumed with the fire  
of love, is terrible to behold O Meer  
Shake thy garment a little as the flame in  
the heart is petering out.)

And Ghalib demands:

Kanton ki zaban sookh gai pyas se ya rab

Ek aabla pa wadi-i-pur khar mein aawai.

(The tongue of the thorns is parched with  
thirst  
May someone with blisters on his feet  
appear, in this valley of thorns.)