The Flower-lit Road

Essays in Urdu Literary Theory and Criticism

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For Adil Mansuri

Poet, painter, calligrapher, friend.

موجۂ گل سے چراغاں ہے گزرگاہ خیال

mauja-e gul se chirāghāñ hai guẓar gah-e ḳhiyāl

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The Poet in the Poem or, Veiling the Utterance

Choudhri Muḥammad Na'im spent very nearly two decades perfecting his translation of *Żikr – e Mīr*, Mīr's autobiography. Written in difficult, somewhat idiosyncratic, and occasionally quite obscure Persian, it has fascinated scholars and students of Mīr ever since it was discovered in the late 1920's and printed in 1928.[1] Yet, apart from the fact that its author is perhaps the greatest Urdu poet ever, it signally fails to do what autobiographies are supposed to do: it tells us practically nothing about Mīr as a person, or even as a poet. What Mir claimed to have done in *Żikr – e Mīr* is as follows (in Naīm's excellent translation):

> Now says this humble man, whose *takhallus* is Mīr, that being unemployed these days and confined to my solitary corner, I wrote down my story [*aḥvāl-e Khud*], containing the events of my life [*ḥālāt*], the incidents of my times[*savanih-e rozgār*] and some [other related] anecdotes [*ḥikāyāt*] and tales [*naqlha*].[2]

Naīm tells us in his Introduction that in *Żikr – e Mīr*:

> The account of Mīr's own life is scattered and quite summary in nature. He does not give us the kind of personal details we expect in an autobiography. He does not tell us what year he was born in, or got married in, or how many

1. *Żikr-e Mīr*, Ed., Maulvī Abdul Ḥaq , Aurangabad, Anjuman Urdu Press, 1928.
2. *Żikr-e Mīr, The Autobiography of the Eighteenth Century Mughal Poet: Mīr Muḥammad Taqi Mīr*, Translated, annotated and with an introduction by C.M. Naīm, New Delhi, OUP, 1999, p. 26.

> children he had and when; he is silent about his peers and his interaction with them in literary gatherings; he doesn't even mention any of his writings.[1]

So what was the purpose of the exercise, or experiment in autobiography that Mīr undertook apparently in all seriousness? Judging from what little we know of Mīr, the autobiography seems to present a picture—if at all it can be called a picture—of Mīr which is not on all fours with his real personality. To quote Naīm once again:

> Contrary to the image created by Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād in *Āb – e Ḥayāt,* the most influential of all histories of Urdu poetry[2], and his own frequent remarks in *Żikr – i Mīr*, Mīr was not always a dour recluse. In fact, on the evidence of many of his topical poems, he could be said to have been a man of appetites. He could feel strongly for his friends and lovers and openly find pleasure in their company, just as he could launch scurrilous attacks against those who would enrage him for any reason. The poems he wrote about his patron Āṣafuddaulah's hunting expeditions—they are thematically unique in Urdu poetry—display a keen appreciation of natural beauty. He also appears to have been quite fond of animals—at various times, he kept cats, dogs, and goats as pets, and wrote delightful poems about them.[3]

Thus *Żikr – e Mīr* seems to conceal much more than it reveals, and what it does reveal about its author is either

1. *Żikr-e Mīr*, p. 11.
2. For an English translation of Ibrahīm's account of Mīr's life, personality, and poetry, see *Āb-e Ḥayāt*, translated by Frances Pritchett in association with Shamsur Raḥman Farūqī, New Delhi , OUP, 2001, pp.185-203.
3. *Żikr-e Mīr*, pp. 4-5. Talking of Mīr's appreciation of nature, it might be worth while to mention here that Mīr never saw a body of water larger than a small though wide and tumultuous river in North Avadh, variously called the Sarju, or the Ghaghra. Yet he has written some most hauntingly resonant and richly textured poetry about the ocean or turbulent river waters.

inconsequential or not quite in conformity with the image of Mīr that has reached us through sources other than this so called autobiography. One might almost say that Mīr composed *Ẕikr – e Mīr* to dissemble, rather than reveal. It is true that no autobiographer reveals everything, but one can expect a responsible autobiographer to reveal something, and to ensure that whatever he does reveal is not false. A good example is the autobiography of Bertrand Russell. It merely hints at or suppresses almost all the unsavoury aspects of the author's life and character; it edits the truth to present the author in the best possible light[1]. Yet what it does present is substantial and true information about its author.

Mīr's autobiography reads in part like a hagiography of his father and grandfather's spiritual merits, and in part like notes of contemporary events hurriedly jotted down in a private journal. A lot of the material has no date, and a good bit of it doesn't observe any chronological sequence. Small wonder, then, that while Urdu critics have assiduously mined Mīr's poetry to glean details about his life and circumstances, they have rarely alluded to, or made use of *Ẕikr – e Mīr* to support their assertions about Mīr's personality and what they regard as the "true details" of his life. And even in poetry, only that much has been used which supports the critic's pet notions. Whatever doesn't, doesn't make it to the horizon of the critic's attention. For

1. Bertrand Russell, *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, 3 vols., London, George Allen & Unwin, 1967, 1968, 1969. He doesn't even hint at the circumstances of his divorce with Dora, his second wife, and the endless bickerings and bitterness, and his own obduracy over the divorce settlement. Or consider, for example, Russell's laconic remark about his divorce with his third wife Patricia ("Peter") Spence. Russell says, "When, in 1949, my wife decided that she wanted no more of me, our marriage came to an end"(Vol. 3, p. 16). For fuller information one has had to wait for Monk's *Bertrand Russell, The Ghost of Madness, 1914-1970,* (Free Press, 2000). But there is no denying the fact that while Russell gives little information about the divorces, whatever he does give is true.

instance, the popular myth is that Mīr was an intensely unhappy person, especially in love. So, a successful love affair of mature years as described in the apparently autobiographical *Mu'āmilāt – e 'Ishq* (Episodes of Love) has been passed over in silence, and the unhappy love story, *Khvāb o Ḳhiyāl-e Mīr's* (Mīr Dreams and Imaginings), also apparently autobiographical, has been savoured by our critics "as much as their lips and teeth could permit" (in Ghālib's phrase, though in another context). Russell and Islām cheerfully satisfy the demands of inclusiveness by flying in the face of the poem's evidence and asserting that the "woman in the case" in both *Mu'āmilāt – e 'Ishq* and *Khvāb o Ḳhiyāl-e Mīr* is the same, and that the *Ḳhvāb o Ḳhiyāl* is actually a sequel to the *Mu'āmilāt*[1].

Much of our Mīr criticism shows a somewhat amusing, somewhat annoying conjuncture of two myths. The first myth is that poetry, especially ghazal, is necessarily the expression of the poet's personal feelings and the events and circumstances narrated in it are, if not entirely factual, based certainly on facts. Myth number two is that since Mīr's poetry reveals him to be a sad, embittered man so his life and personality also were sad and embittered. Another way of stating this myth is to say that since Mīr's life was all sad and embittered, so his poetry is full of sadness and bitterness. Let me elaborate this a little.

Poetry is the expression of personality: versions of this view have been held sacred in our criticism ever since we realized that there is a business of criticism and some people are specially equipped to transact it. The late Professor Nūrul Ḥasan Hāshmi, a respected teacher of C. M. Na'ims, used to observe quite casually and frequently that "poetry was a *dāḳhilī* thing", *dāḳhilī* here being taken to mean anything from "heartfelt", "authentic in some autobiographical sense", to "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings", this last, of course, being a

1. Ralph Russell, and Ḳhurshīdul Islām, *Three Mughal Poets*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1968, pp. 96-97.

statement made by Wordsworth[1], and made popular among us by undergraduate-school teachers of literature.

One inevitable, and perhaps initially unanticipated result of this stress on the *dākhilī* nature of poetry was that much of the *masnavī*, almost all qasida, and all ghazal that wasn't based on Sufistic themes or "sacred love" was considered to be out of the pale of *sachchi shā'irī* (true poetry). The term "true poetry" could be interpreted as (1) texts that truly deserved to be called "poetry", and (2) texts that stated "true" things. When influential literary personages like Rashīd Aḥmad Ṣiddīqī declared that the ghazal was the *ābru* (honour and good name) of Urdu poetry, they clearly intended this to apply to the "authentic","undefiled" Ghazal, the ghazal that expressed the poet's "true and natural feelings" and was based on "reality").

The principle that poetry is, or should be, the expression of the poet's "personality" was a natural derivative of the assumption that poetry expressed the poet's "true feelings". This principle was also stated in the following form: Poetry is, or should be, based on "reality", or "truth", or "true facts". It was again only a small percentage of extant Urdu ghazal that could make the grade according to this formulation. The main demand was that in the ghazal one should narrate or depict only those events and states that one had experienced in person. Thus the ghazal was seen as something like autobiography.

'Andalīb Shādānī, in a series of famous and very influential articles published from October, 1937 to November, 1940, declared that all good ghazal was based on the poet's real life experience. Judging from this standpoint, he found the

1. William Wordsworth, "Preface to The Lyrical Ballads, Second Edition, 1800", in Edmund D. Jones, Ed., *English Critical Essays of the Nineteenth Century*, London, OUP, 1919, p. 26. Earlier in this Preface, Wordsworth said, "The poet thinks and feels in the spirit of human passions" (p.21). Doubtless, in his long essay Wordsworth had hedged his bets in several subtle ways, but the glitter of his grand propositions so dazzled our theory makers that they didn't stop to read the fine print.

productions of all contemporary ghazal writers to be "false", or poetry of "inferior grade". Their ghazals were not based, according to Shādāni, on what he believed should be the true events of love, events that had occurred in the poets' real life, and in fact many of the events described in modern ghazals, like the "death" of the "poet", couldn't have happened at all, because the poet obviously had to be alive to compose the poem.[1] According to Shādānī, the essential requirement for the ghazal was "intensity of feeling and true emotions." He declared further:

> Only those should be considered truly qualified to compose ghazals or narrate the story of love who, in addition to being possessed of poetic powers, give word to their own emotions, write about what has really transpired in their life, and write only what they have personally felt[2].

1. It is curious that practically none of our early twentieth-century critics could see their way to making the elementary distinction between the "poet/author", and the "protagonist" or "speaker" or "narrator" in a she'r. The initiator of the literalism which effected this conflation was the great Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī in his famous *Muqaddama-e She'r o Shā'irī* (1893). Such conflation is entirely repugnant to the principle of *maẓmūn āfirīnī*. Failure to distinguish the protagonist from the poet/author also resulted in the failure to differentiate between metaphorical (or "false") statements and non-metaphorical (or "true") statements. Shiblī No'mānī, despite his disapproval of what he thought was "execessive metaphoricity" in the Indian Persian poetry of the Mughal period, astutely noted that in this poetry metaphor was treated as true in the literal sense, and was then made the basis of more metaphor making. See Shiblī No'mānī, *She'rul 'Ajam*, Vol. III, Azamgarh, Ma'arif Press, 1956, p. 20, "They treated the literal [=idiomatic, accepted] meaning of the word as real, and made it the foundation of their *maẓmūn*". Also see *She'rul 'Ajam*, Vol. V, Azamgarh, Ma'ārif Press, 1957, p. 76, where he discusses the extension of the beloved-as-murderer metaphor in Persian poetry. Shādānī doesn't mention Shiblī at all, but quotes Ḥālī *in extenso*, or paraphrases him freely.
2. 'Andalīb Shādānī, *Daur-e Ḥāzir aur Urdu Ghazalgo'ī*, Delhi, Parvez Book Depot, 1945(?), pp. 14, 12-13.

Shādānī held the curious theory that while the "artificial" themes and tropes that abound in Urdu ghazal were purely imitative of Persian and therefore "unnatural", it was quite all right for the Persian ghazal to have them, because "in the early times, such ideas and themes came into Persian poetry because of the poets' circumstances, and their environment."[1] For example, the Iranians were excessively given to drinking, so it's all right for Persian poetry to be full of images and themes related to wine and song. But in Urdu, the addiction to drink has been a rare occurrence among our poets from the earliest to the modern times. It is therefore impermissible for Urdu poets to wax eloquent on themes of drinking and inebriation.[2]

Firāq Gorakhpūrī had urged that modern Urdu ghazal should not be blamed for being full of themes of sadness and pain, for the air of sadness, lament, and anguish of the heart that one encountered in English poems like *The Shropshire Lad, The Waste Land,* and Hardy's *Wessex Poems,* was much more intense than anything found in Urdu. Shādānī took the trouble to translate some passages from these works (he chooses "Death by Water" from *The Waste Land*) to "prove" that:

> Whatever has been said in these poems is entirely *natural* [English word used in the original]. Some of this poetry is a dirge on love's martyrs, some of it a lament on the untimely death of friends, some of it is an involuntary sigh on the death by drowning of someone whose heart's desire remained unfulfilled...[3]

In any other literary environment such statements would arouse derisive laughter, but in Urdu they became the guiding light for later critics like Nūrul Hasan Hāshmi and Abul Lais Ṣiddīqī who found the poetry of the so-called "Lucknow School" wanting in *dākhiliyat* devoid of the narration of real

1. Shādānī, p. 28.
2. Shādānī, pp. 39-40.
3. Shādānī, pp.61-65.

circumstances, much given to *khārijiyat* (that is, depiction of external things like the beloved's dress, her toilette, her speech and mode of conduct in a somewhat explicit, faintly erotic manner), and therefore inferior. This also established the principle that poetry that concerns itself with the beloved's physical attributes, even if only in a mildly erotic way, and perhaps based on the poet's own experience and observation, is inauthentic, "effeminate" and not of the first order.[1]

By the time our understanding of "good" and "bad" poetry (or at least ghazal poetry) became firmly established within the discourse of "truth" and "personality", we discovered yet another nugget of "truth" about the nature of poetry. Critics who were led to believe that "individuality" of voice and therefore "originality" of style was a positive value, found Buffon's maxim *Le style c'est l'homme meme* much congenial to the theory that poetry was the expression of the poet's personality. The English translation of this dictum, "Style is the man", was understood to mean that personality colours, or even creates a writer's style. This was conveniently added on to pseudopsychological critical speculations like: Byron would not have been Byron but for his game leg. John Middleton Murry's nebulous semi-metaphysical notions about style also came in handy and his name was often invoked in discussions of this subject. Though his observation that style was "organic—not the clothes a man wears, but the flesh and bone of his body"[2] was

1. Nūrul Hasan, *Dihlī kā Dabistān-e Shāirī*; Abul Lais Ṣiddīqī, *Lakhnaū kā Dabistān-e Shā'irī*; Hāshmi's book first came out in the 1950's, Ṣiddīqī's in the sixties. Both have remained popular. These works bring to their logical conclusion the ideas about "natural" and "authentic" poetry introduced by Hālī (1893), then 'Abdus Salām Nadvī (1926), and 'Andalīb Shādānī. For a good discussion of what these people meant by "Delhi-ness" and "Lucknow-ness" in the context of Urdu poetry, see Carla Petievich, *Assembly of Rivals: Delhi, Lucknow and the Urdu Ghazal,* New Delhi, Manohar, 1992, pp. 13-25.
2. Quoted in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics,* Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1993, p.1225.

not actually quoted very often, it informed our critics' assumptions about how the writer's personality revealed itself through his style.

Given the paucity of facts or even clues about the manner of life and feeling of early Urdu poets, there was no better way to determine the contours of a poet's personality than extrapolating inferential facts from his poems, or from whatever "sources" that presented themselves. The conclusions were then patched on to the poet's status as a literary person. For example, it could be argued that if Mīr was seen in *Żikr-e Mīr* as telling a lot of lies, we could infer that such a person could not be a good poet, for he would have lied about his affairs of the heart as well, and since poetry, in order to be good, must be based on truth, Mīr's love poetry cannot be regarded as good poetry. While we didn't go quite that far in regard to Mīr, Ghālib's detractors often found in the "questionable" aspects of his character a suitable stick to beat him with: a person given to drinking, gambling, sycophancy, jealousy, etc., could not be a good poet.

The Urdu Modernists avoided the pitfalls of "personality", but insisted that poetry was *iẓhār-e żāt* (expression of the inner being). This formulation was used as a counterpoint to what was later described as "committed" literature, but was actually the literature of the Party-line. The Modernists said that the poet should write whatever he really feels or thinks. He should not be fettered by outside pressures or persuasions. A true poet describes the truth as he sees it. He narrates truths, conveys to his reader his personal vision; he deals in truths that he discovers for himself. In other words, the poet does not purvey communal or communitarian truths; he gives to the world only what his inner being says is the truth.

There is no doubt that this principle works very well for the "new" poetry, that is, the poetry written and promoted by the Modernists and their immediate inspirations: Mīrājī, Rāshid,

Akhtarul Īmān. And it continues to work for the Urdu poetry being written even today. But as a tool for understanding the "classical" or pre-modern Urdu poetry, it is useless. It must go to the great credit of the Urdu Modernists that they did not try to read and judge classical Urdu poetry in terms of the "expression of the poet's inner being". They, however, did say that there was no unbridgeable difference between the old poetry and the new, for both were, after all, true poetry. Thus they paved the way for the notion that poetry in not necessarily, and not always, the expression of the "inner being."

The principle that remains on the whole even now dominant in our main line criticism is that poetry, and especially ghazal poetry, in some way mirrors the poet's life and personality. This implies two things: (1) We can derive some truths about the poet's life from his poems, and (2) We can legitimately derive some conclusions about his poetry from the facts of a poet's life and personality.

Different Urdu critics used these principles within limits set apparently unconsciously by themselves. Also, if some critics stressed the personality of a poet as a foundation on which to erect opinions about his poetry, others used the poetry in order to make generalizations about his personality. For instance, Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād depicted Nāsikh as a somewhat aristocratic and arrogant person of good culinary appetites who was also fond of "worldly" or "unpoetic" pastimes like physical exercise and wrestling. Against this portrait of Nāsikh, Āzād posited, perhaps unconsciously, the figure of Ātash as a person of no desires, unworldly to the point of being naïve, self-respecting though not self-regarding, devoid of hypocrisy, and austere like a Sufī. Our critics were not slow in concluding that given these personal traits, Nāsikh produced a poetry that was the epitome of Lucknow-ness: a poetry replete with *khārijiyat* and empty of *dākhiliyat*, while Atash's poetry was something else—steeped in the "Delhi" style, a model of *dākhiliyat,* and devoid of the preoccupation with the beloved's body and

raiment, so characteristic of Lucknow-ness.[1] That both were actually poets of the same type, and in fact sometimes the poetry of one is practically indistinguishable from the other's, was a fact that does not seem to have occurred to any of our critics.

The contradictions and errors bred by the approach: poetry reflects biography, or biography is mirrored in the poetry, can further be seen in our treatment of Naẓīr Akbarābādī and Amīr Mīnā'ī. Seeing in Naẓīr's poetry an apparent abundance of religious and social multivalence, a proclivity for free, or at least liberal thought, and a lack of stress on religious ritualism, we made no delay in concluding that Naẓīr displayed these properties of character in his everyday, "non-poetic" life too. Basing ourselves on the poems, we declared Naẓīr's to be an *'avāmī shā'ir* (poet of the people). We ignored Naẓīr's ghazals because the ghazals could support no such conclusion. As for Naẓīr's putative liberal and multivalent religiosity, no one seems to have noticed that Naẓīr, who lavishly praises Hindu and Sikh religious figures, doesn't have a word for the *shaykhain* (the first two Caliphs of Islām).

The exemplary personal piety of Amīr Mīnā'ī rubs uncomfortable shoulders with his numerous erotic she'rs, some of which he liked so much that he put them in a selection of his poetry which he himself compiled.[2] If poetry is expression of

1. For character sketches of Nāsikh and Ātash by Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād, see Frances Pritchett and the present writer's translation of *Āb-e Ḥayāt*,, pp. 279-84 (Nāsikh), and 311-12, 17 (Ātash).
2. Here are two of my favourites, from the first 15 pages:
I'll now bring back your picture
Before you, and
I'll clasp it to my breast,
I'll kiss it.
Arm under the head, last night
She went to sleep with me.
It was so comfy, my arm
Went to sleep.
See *Gauhar-e Intikhāb*, by Amīr Mīnā'ī, Rāmpūr, R'isul Maṭābi', 1873, pp. 10, 15.

personality, should it not be inferred that Amīr Mīnā'ī was a man of worldly delights, and a free-living lover of erotic pleasures? Major details of the life of Amīr Mīnā'ī are well known, and speculation of the kind that was freely yielded to in Naẓīr's case was not possible here. So our critics maintained a discreet silence. With all the self-assurance of one who need not see very far, Rashīd Aḥmad Ṣiddīqī pronounced it impossible for a "bad" person to be a "good" poet.

For obvious reasons, Mīr has had more than his share of theory-flaunting, poetry-twisting critics. For example, 'Andalīb Shādānī was quite persuaded that since Mīr has a number of she'rs with homoerotic, or homosexual, or plain boy-love themes, he was an *amrad parast*, a term that means all the above modes of homosexual eroticism.[1] Contrariwise, some of Mīr's famous she'rs which sounded conventionally "sad", or had themes of unsuccessful or unrequited love led the critic to decide that Mīr did nothing in his life but weep and sigh sad sighs. His clearly humorous or light-hearted she'rs were dismissed as "lowly", or "vulgar", or somehow darkened by the murk and gloom of personal loss and tragedy. In the Preface to his extremely popular *Intikhāb-e Kalām-e Mīr, Ma' Muqaddama, jis men Mīr ke Ḥālāt aur Kalām ki Khuṣūṣiyat par Bahs kī ga'i ha'i* (Mīr's Selected Poetry, with a Preface, which Discusses Mīr's Circumstances and the Characteristics of his Poetry), Maulvī 'Abdul Ḥaq had this to say about Mīr and his humorous she'rs:

> Light-heartedness and gaiety were not allotted in Mīr Ṣāḥib's portion; he was the very embodiment of

1. "Mīr Ṣahib Kā Ek Khās Rang", by Andalīb Shādānī, in his *Taḥqiq kī Raushnī* Meñ, Lahore, Ghulam '*Alī* and Sons, 1963; originally pub-lished in the *Sāqī*, Delhi, October, 1940. Shādānī's and Russell's conclusions on Mīr's love poetry have been well and searchingly examined by Frances W. Pritchett in her "Convention in Classical Urdu Ghazal: The Case of Mīr", in *The Journal of South Asian & Middle Eastern Studies*, 3,1, (Fall 1979), pp. 60-77.

despair and [emotional] deprivation. This is the state of his poetry too. Or rather, his poetry is a true image of his disposition and life-story, and probably this is the reason why it is not devoid of genuineness and reality....

Man's temperament has two aspects: pleasure and delight, or then affliction and grief. Mīr Ṣāḥib's she'rs, whether based on love or on wisdom, all reflect grief and affliction, failure and despair. This was the cast of his temperament. He might have been in any circumstance, may have been overpowered by any state, whenever he uttered something from the heart, it would be saturated in despair and failure. The taste of jesting, or fun, is just not there in his poetry.... His Works do have some humorous she'rs, but they are either of such vulgarity that they smack of bad taste, or then they have that very unfulfilled longing and despair which stuck with him through his living days.[1]

Majnūñ Gorakhpūrī detected some sort of "revolutionary", or at least a moral and didactic agenda in Mīr's poetry, but still he designated Mīr "the poet of sorrow", and said something curious to support his contention:

Mīr is the poet of sorrow. Mīr's age was the age of sorrow. And Mīr, had he not been the poet of sorrow, would have committed treason against his age, and would not have been such a great poet for us either. Posterity has regarded only those poets as great who were the true children of their age, and fully representative of it.[2]

All this would be risible, if the matter was not deadly serious, for criticism such as this has governed our appreciation of Mīr for the last seventy or seventy-five years. Going back to

1. Maulvī 'Abdul Ḥaq, *Intikhāb* ..., Delhi, Anjuman Taraqqi-e Urdu (Hind), 1945 [1929], pp. 16, 31.
2. Majnūñ Gorakhpūrī, "Mīr aur Ham", in M. Habīb Khān, Ed., *Afkār-e Mīr*, Delhi, Abdul Ḥaq Academy, 1996 [1967], p. 196. Majnūñ Gorakhpūrī's essay was first published in the 1940's.

Maulvī 'Abdul Ḥaq's judgement on Mīr's humour, let me recall here that Maulvī Abdul Ḥaq has quoted just one she'r of Mīr's[1] to "prove" that even the comic verses of Mīr are charged with sorrow and despair:

Mīr too was mad, but while passing by,
In a jesting way
He would rattle the chains
Of us, the shackled ones.[2]

So what does Majnūñ Gorakhpūrī do to account for Mīr's humorous she'rs? He says:

Let it be remembered that Mīr's humour was not of the shallow and cheap kind. His humour had very deep layers of gravity and meaningfulness.

This remark is intended by Majnūñ Gorakhpūrī as a comment on the very she'r about the "jesting Mīr" that Maulavī Abdul Ḥaq quoted to "prove" that Mīr's humour was overlaid with tones of sorrow and despair.

It is interesting and symptomatic that these two senior critics who are often praised for establishing the place of Mīr in the modern canon, are entirely unable to come to grips with Mīr's humour and his pleasantries. Both quote the same she'r to prove two different points. According to 'Abdul Ḥaq, Mīr's lighter verses are both vulgar and plebeian, or are actually darkened by the shadow of his sorrows and frustrations. Majnūñ Gorakhpūrī, on the contrary, judges Mīr's humour as having "serious" purposes underneath.

It must be concluded, however reluctantly, that neither of these critics seems actually to have read Mīr carefully. Or then they have deliberately distorted the personal and literary picture

1. Maulvī 'Abdul Ḥaq, *Intikhāb*, p. 32.
2. Mīr, *Kulliyāt, Vol. I,* Ed., Zill-e 'Abbās 'Abbāsī, Delhi, 'Ilmī Majlis, 1968, p. 616. The she'r occurs in the Fourth Dīvān, composed before 1794, though after 1785.

of Mīr to suit their own favourite theories. Both are quite convinced that Mīr is a poet of sorrow and pain. Majnūñ Gorakhpūrī attributes this to Mīr's age. For it was his age, and his personal circumstances, which had turned Mīr's life, and therefore his poetry, into a "perpetual hanging on the gallows". His poetry, especially his ghazals prove that "Mīr's voice expresses the whole pain and anguish of his times in an extremely sophisticated and dignified manner."[1] Against this is Maulvī 'Abdul Ḥaq's formulation to the effect that Mīr's temperament itself was extremely susceptible to the experience of pain. According to Majnūñ Gorakhpūrī, Mīr's poetry reflects his life; according to 'Abdul Ḥaq Mīr's life reflects his poetry. That is, 'Abdul Ḥaq diagnoses Mīr's temperament to have made his life unhappy, and since his life was unhappy, his poetry was unhappy too. Majnūñ Gorakhpūrī goes the other way round: Mīr's age was an age of sorrow, so Mīr's life was sorrowful, hence his poetry was sorrowful too. Thus according to 'Abdul Ḥaq , Mir was essentially an uncouth type who lapsed into indecorous drollery the moment he slipped out of his tenebrous moods. According to Majnūñ Gorakhpūrī, Mīr's was a life of unrelieved gloom and even his humour veiled serious meanings and grave purposes.

The poetry of humour or banter doesn't translate well, if at all. Yet it seems worthwhile here to invoke Mīr's own evidence and present some of his lighthearted she'rs to show what actually he was doing when he wrote in that mode:

I now depart the idol-house, oh Mīr,
We'll meet here again, God willing.

Friendship with the boys now darkens my destiny;
My father used to warn me
Often, against this very day.

1. Majnūñ Gorakhpūrī, , "*Mīr aur Ham*", in M. Ḥabīb Khan , p. 191.

If I was so minded
I'd fill my arms with you
and lift you up in a trice:
Weighty you may be, but you are
just a flower before me.

Pious Sheikh, your asinine nature
Is known the world over;
You do your hops and skips everywhere,
in refined assemblies, or arid places.

I visited Mecca, Medina, Karbala,
I sauntered around and came back
Just the way I was.

On the Day Of Judgement
By way of punishment for having written poems,
They flung against my head
My own book of poems.[1]

It should be obvious even from these random selections that in range, mood, and verbal subtlety, these she'rs present a degree of variety and sophistication which the reductionist mindset of our critics was unequipped to handle. The three senior critics whose work I have briefly discussed above, I hope without oversimplifying their positions, considered their assumptions about Mīr's poetry more reliable than the poetry itself. The assumption that they shared was that poetry is the expression of personality. The only difference was that for Shādānī and 'Abdul Ḥaq, personality meant disposition and

1. Mīr, *Kulliyāt,* Ed., 'Abbāsī, pp. 138 (Dīvān I), 145 (Dīvān I), 237 (Dīvān I), 584 (Dīvān III), 620 (Dīvān IV), 623 (Dīvān IV).

temperament, and for Majnūn Gorakhpūrī it was the sum total of the poet's personal history and the social and political circumstances prevalent in his time.

I need not emphasize here that questions like "personal expression", or "poetry as self-revelation" never arose in classical Urdu poetics, or in Sanskrit poetics, nor yet in the Perso-Arab poetics. Nor were issues like "authenticity", "true expression of real emotions" ever raised in any of the literary traditions that Urdu is heir to. None of the contemporary or near contemporary accounts of Mīr, for instance, say a word about his so-called hardships, disappointments and sorrows, or that his poetry is an expression of his bitter personality and the sadness of his life trickles through everywhere in his poetry. The censures of critics like Shādānī and the extenuations offered by critics like Firāq Gorakhpūrī were both conceived in terms of what they thought was the literary idiom of the western world.

The important thing from the point of view of the sociology and politics of Urdu literary criticism is not the truth or validity of the literary theory offered by Shādānī and others. The important thing is that in its essentials, the theory was believed by our critics to be Western in origin, and also (or perhaps therefore) universally true. The fact of the matter, as every student of Western literary thought knows, is that poetry as expression of personality is not a universally recognized notion in the West. On the contrary, up until the advent of Romanticism in England, it had long been recognized in the West that literary texts, especially poems breed other literary texts, and that no literary artifact can be understood outside the rules and conventions of the genre in which it was written. When a new genre came into existence, every effort was made to present it as not essentially different from the pre-existing literary artifacts of a similar nature.

A good example of this can be seen in the romances (we would now call them "novels") of Madeleine de Scudery, and the prefaces that her brother Georges wrote for them as their

putative author. In the Preface to *Ibrahīm* (1641) Georges wrote:

> The works of the spirit are too significant to be left to chance; and I would be rather accused of having failed consciously, than of having succeeded without knowing what I was about....Every art has certain rules which by infallible means lead to the ends proposed;...I have concluded that in drawing up a plan for this work I must consult the Greeks..., and to try by imitating them to arrive at the same end....It would be as stupid as arrogant not to wish to imitate them.[1]

This was not just a casual appeal to the Ancients to justify what would have been at that time a novelty. We see Fielding adopting the same strategy in his Preface to *Joseph Andrews* (1742). He wishes his text to be read as a "comic romance", and finds justification for it in the practice of the Ancients. Having declared that "poetry may be tragic or comic", and that it "may be likewise either in verse or prose", he designates his "comic romance" as a "comic epic poem in prose":

> Now, a comic romance is a comic epic poem in prose; differing from comedy, as the serious epic from tragedy: its action being more extended and comprehensive; containing a much larger circle of incidents, and introducing a great variety of characters.[2]

Similarly, in regard to making extensive and even blatant use of the texts of one's literary forebears, it is interesting to see Fielding say in *Tom Jones* (1749):

> The ancients may be considered as a rich common, where every poor person who hath the smallest tenement in Parnassus hath a free right to fatten his muse. Or, to

1. Georges de Scudery, "The Preface to Ibrahīm (selections)", in Allan H. Gilbert, Ed., *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden*, Detroit, Wayne University Press, 1964, [1940], pp. 580-81.
2. Henry Fielding, *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews & His Friend Mr Abraham Adams*, Penguin Edition, 1954, pp. 17-18.

place it in clearer light, we moderns are to the ancients what the poor are to the rich....

In like manner are the ancients, such as Homer, Virgil, Horace, Cicero, and the rest, to be esteemed among us writers as so many wealthy squires, from whom we, the poor of Parnassus, claim an immemorial custom of taking whatever we can come at.[1]

Fielding's tone is facetious, but in essence his point is well supported by past theory and practice. I cite Madelaine de Scud'ery and Fielding to illustrate the point that in the literature of pre-industrial Europe, even new genres were sought to be understood in terms of old genres, and that literary artifacts were not seen there as creations in the void. A very vague and generalized maxim to the effect that poetry expresses the personality of the poet may be extracted from the writings of some of the English Romantics. But it would be a brave critic indeed who would believe that a "lyric" poem like Shelley's *A Lament* (1821) expressed not only his real feelings, but also that those feelings were permanent, and that the second (concluding) stanza was true and accurate for Shelley's later life too:

Out of the day and night
A joy has taken flight;
Fresh spring, and summer, and winter hoar
Move my faint heart with grief, but with delight
No more—Oh, never more.[2]

Had 'Abdul Ḥaq and other Urdu critics had their way, Shelley, on the strength of *A Lament* would have been held out

1. Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling*, New York, Washington Square Press, Inc., 1966, p. 501.
2. Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Selected Poems*, Edited with an Introduction and Notes by Edmund Blunden, London and Glasgow, Collins, 1965. There are also other, somewhat different versions of the poem. I give the one that is considered most acceptable.

as a poet of unmitigated sadness and frustration at least after 1821. Critics (see Firāq Gorakhpūrī and Andalib Shādānī above) who could believe *Death by Water* to be a personal poem of loss could believe anything.

A genuine question arises here: After all, the poet does put something in his poem, even if it is mere words. So does his utterance, or his words, give us no clue about his personality?

In order to attempt any coherent answer to this question, we'll first have to decide what we mean by "personality". Caroline Spurgeon, in her *Shakespeare's Imagery and What it Tells us* (1935) had, by offering not unfanciful interpretations of Shakespeare's image-clusters, even tried to determine Shakespeare's likes and dislikes, his habits, his personal experiences, and similar (minor?) details of his personality. But if "personality" is the sum total of a person's genetic inheritance, education, domestic and cultural environment, then it is a moot point if poetry does express it all, and if it does, whether it can be descried by the reader in distant times and climes.

Then there is another question: Even if we do succeed in determining some or even all feature's of the pre-modern Urdu poet's personality, what insights would that information give us that could be relevant to an understanding or appreciation of his poetry? Or let's go the other way round: Let's study the she'rs in which the poet seems to be speaking of himself. What information would we get about his character and personality from such she'rs, and how reliable would that information be, never mind its usefulness as a tool for critical assessment of the poetry?

Even a less than close reading of a pre-modern Urdu ghazal poet would make one thing instantly clear: he is not a reliable informant about himself, if at all the word "informant" would apply here. Muṣhafī (1750-1824) and Mīr are notable among our poets for their sensuous and erotic imagery. Both also say things that can be taken as information about their sexual interests.

Here are some she'rs from Muṣḥafī :

Master Muṣḥafī, you didn't miss out on a single lad;
Obviously you are quite a maestro
At your calling.

Well, Muṣḥafī, I am not
much of a lover of boys—
But I do have intercourse, more or less
With womenkind.

Even if she ever came to hand
I shouldn't be guilty of the wicked deed;
Please oh pure and perfect Lord,
Grant me this prayer.

I grant that beardless boys
Do give pleasure in a way, yet one finds
The pleasure of love in females alone.[1]

It is obvious that these she'rs are useless as material for a personality profile of Muṣḥafī. In fact, it is easy to see, were one familiar with the principle of *mażmūn āfirīnī* (theme creation, that is, finding new themes for poems) that more than anything else, these she'rs are exercises in theme creation. Mīr sometimes affords even more telling examples. Here is one:

How could a plain human being
Keep company with such a one?
Impudent, thieving, restless, shallow, rakish, profligate.[2]

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1. Shaikh Ghulām Hamadānī Muṣḥafī, *Kulliyāt,* Ed., Nūrul Ḥasan Naqvī, Lahore, Majlis Taraqqi-e Adab, Dīvān I, 1968, pp. 515, 225, Dīvān III, 1971, p. 65, Dīvān IV, 1974, p. 56.
2. Mīr, *Kulliyāt,* Ed., 'Abbāsī, p. 726.

This she'r occurs in Mīr's fifth dīvān, completed perhaps not earlier than 1798 and not later than 1803. Even if the earlier date is taken as more probable, Mīr was seventy-five years of age at that time. And if this she'r is based on Mīr's real circumstances, we should be bound to conclude that Mīr was possessed of a personality that inclined toward what he himself describes as the very dregs of society. And if poetry expresses personality, one may wonder if a poet with such a personality could really have composed those noble she'rs that are the glory of our literature.

Here again, the principle of *mażmūn āfirīnī* provides a more reliable key for opening up such texts to us. First and foremost, the pre-modern Urdu poet was engaged upon the business of finding new themes, or giving new slants to old themes. Mīr said:

Your soul free from torment for the mażmūn,,
your heart devoid of pain,
What avails?
Even if your visage is paper pale,
What avails?[1]

Here the poet's office has been equated with that of the lover or the Sufi, whose heart is tender and full of pain: one should have a heart full of pain, or a soul afflicted with torment, searching for new *mażmūn,* or torment for *mażmūn* not coming at all, or those that came but disappeared before they could be captured in words. One's true station in life is to have a concern in the heart for *mażmūn,* or pain in the heart caused by love. One must have either one or the other, or one's life is profitless. Creation of themes, and not self-revelation, is the proper business of the poet.

The following she'r occurs in Mīr's first dīvān, completed before 1752:

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1. Mīr, *Kulliyāt,* Ed., 'Abbāsī, p. 649, Dīvān IV.

I used Rekhta as a veil
over my true utterance;
And now it has been fated
to stay as my art.[1]

This could be just another *mazmūn.* But experience has taught me to regard poetics related utterances of pre-modern Urdu poets as genuine statements in literary theory. This is particularly true of the poets who wrote roughly during the century and a half from around 1700 to around 1850 when Urdu's "new" poetics was being developed and refined. I have given an inadequate translation; the keywords here are *sukhan, parda,* and *fan*, translated by me as "utterance", "veil", and "art" respectively. The following other meanings of these words are pertinent here:

sukhan : conversation, speech, poetry, words, discourse

parda : screen, curtain, pretext, covering

fan : artifice, craft, accomplishment, cunning

The word Rekhta too has more sides than one: the language called Rekhta, the poetry written in that language, the ghazals written in the language called Rekhta, or Hindi. The basic theory is clear: the accomplishment of poetry conceals, throws a veil over the real utterance, or speech, or poetry, which remains unheard and unrevealed. Poetry veils the true utterance, and dissembling is the true art of the poet. Should this then be taken to mean a confession that one can never express one's true thoughts? Again, my experience of pre-modern Urdu poetry tells me not to do so. The problem of the failure of language is a modern phenomenon; the pre-modern poet was supremely confident in his power to find words for any theme. Mīr possessed all *sukhan,* all words, what he didn't have (according to this she'r) was the desire, or the will, to unveil his words.

1. Mīr, *Kulliyāt,* Ed., 'Abbāsī, p. 132.

So, what words could those words be? They could be anything, a declaration of love before the beloved, a mystical, gnomic vision, a proclamation of war upon a world that valued form over meaning, the ritual over the spiritual, illusion over reality. The fact that he doesn't tell us what his real utterance was, or could be, is entirely appropriate: the utterance remains veiled.

So are we fated forever to remain ignorant of the poet's true purpose? My answer is, yes. And it is not such an intolerable state of affairs so long as we can manage to divine all, or at least some, of the poem's true purposes. Trying to discern the poet's true purpose will almost certainly lead us to nothing more than a handful of trivialities. In Mīr's third dīvān there is a stunning she'r:

The world is the chessboard, Heaven the Player,
You and I the pieces. Like a true tyro
Heaven's only interest is in taking the pieces.[1]

The cold passion of the tone, the laconic satire, and the telling observation about novice chess players create a dramatic space where distant reverberations sound from a rubā'ī attributed to Khayyam, and from *King Lear,* (though the latter should owe entirely to reader/listener for their existence) and where a somewhat conventional theme is transformed into a cosmic dance of death. Added to this is the underlying irony: the sky is conventionally described in Urdu poetry as incredibly old. (That's why it appears "bent", or it is "bent" because it is so old). So there is a new dimension of irony in describing a traditionally ancient being as an abecedarian chess player. What made the she'r even more memorable to me was another image drawn from the realm of chess, in the following she'r from the fourth dīvān of Mīr:

How I wish you had
At least a chess board and pieces around—

1. Mīr, *Kulliyāt,* Ed., 'Abbāsī, p. 604.

Mīr is an artful chess-playing companion,
Not a burden upon the heart.[1]

Putting aside the felicity with which Mīr made use of two double-rhyming phrases *(bar hai khāṭir, yār-e shāṭir)* in a single line, the easy flow of the she'r, the tongue in cheek humility of the tone, and the polysemy of *yār-e shāṭir*,[2] I was immediately struck by the chess imagery, and coupled with the previously quoted she'r from dīvāns III, it led me to conclude that Mīr must have been interested in chess. This happy inference was shattered when some time later I came across the following sentence in chapter II of Sa'dī's *Gulistān* (1258):

> In the people's service I should be an artful chess playing companion (*yār-e shāṭir*), not a burden upon the heart (*bar-e khāṭir*).[3]

I ruefully concluded that the only knowledge about the personality of Mīr that I could extract from the two she'rs was that Mīr may or may not have been interested in chess, but he knew *Gulistān* better than I did.

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1. Mīr, *Kulliyāt*, Ed., 'Abbāsī, p. 680.
2. This phrase has at least the following meanings: a friend or companion who is (1) an expert chess-player, (2) extremely clever and artful, (3) swift in speed (as a messenger or runner, or one who walks with the master's mount), (4) deceitful, (5) roguish and unreliable, (6) wanton. The Arabic root *shīn, toe, ra*, also means "to go away from, to withdraw from."
3. Sa'dī Shīrāzī, *Gulistān*, Kanpur, Maṭba'-e Majīdī, 1909, p. 68.

Conventions of Love, Love of Conventions: Urdu Love Poetry in the Eighteenth Century

Next to our own, the eighteenth century is the most exciting, vibrant, and productive century in more than five hundred years of literary production in Urdu. Perhaps the most remarkable thing that happened in Urdu literature during that time—traditionally represented by British historiography-influenced writers as a period of decay and disintegration—was the consolidation and discovery of a poetics, of a whole new way of charting out a course for literary creativity in a language that, in Delhi at least, was still a little tottery on its legs in the field of literary production. Delhi, even in the middle of the eighteenth century, boasted of Persian as the *zabān-e urdū-e mua'allā-e shāhjahānābād* (the language of the exalted city of Shajahanabad). It described Sanskrit as *Hindī-e kitābī*[1] (learned Hindi=Indian), and the city's common, spoken language, was known as plain Hindi or Hindvi. Very little literature in Hindi/Hindvi was produced in Delhi during the period 1600-1700—and hardly any during the four preceding centuries—and the literary form of Hindi in which this literature was produced was called Rekhta (mixed, poured, cement-and-mortar, etc). The term Urdu as language name came into use much later. Rekhta /Hindi remained the

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1. Sirājuddin 'Alī Khān-e Ārzū, *Navādirul Alfāẓ*, Ed., Dr. Syed Abdullah, Karachi, Anjuman Taraqqi-e Urdu, 1992 [1951], [1746-52] p. 6 and passim.