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The Consequences of Imitating the West¹

SOME seven or eight years ago professors of Urdu indulged in a strange kind of debate. Alḥāf Ḥusain Ḥālī (1837–1914), acting according to the philosophy, “if you can’t beat ’em join ’em,” gave the following advice to his contemporary poets:

*Ḥālī ab ā’ō pairavī-e maghribī karēñ
bas iqtidā-e Muṣḥafī-o-Mīr hō čukī*

Ḥālī, come now, let us follow the West;
Enough of the leadership of Muṣḥafī and
Mīr.

A gentleman got the idea into his head that the word *maghribī* in this *she’r* did not refer to the *maghrib*, or the West, but to a little-known Persian poet named Maghribī. Now there were many who regarded Ḥālī as the leader of the new literary movement and they considered the above interpretation an attack on the movement. This was enough to open a floodgate of accusatory and counter-accusatory remarks. A war by proxy began. Critics presented a host of social, political, and economic arguments to prove that indeed Ḥālī was insisting upon following the West. This discussion was totally absurd because dialogue was redundant. There should have been no doubt about Ḥālī’s intent in this *she’r*. But I do wish that Ḥālī had indeed suggested that we follow that unknown Persian poet

¹Written in 1954, “Pairavī-e Maghribī kā Anjām” was included in ‘Askari’s collection of critical essays *Sitāra yā Bādbān* (Karachi: Maktaba-e Sāt Raṅg, 1963), 121–31. This translation is based on a reprint of the article in ‘Askari’s collected works, *Majmū’a Muḥammad Ḥasan ‘Askari* (Lahore: Sang-e Meel, 2000), 267–75. The footnotes in this essay have been added by the translator.

named Maghribī, rather than the West, for he had little notion of the fact that imitating the West was like bringing back news of such legendary locations as Kōh-e Nidā or Ḥammam-e Bād Gard.² The innocence with which he said, “Ḥālī, come now,” suggested that imitating the West was as easy as putting a scarf around your neck, picking up a walking stick, and setting off for a stroll. Well, perhaps Ḥālī was not so gullible as our critics, who think that it *is* the easiest thing to do. So we keep rejoicing and thinking that our short story has already borrowed whatever it could from the West. Similar claims were made for the Urdu *naẓm* (free verse) until some eight or ten years ago. If we respond to these claims by saying that our literature is way behind Western literature, then this does not address the issue. If the question were merely of good or bad literature, or less than best, perhaps it would not be a cause of concern. Ismā‘īl Mēraṭḥī (1843–1917)³ advised poets in regard to natural poetry: Keep trying my friends! Would that we had followed his counsel and slept the sleep of the just.

But the real question is whether, in the past one hundred years, we were able to follow in the footsteps of the West or not? And what does following the West actually mean? What distinguishes one literary tradition from another is the difference of sensibility. But Ḥālī’s contemporaries thought that imitating the West just meant writing poems about birds and flowers, because Mr. Wordsworth did just that. Or that poetry should be a tool for moral improvement, because Macaulay said so, and so forth. After 1930, our writers interpreted following the West to mean borrowing from Greek mythology and proving themselves to be more liberal and aesthetically conscious than others. In 1936, modern Western literature was determined to denote economic problems in literature. Thus one could enjoy two shows for the price of one because a literature that discussed economic issues became, ipso facto, indigenous. For economic problems were indigenous problems. During this time imitating Western literature also came to mean narrating the problems and complexes of young people. The literary interpreters from this group learned this, according to them the most important lesson, that literature should

²Famous imaginary locations in *Qiṣṣa-e Ḥātim Ṭā‘ī* and *Čahār Darvēsh*, romance tales that have been written and retold numerous times in Urdu and Persian.

³Well-known author of textbooks and poems for children and also a few experimentalist poems in the English mode.

have no purpose other than its own self. Thus, in accordance with these two principles, poetry should be written in the following manner: First it should touch upon the dilemmas of the youth—

Entering my mind
the fragrance of juicy crimes.

Because we are also enamored with art for the sake of art and want to experiment with form in poetry, we reverse the order of the lines further on in the poem—

The fragrance of juicy crimes
entering my mind.⁴

This may not be Malarmé but at least it could be considered Baudelaire.

This, in short, has been how we have imitated the West from Ḥālī's time to the present day and the result of this has been that we have lost all measure of literary standard. Our critics keep on saying that Urdu literature has come abreast of Western literature. People belonging to the old school, however, say that we have lost whatever we had to begin with. The poor reader is unable to understand what is happening around him. Too many cooks are spoiling the broth. Imitating the West could mean one and only one thing, that we imbibe Western sensibility. But we never stopped, even for a moment, to think about what our own sensibility was and whether any change had taken place in it at all.

If Sprengler's⁵ view is to be accepted, then, according to him, one culture cannot borrow the sensibility of another culture. Indeed, in his opinion every culture has its own distinctive worldview, and that worldview determines that particular culture's sensibility. This is not something that can be transferred to another culture. Every culture produces exclusive modes of expression that are tied to it and die with it. These cannot be used by another culture. In fact, other cultures cannot even understand it properly. For example, if there is anything in common between Greek

⁴These are quotes from the Urdu poet Mirāji's (1912–49) poem titled “Rasīlē Jarā'im ki Khushbū” (“Fragrance of Juicy Crimes”). Obviously 'Askari's is taking a jibe at Mirāji.

⁵Oswald Sprengler was a famous German social historian whose book *The Decline of the West* became an important contribution to the theory of the growth and decay of civilizations.

drama and Western drama it is only the name of the genre. A culture cannot influence or be influenced by another culture. Neither can there be a basic change within a particular culture's sensibility. Every culture goes through its own stages of development then declines and dies, leaving nothing behind.

Sprengler's views may be right or wrong, but there are some people who don't agree with him. Even people like Thomas Mann have regarded Sprengler's views as anti-humanism. If Sprengler's theory is correct, then despite Maulānā Ḥālī's best intentions we could never have imitated the West. But even after rejecting this point of view, the historical fact remains that changes in the sensibility of any culture do not happen every day. Some Western writers of the twentieth century talk about changes in sensibility flippantly, as if one changes old clothes for new. For example, D. H. Lawrence has gone to the extent of saying that every major writer is the forerunner of some major change in consciousness. But amendment cannot be described as a major change. If there were revolutions in sensibility every other day, then society would become a mad house. Major changes, whether produced from within or the result of external influences, become apparent only after long periods of time. According to Auden, in the last fifteen hundred years of Europe's history, only three major revolutions in sensibility have occurred: the first, in the twelfth century when the tradition of courtly love was established; the second, in the sixteenth century when the power of allegory came to an end, and the third, in the nineteenth century when the romantic movement emerged, and that's it.

Because I'm not an expert in Arabic and Persian, I do not know for sure if there has been any revolutionary change of sensibility in our collective culture. I can only dare to talk within the limits of Urdu literature. Some people assert that Urdu literature died the day modern literature was born. Modern writers claim to have brought about such a revolution in Urdu literature that an entirely new tradition starts from here. While it cannot be denied that there seem to be many obvious (read: superficial) changes, nevertheless, can a few new themes and a couple of new modes of writing be described as a revolution in sensibility? I believe that despite all the efforts, conscious and unconscious, to imitate the West in the last one hundred years, our consciousness could not become the same as the consciousness of the West. In itself, this is nothing to regret. What causes anxiety is the fact that our sensibility's innate capacity to develop and evolve came to an end, or could not express itself in practice. On the other hand, we could not produce a literature similar to that of the West

because such a literature can only be produced by a certain kind of consciousness. The creativity of our writers is paralyzed because all paths are blocked for them. If our literary production had stayed on the same path it was going on a hundred years ago, stagnation would have happened only after all possibilities for its consciousness and expression had dried up. The present-day literary stagnation is the result of Ḥālī's call to imitate the West. Our misfortune has been that, from Ḥālī's times to the present, we made the decision to imitate the West. But our theorists were people who had not read Western literature, or perhaps they had only read the indexes of the histories of Western literature.

Anyway, let us now come to the point, which is that our consciousness could not become Western in nature. If you need to investigate this further, then, by way of example, let's look at how our literature has approached things and objects and what the approach of Western literature has been. Our ghazal poetry is not engaged with external things at all. Its subject is only the human experience, and this kind of poetry does not look at anything else. You may say, what else could be the subject of literature? Of course this is true, in a certain sense, because how is it possible for humans to know the experiences of creatures other than themselves? But there are some foolish people in Europe who think that humans are not the only interesting subjects in this world; after all, other things too have a right to an independent existence. An extremist example of this view is the poetry of the Frenchman Francis Ponge (1899–1988).⁶ In any case, in our poetry, nothing exists but man. Some people complain that our poets speak of flowers which they have never seen. But these objections are absurd. Our ghazal poets are not really talking about flowers at all: tulips, narcissus, poppies, roses are not real flowers. These are not even similes. They are actually substitutes for human concepts. There are very few examples where the poet has actually spoken of a flower in the sense of a flower. For example, Mīr Taqī Mīr (1730–1810) has once or twice mentioned *dhāk* (the silk cotton tree flower), or Shaikh Imām Bakhsh Nasikh (1772–1838) has said:

⁶French poet who crafted intricate prose poems about everyday objects. He sought to create a visual equivalence between language and subject matter by emphasizing word associations and by manipulating the sound rhythm and typography of the words to mimic the essential characteristics of the object described.

Oh madness I love the shade of the acacia
 tree
 what a wonderful bloom these deep yellow
 flowers have

Or, in the following *she'r* of Ḥaidar 'Alī Ātish (1777–1847) a true scene of nature has been depicted to a certain extent:

Night of union and for fear of you I didn't
 look
 the morning star kept winking at me.

Apart from these exceptions our ghazal does not really concern itself with anything in the world other than man. And if it does engage with other subjects, then only as substitutes for human emotions and thoughts. Or we can put it this way: The ghazal does not engage with but just uses objects. *Maṣnavīs* and *qiṣṣas* do engage with objects, but these genres too do not grant an independent and permanent existence to other objects. These are counted only as ancillaries to human existence. I am not saying that our literary consciousness does not have the capacity to enjoy or love external objects. One will find many instances of this enjoyment in *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā* or *Fasāna-e Āzād*. But these instances depict love of things associated with humans, not a love for those things in and of themselves. It is therefore a love of “one’s own things.” Then again, in these texts there are hardly any adjectives appended to the names of objects, or if there are, they are just one or two. For the most part there are no attributes associated with a particular thing, or if there are, at most there would be one attribute, and it would signify some external quality of that thing or depict a human reaction of the most primary level, for example, “red flower” or “nice flower.” The need for appending an adjective to a noun does not arise because in our literary tradition human reaction to objects is always predetermined and constant. For example, look at the description of a fair or a garden or a feast in *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā*. The writer is simply content to make a list of things and feels that enough has been done for the interest of the reader, because he knows that the mere name of a thing will evoke a very specific reaction in the mind of a reader. So he does not feel the need to propel the emotions of the reader onward with a list of adjectives.

It’s possible that this kind of prose may not appeal to many readers who are fascinated with Western literature because this prose does not

depict impressions that are personal to an individual. But this is an entirely different matter. Our consciousness can only produce our kind of prose. After imitating the West for a full hundred years, we still could not produce prose like theirs. This in itself is a small proof of what I'm trying to say. If we cannot find feelings of surprise, wonder, respect, fear, or mystery about things, it's because we do not acknowledge the existence of things other than human, and there is no change in our given reaction to objects. Rather, when we experience delight on hearing the name of a particular thing we're actually remembering our standard reaction to that particular thing and are pleased with it. For example, when the word "orange" occurs in *Ṭilism-e Hōshrubā*, it will always signify that taste which the human tongue has experienced, and it always represents the same taste.

Our critics have not yet understood this characteristic of our sensibility. Having read Mr. Hudson's⁷ book, they say that Urdu's *maṣnavī* poets had no command over human emotions, or they could not handle character, and so forth. A common criticism of some *maṣnavīs* is that the story is about a princess, but when she's in love she speaks of it in the language of a courtesan. Therefore, according to these critics, the poet is unable to fulfill the demands of characterization. I do not know how our critics decided that a *maṣnavī* poet should also be responsible for characterization. This is not one of the rules of his art. The poet has a constant image of every human emotion in his mind. This image is free of the confines of individual characterization. Wherever the experience of love is mentioned he won't show the love affair of a princess, he'll show the affair of a woman about whom he has only one concept in his mind. The *maṣnavī* of Mīr Ḥasan is not the novel of Thomas Hardy. Their cultural perspectives are entirely different and every culture has the right to determine the parameters of its art; that is, it understands human emotion in its own way. In Western literature the actions and emotions of an individual are determined by his or her personality. In our literature these things are determined by social tradition. If we try to imitate the West without understanding the differences of sensibility we will be limited to Mr. Macaulay alone.

⁷W.H. Hudson, *An Introduction to the Study of Literature* (London: G.G. Harrap, 1910), an extremely elementary and English-oriented account of the nature of literature that was extremely popular with Urdu writers until around the 1970s.

So this was the style of representing our consciousness. In Western literature the tradition is to grasp the individual moment of human experience in its full uniqueness, and because of this point of view Western literature presents things in numerous ways. Let's look at a few examples.

How did the poet experience an object at a particular time?

In what way did his experience of a particular thing keep altering with changes in time and space?

Apart from the response of a poet or the person concerned, the question, what is an object in itself, has also been considered. What is that special innateness of an object that gives it an independent, unique identity beyond its external features or its chemical composition? If we want examples of this kind of inquiry we don't have to read French literature, reading D. H. Lawrence's poems about fruits should suffice.

Can one discern a universal force in objects?

It is possible to extend this list further. At present it suffices to say that the Western consciousness examines every object over and over again and each time extracts a new response.

When we began imitating Western poetry our writers, following in the footsteps of Wordsworth, started looking for God's glory in natural phenomena. No, I'm wrong here. They didn't begin to *look* for it! Had they done so, they would have inaugurated a change in their experiences/consciousness. They only began to tell us that one could see God's glory in nature. In other words, instead of actually seeing things they just began to versify some thoughts and conceptions about them. Ismā'il Mēraṭḥī wrote poems like the "First Raindrop," or "The Windmill by the Stream." In these poems, instead of seeing things, human actions and intentions have been hitched to them. Mēraṭḥī does not examine nature but tacks on presumed human responses and inclinations towards situations described in the poems. When realism became popular, the worship of nature combined with it to produce writings like these: "An old farmer is moving about on his cart. He looks at his fields and nods."⁸ If there was any change after 1936 it was just that poetry began to mention Lux soap as well.

But the question is, how much exactly did our attitude change towards things? The people of the past would at least have derived enjoyment from things. We can't even do that. And what else happened?

⁸This line is not from a creative piece of prose but is a parody of a lesson in a textbook for young people written by Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād (1831–1910).

Contemplating the growth and development of Urdu literature, I honestly think that Maulana Ḥālī actually did advise us to follow the unknown Persian poet named Maghribī, and we are obediently acting on his counsel up till now. □

—Translated by Mehr Afshan Farooqi

Appendix

Translator's Note on the Text of Ḥālī's *She'r* as Quoted by 'Askari

When I looked up the reference for Ḥālī's *she'r* in the *Divān-e Ḥālī* published during the poet's lifetime in 1893, I was surprised to see that the *radīf* of the ghazal of which the *she'r* in question is the *maqṭā'* is “*kar čukē*” not “*hō čukī*” as quoted by 'Askari in his essay. In the 1893 edition (which I was looking at in a facsimile edition) all proper nouns are calligraphed in bold. This *she'r*, among other peculiarities, also has the dubious distinction of containing four proper nouns in the space of two lines, that is, if we count Maghribī as a proper noun. And indeed, “Maghribī” is inscribed in bold along with the other names, clearly indicating that in that particular edition the calligrapher (I assume with Ḥālī's approval) had no doubt that Maghribī was the sixteenth-century Persian Sufi poet, just as Mīr and Muṣṭafī were famous Urdu poets.

This discovery prompted me to do further research on Maghribī the poet and to think some more about Ḥālī's intention in using him as a model for imitation or emulation. It's obvious that *kar čukē* is the authentic *radīf* here because the entire ghazal follows that *radīf*, however *hō čukī* seems to have been current in verbal recitation. This was confirmed by Shamsu'r-Raḥman Fārūqī who said that he had heard both versions and that *hō čukī* sounded better and more forceful.

There was no controversy about Ḥālī's intent or the implied meaning of *maghribī*/*maghribī*/Maghribī during Ḥālī's time. On this Ḥālī himself offered no comments or clarifications as he occasionally did in the form of notes in the printed versions of his work. For example in his *Divān* the letter *qāf* is written in the margin beside ghazals that are in the “old”—that is, *qadīm* (read classical)—style. There could have been an explanatory note for Maghribī as well, had Ḥālī felt the need for it. The possibility of a scribal error (bolding Maghribī) cannot be completely ruled out, though it seems unlikely in light of the debate that followed.

In the Maghribī as poet versus *maghribī* as West(ern) debate there are at least two important questions: First, if there was no ambiguity regarding Maghribī

during Ḥālī's time, why was one perceived in the 1940s, nearly fifty years after the publication of the *Dīvān*? Second, if emulation was what Ḥālī was prescribing, why name a relatively obscure poet like Maghribī when there were any number of famous Indo-Persian poets to choose from? And if the problem was in selecting a name that would fit the meter, *pairavī-e Khusravī* might have been a good choice, for Amīr Khusrau, as we know, is one of the greatest Persian poets and is also revered as a Sufi.

In the text where I first encountered this *she'r* of Ḥālī's, *maghribī* was not written in bold or highlighted in any other way to indicate that it was a proper noun. I took it to mean "of the West," as probably everyone who reads it now does. The reason being that Maghribī the poet is too obscure a person for even well-read Urdu-speakers to direct their minds towards the historical figure. Also, Ḥālī is reputed for having a pro-Western stance. But there was a possibility that during the last quarter of the nineteenth century Maghribī the poet was popular, or at least well known, in Urdu literary circles. If this were true then Persian *tazkiras* (poets' biographies) of that period would have significant entries for the poet. However, 'Alī Qulī Vāleh Dāghistānī's voluminous *Riāzu'sh-Shu'arā'*⁹ (compiled during the period 1734–1748) has very little information on Maghribī—only a short notice giving the poet's probable date of death (A.H. 809) and mentioning that he was a Sufi of some distinction. The famous and almost equally voluminous *tazkira Sham'-e Anjuman* of Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān (Bhopal, 1876) doesn't even have an entry for Maghribī. However, *Nigāristān-e Sukhan*,¹⁰ a shorter *tazkira* published in the same year which was compiled by Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān's son Nūru'l-Ḥasan and which is generally regarded as a supplement to his father's work, has a brief two-line entry. Thus none of these records suggest that Maghribī was a well-known name in Urdu/Persian literary circles of the time. Certainly, Ghālib has referred to Maghribī twice in his *Khuṭūṭ* (letters), but the very manner in which he is mentioned shows that Ghālib's correspondent was not expected to have known much about Maghribī.¹¹ Therefore, it does not stand to reason that Ḥālī would have referred to such a person as a model for imitation.

Though Maghribī may not have been a major poet, he was certainly known among the literati of Ḥālī's time. There is a strong convention of *talmih* (allusion)

⁹See vol. 1, ed. by Sharīf Ḥusain Qāsimī (Rampur: Razā Library, 2001), 648.

¹⁰(Bhopal: Maṭba'-e Shāhjahānī), 99.

¹¹See *Ghālib ke Khuṭūṭ*, vol. 1, ed. Khaliq Anjum (New Delhi: Ghalib Institute, 1984), 390, also 395 for the second *she'r*. The letters are addressed to Navāb 'Alāu'd-Dīn Khān 'Alā'ī. Apparently Ghālib was asked to compose a ghazal with the *radif* "gila dārad" borrowed from the *radif* of a ghazal said to be Maghribī's.

in Urdu, Persian, and Arabic poetry, but the major requirement of *talmīḥ* is that the event or person or poem meant to be recalled by the allusion should be well known enough not to leave any doubt about the poet's intent or the meaning of the allusion. There could, however, be a deliberate wordplay in Ḥālī's use of Maghribī. We know that Ḥālī acknowledged and even appreciated wordplay as a poetic device. In his *Muqaddama-e She'r-o-Shā'irī* he gives the example of the following *she'r* of Bālmukand Ḥuẓūr¹² (although he misattributes it to Mīr) as an illustration of good wordplay:¹³

ye jō ḥashm-e pur āb hain dōnōn
ek khāna kharāb hain dōnōn

Oh these two eyes full of tears
They are a great one as home destroyers

It could therefore be inferred that while Ḥālī's intention was mainly to advise his compeers to emulate the West, he used a word that could also be read as referring to the poet. Considering the entire literary agenda of Ḥālī and also of his mentors, particularly Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (who almost never let go an opportunity to decry Urdu literature as artificial and useless), it would be quite proper to assume that Ḥālī intended and meant *maghribī* to be read as "Western" but fortuitously or deliberately left himself an escape route in the fact that there was an Iranian Sufi poet called Maghribī who could, in a pinch, be invoked as a model for the materialistic nineteenth-century world in which Ḥālī found himself.

¹²He was a pupil (*shāgird*) of Khvāja Mīr Dard. The above *she'r* has been quoted as a sample of his poetry in Mīr Sarvar's *tazkira* (compiled 1801–1809) which includes entries for some 996 Urdu poets. See Khvāja Ahmad Fārūqī, ed. *Tazkira-e Sarvar* (Delhi: Delhi University, 1961), 238.

¹³Second ed. (Allahabad: Ram Narain Lal Publishers, 1953), 190.