

INDO-PERSIAN POETRY

Overview While Indo-Persian writers produced some memorable examples of narrative literature, it is their poetry, and especially lyric poetry, that defines them. In the genre of the *ghazal*, Indo-Persian writers composed some of the finest poetry in the long history of Indian literature. Like their contributions to narrative literature, these poems represent a subtle blend of Persian literary conceits and Indian content. And in some ways, we can say that these poems found a natural home in India, with its long tradition of mysticism, a deep, almost ritual, respect for language and generous patronage of courtly literature.

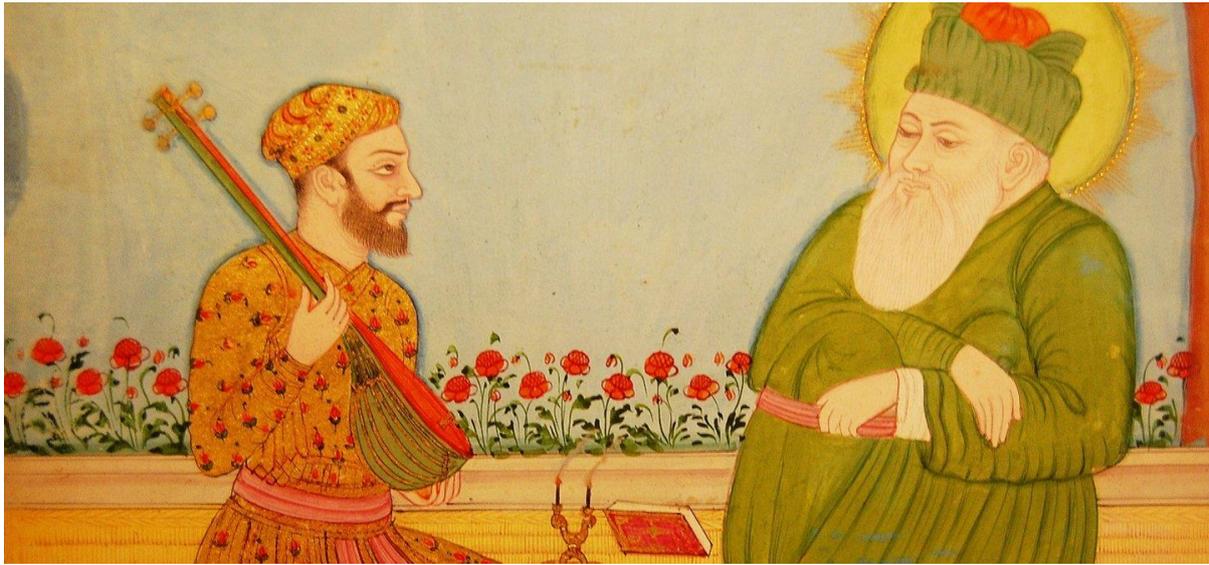
History Again, as with narrative literature, Indo-Persian poetry had its origins in the Persianate courts of the Samanids (c. 800-1000 CE) and Ghaznavids (c. 1000-1200 CE). Poets in both these pre-Sultanate empires specialised in the *qasida* (or panegyric ode), composed in praise of kings, commanders and wealthy patrons. By the end of the Ghaznavi period, influential poets, such as Mas'ud Sa'd-e Salman (b. Lahore, 1046; d. Ghazni ca. 1121), were living in Lahore (present-day Pakistan) on the northwest edge of India. Mas'ud was a significant figure also because he introduced the Sanskrit genre of *baramasa* (poems about the seasons) into Indo-Persian courts. By the time of the early Delhi Sultanates, in the 13th century, many of the courtly poets were Indian-born and their style was called 'The Indian style.' The great Amir Khusrao, for instance, referred to himself as a 'Indian Turk [Muslim]'. Khusrao and other poets in Delhi now developed the *ghazal*.

Prominent poets beside Khusrao include Hasan Sijzi (d. 1336), who is famed for the honey-like sweetness of his lyrics. Khusrao and Sijzi, and many others, were part of the Chishti Order, a Sufi cult that began in Chishti, a small town near Herat in Afghanistan in the 10th century and spread, along with Persian literary culture, into India. The Chishti circle to which the Indo-Persian poets in Delhi belonged was led by the Sufi saint Muhammad Nizamuddin Auliya (1238 –1325 CE), who also took a great interest in poetry. The mystical teachings of Sufism, especially its emphasis on love as a means from realising god, inspired much of the literary output during the Delhi Sultanate period and later.

During the Mughal period (1526-1857), the main forms of Indo-Persian poetry (*qasida*, *baramasa* and *ghazal*) flourished and developed new themes. The munificence of Akbar's court (r. 1556-1605) attracted the most talented poets in the Muslim world. Primary among them was the scholarly and ambitious Abu'l Faiz (1547-1595), who introduced historical themes in to the *qasida*, while others, such as 'Orfi of Shiraz (d. 1591) took the genre in a more emotional and personal direction. Excellent examples of Indo-Persian verse were also written by Hindu poets who were patronised by Emperor Akbar, with his 'universalist' approach to culture.

By the 17th century, the new 'Indian style' had become the fashion at court. Whereas the older, Persianate poems were somewhat analytical in tone and impeccable in following conventions, the Indian style expressed a lighter tone and experimented with new kinds of images, which roamed more freely over the Indian landscape. It also employed a vocabulary that borrowed words and phrases from Hindi. In addition, it introduced new themes, taking up moral issues and social commentary (influenced by these concerns in the contemporaneous movement of Hindu devotional poetry).

By the end of the 17th century, courtly patronage dried up when the emperor Aurangzeb abolished the title of poet-laurate, and poets took refuge in an increasingly introspective world of recondite images and personal moods. Sufi poets, however, continued to thrive throughout the century, many of them in regional courts, such as 'Abd-al-Qader Bidel (d. 1721) who lived in Patna. As the century advanced and colonialism spread across the subcontinent, conquering Muslim rulers and deposing them, fewer poets came to India from Persia. Although Persian remained the official language of British India until the 1830s (a choice of convenience rather than commitment), Indo-Persian poetry declined from lack of patronage, and Urdu became the literary language of Muslims in India. The last great poet in this tradition of six centuries (13th to 19th) was Ghalib (d. 1869), who wrote in both Persian and Urdu. The themes now were not the mystical union with god and delicate descriptions of the nightingale, but the nostalgia of faded glory.



(painting of the poet Amir Khusrao, left, and Nizammudin, his spiritual guide, date unknown)

Genres

Qasida One of the preeminent poetic forms of Indo-Persian literature in this period is the *qasida* (panegyric ode). An early master of this genre was Abu'l-Faraj Runi (d. 1091 CE), who lived in Lahore. A later exponent was Sehab-al-Din Maḥ-mera (13th c. CE), who introduced overtly religious themes into the *qasida*. Another was Badr Caci (14th c. CE), who wrote in abstract, metaphysical language and was revered by later literary tradition.

Baramasa *Baramasa* (lit. 'twelve months') is an older Indian genre that describes the seasons as they change throughout the months of the year. This Indian genre, popular at the folk level, was brought into Indo-Persian literature by Mas'ud Sa'd-e Salman in the late 11th century CE. The *baramasa* format, in which the singer longs for the seasons, provided an opportunity for the Persian-influenced poets to sing songs of separation on both secular and divine levels.

Ghazal Indo-Persian writers produced their most subtle work in the *ghazal*, a short lyric of rhymed couplets mixing the conventions of a love poem with those of a drinking song. The verses draw almost entirely on the landscape, flora and fauna of Iran for imagery, the most famous example being the contrast between the rose (*gul*) and the nightingale (*bulbul*). The language uses a highly complex poetic vocabulary, made even more enigmatic by the Sufi religious themes that supply the content. Many *ghazals* express deep emotions of longing and loss, on both the level of ordinary human experience and the mystical experience of god.

Cultural Significance The poetry composed by Indo-Persian writers during the period from 1200-1850 CE represents an important contribution to the history of Indian literature. They represent the finest works in the third of India's great literary traditions (the other two being Sanskrit and Tamil). Their poems, which combined the sophistication of Persian literary models with the new elements derived from India and its wealthy court culture, illustrate the wider process of cultural integration that underpins much of India's history. Borrowing from Persianate and Turkish courts not only in Iran, but also Central Asia and Transoxiana, these poets produced a literature that is today admired around the world for its delicacy and beauty. One source of its excellence is the inspiration the poets received from Sufism, which also flourished on Indian soil. Sufism, with its mystical, subtle and personalised doctrines of love, was itself the most poetic of the several religious systems in pre-modern India. And, it, too, represents a syncretism that is the texture of Indian civilisation, blending and bending Hindu and Muslim elements, devotionalism and mysticism, oral and scribal traditions. Indo-Persian poetry also made a contribution to the associated arts of lexicography, painting, illustrated manuscript and book printing. Jawarhalal Nehru, India's first Prime Minister and acclaimed historian of his country,

was unequivocal when he wrote, 'Among all the nations and races who have come in contact with India, none of them has so everlasting influence on our culture and civilisation as that of the Iranians.'



(Amir Khusrau surrounded by young men, miniature from a manuscript of Majlis Al-Usshak by Husayn Bayqarah, 14th c. CE)

Poets

Amir Khusrau Amir Khusrau (1253-1325 CE) is the prince of Indo-Persian literature, who is often compared to Kalidasa or Shakespeare in terms of his prominence in his own tradition. His father was a Turkic soldier who came from Transoxiana and settled in Delhi, where he married the daughter of an Indian officer. After receiving a traditional Islamic education, and losing his father at an early age, he showed literary talent and, through his maternal grandmother, gained a position at the Delhi court of the Sultans. He served as a soldier, an advisor and court poet. Amid his busy life, he also became close to the Sufi saint Nizammudin, who was part of the Chishti Order and boasted a large, public following that made the Sultans jealous. Khusrau's poems are infused with the specific teachings of this Sufi saint, who also gave him literary criticism and helped him to refine his verse. The poet is buried alongside the saint in a mausoleum in Delhi, where even today professional singers still perform his poetry. With both royal patronage and spiritual guidance, Khusrau wrote some of the finest poems and prose in Indian literary history and in more than one genre. But his special talent was the *ghazal*, in which he combined asceticism with aestheticism. Critics both then and now admire his concise style, in which each verse encapsulates a complete moral point of view. In addition to writing odes, riddles and legends, some of which are still studied today, he is credited with developing the influential *qawwali* genre of devotional song by fusing Persian and Indian music traditions.

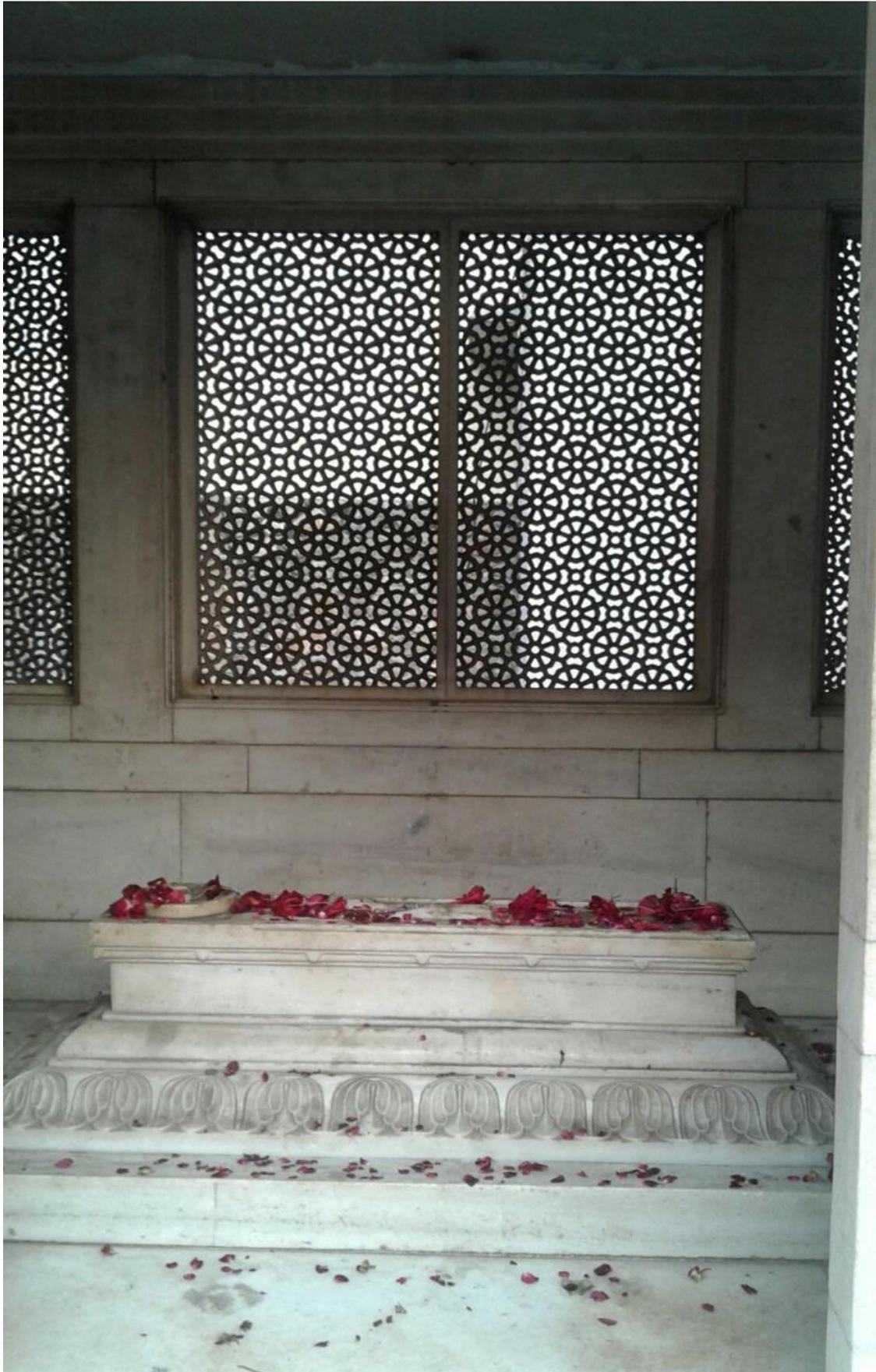
Abu'l Faiz Abu'l al-Faiz ibn Mubarak (1547-1595) is more commonly known as Abu'l Faiz or Faizi. His family came from the Yemen, in the Arabian Peninsula, but settled in western India in the early 16th century. His father was a scholar and philosopher, who worked in a small Hindu kingdom in modern-day Rajasthan. When Faizi was still a young man, he found his way to Delhi where he and his young brother (Abul Fazl) gained important positions in the court of the Mughal Emperor Akbar. Faizi was given the task of teaching the emperor's sons and, in 1588, was appointed poet laureate of Akbar's court. His most significant work was a collection of his poems—including qasidas, *ghazals* and elegies—brought out in a single volume, entitled *Tasabhir al-Subh*. In addition, he wrote verse in Arabic and translated major Sanskrit works into Persian. In the final decade of his life, Faizi also served in several regional kingdoms as an envoy from Akbar's court. During that time he wrote several reports on the politics and culture of these regions.



(a shrine dedicated to Shah Abdul Latif, Bhittai, Pakistan)

Shah Abdul Latif Shah Abdul Latif (1689-1752) was, like Khusrao, a Sufi, but one who wrote largely in the Sindhi language. He was born in a small village in the present-day Sindhi province of Pakistan, where he was taught by a Sufi scholar named Akhund Noor Muhammad. After a thorough education in the *Qur'an* and the Hadith, he became fascinated with the Rumi, whose poems his are said to resemble. Latif became a Sufi saint, whose mystical poems are cherished and considered some of the greatest in the Indo-Persian tradition. His various poems were collected some time after his death and written down in a manuscript entitled *Shah jo Risalo*, which was quickly translated into Urdu and then English. He also wrote verse and prose in Persian,

Ghalib If Amir Khusrao is the first great poet of Indo-Persian literature, then Mirza Ghalib (Mirza Asadullah Baig Khan, 1797-1869) was certainly the last. His ancestors were Turks who migrated to Samarkand during the Seljuk dynasty (c. 900-1180 CE). Later, his paternal grandfather made the decisive move south to India in the middle of the 18th century, when Delhi was ruled by a Persian king. After working as an agricultural officer, he settled in Agra, where he had two sons, one of whom (Mirza Abdullah Baig became Ghalib's father. Ghalib's mother was from a Kashmiri family. Ghalib's father worked for the Nawab of Lucknow and the Nizam of Hyderabad before being killed in a battle in 1803, when Ghalib was just 5 years old. He grew up in Agra, where he was taught Arabic, Persian, philosophy and logic. Ghalib married at age thirteen, and had seven children but none survived infancy. He was not a happy man, as his poems reveal, either in his personal or his public life. Although his first language was Urdu, he composed most of his poems in Persian (and some in Turkish), as that language seemed more suitable for his nostalgia for the now-lost Mughal Empire. His most enduring contribution was to expand the scope of the *ghazal*, which had traditionally been confined to love themes, to include more subjects such as history, philosophy and travel.



(Ghalib's tomb, New Delhi)

Poems and translations

Amir Khusrau (verses translated by Hadi Hasan, date unknown)

1. This first poem might have come from the mouth of a Hindu devotional poet such as Kabir. Khusrau rejects the misleading labels of Muslim and Hindu, and seeks a truth in his love for god, whom he addresses as the 'beloved.' He needs nothing more on his journey, only the desire to find god. The final enigmatic lines are said to express a central metaphysical doctrine of Sufism known as the 'unity of existence' (*waḥdat al-wujūd*), which argues that god is everywhere manifest in the material world.

I am a pagan and a worshiper of love: the creed (of Muslims) I do not need;
Every vein of mine has become taunt like a wire,
the (Brahman's) girdle I do not need.
Leave from my bedside, you ignorant physician!
The only cure for the patient of love is the sight of his beloved -
other than this no medicine does he need.
If there be no pilot in our boat, let there be none:
We have god in our midst: the sea we do not need.
The people of the world say that Khusrau worships idols.
So he does, so he does; the people he does not need,
the world he does not need.

2. A similar blending of external and internal worlds is suggested in the second poem by Khusrau, only now the lines also carry a double layering of human love and transcendental love. There is a complete identification of lover and beloved, in language that critics say is among the most beautiful in all Persian literature.

O, you whose beautiful face is the envy of the idols of Azur
You remain beyond my praise, praise them as I may.
All over the world I have travelled, many a maiden's
Love have I tasted, many a beautiful star have I seen,
But you are something different and unique, if I may say so.
I face lovelier than yours my eyes have not seen.
Are you the sun or the Moon? Or Venus or Jupiter?
What you are is hard to say.
Ever since the sky began making images on earth,
On no one else has such charm been bestowed.
Are you a fairy or an angel? Or the daughter of a nymph?
What you are I cannot say.
I have become you, and you have become me.
I have become the body, and you the soul
So that 'I am different from you' and 'You are different from me'
None hereafter will be able to say.

3. The poem below is included because, among other things, it refers to Nizamuddin, the Sufi saint with whom Khusrau formed such a close relationship. Now, the poet describes his rapturous love for his *pir* or guide, as if he were god himself. And, again, we find the theme of unity, of total interpenetration of worshipper and god, only this time the chosen image is even more striking: the poet wishes to have himself dyed in the colour of his beloved. The final line, with its sharp visuality, echoes the first, which illustrates the much-admired concision of Khusrau's verse.

What a glow everywhere I see, Oh mother, what a glow;
I've found the beloved, yes I found him,
In my courtyard;
I have found my *pir* [guide] Nizamuddin Aulia.
I roamed around the entire world,
looking for an ideal beloved;
And finally this face has enchanted my heart.

The whole world has been opened for me,
Never seen a glow like this before.
Whenever I see now, he is with me,
Oh beloved, please dye me in yourself;
Dye me in the colour of the spring, beloved;
What a glow, Oh, what a glow.

Shah Abdul Latif (poems translated by A. Schimmel, 1976)

1. This first poem by Latif contains a remarkable travelogue, journeying from Sindh (the poet's home region) to China and Rome, and many places in between. It is noteworthy also in its use of a traditional Indian literary tropes (the storm clouds) and the Hindu concept of god as the bountiful rain-giver in order to praise Allah.

Clouds return and once again, it rains,
Lightings flash from all sides, and with them,
Some go to Istanbul others turn to the west,
Some shine bright over China and others take care of Samarkand, Some wandered to Rome,
to Kabul and Kandahar,
Some lie on Delhi, Deccan thundering over...
My beloved Allah, may you always make Sindh,
A land of abundance, my beloved Allah, may you make prosperous the whole universe.

2. In this second poem, Latif is more metaphysical. The poem is written in the spirit of the 'unity of existence' doctrine of Sufism, which was a stable subject for Sufi poets (see the first poem by Amir Khusrau), and yet he still manages to make it appear fresh.

From unity came multiplicity, multiplicity is all union;
Reality is one; do not be mistaken.

He is 'Mighty in His greatness.' He is all Beauty,
His is the image of the beloved. He is perfection of loveliness.
He himself becomes master and disciple, he is all imagination,
And through Him the state of all things becomes known.
He is this, and He is that, he is God, and He is Death,
He the Beloved, He the breath, He the Enemy, and he the helper.

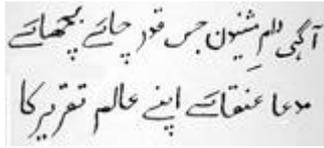
3. Finally, we have a series of short poems, all on the theme of true religion and the genuine Sufi saint. In the first one, Latif criticises those who identify Sufism with external signs, saying they are as ignorant as those who sleep. The real Sufi, the second poem suggests, has no visible form and is beyond hate. In the third verse, the poet tells us to 'pull out all the stops' because you'll never succeed if you are half-hearted.

Those, who body is a rosary, the soul a bead of the rosary, the heart a tanbura [stringed instrument]—
They play on the strings of the secret of unity:
'He is One, has no companion'—thus they sing—
For those sleep is fitting, slumber is worship for them.

The Sufi is without religious form; nobody has understood him;
He struggles deep in his interior, his foot has no trace,
For him who has enmity with him, he has become a helper.

If you put a cap on your neck, then become the real Sufi:
Reaching the goblet of poison, drink the full glass;
The place of honour will be of those who have reached the mystical state.

Ghalib (poems translated by Andrew McCord, 2014)



(Ghalib poem in Nastaliq script)

In the five ghazals given below, Ghalib expresses the essence of his philosophy, with an emphasis on the mystery, frustration and pain of love. For Ghalib, this is sum total of life, as lived in the after glow of the glory of the Mughal Empire.

In her every gesture is a sign of some other thing,
As in her love transpires doubts of some other thing.
In her every gesture is a sign of some other thing,
As in her love transpires doubts of some other thing.

Lord, she has not and will not understand me talking.
Give her another heart or give me some other language.
Are those brows what propel that fetching gaze?
An arrow is fixed, but perhaps there is some other bow.
When you are in the city, what grief is there to us?

If we can make it to market, we can buy some other life.
Indeed we were dab hands breaking graven images,
But as we last, our way is blocked by some other stone.
Heart's-blood boils and I would spill it completely
If to scatter the pure blood I had some many other eye

I die at that sound, my head would fly away from me,
But let me hear her tell my scourge, "Try some other blows."
People are fooled that a world-burning sun rises
Each day as I air out some other hidden wound.
I would live a bit, if I gave not my heart to you.

As at sight of the Eid moon, a never satisfied band rejoices
On the killing ground for the sword to be drawn.
In the dust we laid the scars of vigor we longed for—
Were you to be here, we would be gardens in bloom.
Joy for a botched heart is a feeling of laceration

Reading

Paul Lokensy and Sunil Sharma, *In the Last Bazaar of Love: The Selected Poetry of Amir Khusrau*, 2013

Sunil Sharma, *Persian Poetry at the Indian Frontier*, 2000

Waris Kirmani, *Dreams Forgotten: An Anthology of Indo-Persian Poetry*, 1984

A. Schimmel, *Pain and Grace: A Study of Two Mystical Writers of 18th-Century India*, 1976