

Gulzar (Sampooran Singh Kalra) as A Poet: The Lyricism of Everyday Life

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Abstract

Sampooran Singh Kalra, internationally known by his pen name Gulzar, being lyricist, short story writer, film script writer, playwright, producer, dialogue writer, director, intellectual, famous for his uniqueness and innovation in every field of his work, is one of the most important poetic voices in post-independent India. While recognizing him as a lyricist and filmmaker, Gulzar's literary output as a poet warrants a separate critical reading. His poetry, which is written mainly in Hindustani (a fluid combination of Hindi and Urdu), is intensely simple and cerebral at once. In this paper, Gulzar's style as a poet, his themes, language, and his contribution to modern Indian poetry is addressed. It draws on selected examples of Gulzar's work and critical writing about him to situate Gulzar's poetry in relation to the larger tradition of Indian lyric poetry and modern literature.

Keywords: Gulzar, Poetry, Lyrics

INTRODUCTION

"Gulzar", As soon as the name comes to mind, the mind is drawn to many directions and the dazzling layers of Gulzar's magical personality begin to scatter before us. Sampooran Singh Kalra known as "Gulzar", who has been awarded Indian cinema's highest award, the Dadasaheb Phalke Award (2013), Jnanpith Award (2024) Hollywood's Oscar Award (2009), Grammy Award (2010), 21-time Filmfare Award, Indira Gandhi Award for National Integration (2012), Sahitya Academy Award (2002) for literature and India's third-highest civilian award the Padma Bhushan (2004), prefers to be recognized as a writer and poet. He knows that six words in solid ink on paper have a longer impact and longer life than images and sounds on celluloid. Poetry or prose is actually a magical process of selecting life's observations with the eyelids of poetic feeling and dressing them in letters and sounds. He is a person who has been imprinting his emotions on paper with his pen for the past many years, as if he is creating a world of words.

In a student-media interaction at Whistling Woods International, Mumbai he draws a clear distinction between writing film-lyrics and writing poetry.

He says "Lyrics is commissioned work, it is my profession. But poetry is my statement to life. Something that I feel, I know, something that I have acquired from life, that is my statement, my poetry". [1]

The key phrase: "my statement to life" suggests that his poetry is how he voices his inner self, his lived experience. Gulzar was born in 1934 in Dina (Pakistan today) and felt the violence directly, including

being displaced, when partition took place, which established part of his poetic sensibility. He began his career in the Bombay film industry as a lyricist while developing a literary career that depended on the rhythm of living and the poetics of memory. While being extremely popular through his film songs, his poetry collected in “Raat Pashminey Ki”, “Chand Pukhraaj Ka”, and “Pandrah Paanch Pachattar” offers a more contemplative, humane sense of the world. Gulzar's work brings together modernist restraint and traditional lyricism to create an autonomous voice that is both personal and timeless.

Gulzar, despite his unparalleled success and fame in films, never became unserious towards serious literature. Initially, his literary works were published in Pakistani magazines. Ahmed Nadeem Qasmi, the editor of “Funoon”, especially patronized and guided him. An important feature of Gulzar's poetry, according to Qasmi, is that he skillfully and quickly brings out the expressive concept of words and lines in his poems. Nature acts as Gulzar's counterpart in his poetry. Here, the phenomena of nature seem to be alive, breathing and taking the form of living beings like humans [2].

1. The Biographical and Cultural Context

Gulzar's prose cannot be separated from his personal and cultural experiences. His trauma about Partition, his move from Punjab to Delhi to Mumbai, and the multiplicity of languages spoken by him all added value to his voice as a poet. He has frequently discussed in interviews how “displacement teaches you to carry your home with you” — a theme that frequently comes up in the poems about memory, nostalgia and belonging.

Gulzar's Hindustani —a blend of Urdu, Hindi, Punjabi, and dialects like Braj or Haryanvi — strikes a note of linguistic inclusivity that is rare in contemporary poetry. Pallavi Kiran states in her stylistic study, “Gulzar’s use of Hindustani transcends language barriers, and allows his poetry to feel approachable while still hinting at a deeper intricacy” (Kiran, Rupkatha Journal, 2018).

This kind of multilingualism mirrors the pluralism of an Indian identity, making Gulzar's work both culturally situated and universally appealing.

A profile piece titled “I AM: Gulzar” indicates that for him, poetry isn’t just craft or entertainment, it’s a spiritual expression. Hence, poetry has a deeper role in his life.

“I express my spiritual self through my poetry. Spirituality is expressed in many ways. For different people, it means different things. For me, it is about surrendering oneself to the ultimate eternal power.” (The Times of India “I AM: Gulzar”, September 19, 2010)

2. Poetic Form and Innovation

2.1 The “Triveni”

One of Gulzar's defining innovations is the creation of Triveni, a three-line poem, in which a twist or deeper meaning in the third line reframes or reinterprets the first two lines. In a typical example of a Triveni, the first two lines present an image or emotion, the third line deconstructs or layers that original meaning with irony, longing, or insight - a kind of “taste” that changes your understanding. The economy of form is reminiscent of the Japanese haiku, however, the concepts are layered. Through Triveni, Gulzar is able to produce density of meaning with remarkable economy

For example:

1. baarish rukii hu.ii hai kal se aur ghutan bhii ziyaada hai ro kar kab dil halkaa hu.aa hai
2. tamaam safhe kitaabo.n ke pha.Dpha.Daane lage havaa dhakel ke darvaaza aa ga.ii ghar me.n kabhii havaa kii tarah tum bhii aayaa-jaayaa karo

2.2 Style and Tone

Gulzar's tone as a poet is characterized by restraint and understatement and his diction is conversational, yet powerfully evocative. He rarely employs grand metaphors; rather, he lends anthropomorphic traits to the commonplace — doors, windows, shadows — to create a complex emotional landscape. As noted by Poetry International, "His lyricism is never baroque rather retains a direct, intimate mode devoid of sentimentality" (Poetry International, 2018). This tension between accessibility and depth is key to Gulzar's aesthetic. In an interview taken by Soham Chakraborty, Ayush Tharad and Madhav Poddar, Gulzar says,

"There is no question of being bitter. ... When you are in the world of fine arts ... in darkness you don't pick up daggers, you have to pick up a match box, light it and light a lamp."

(YOUTHINK, 2021, Vol XV Pg.54-57)

He is talking about how art must carry hope and humanity rather than bitterness.

This describes his view of what poetry should do. It should not just reflect pain, but offer light.

3. Major Themes in Gulzar's Poetry

3.1 Memory and Displacement

Home, along with the longing of nostalgia, are at the center of Gulzar's poetry. His poems frequently return to streets, childhood homes, or sounds experienced previously, not as static memorials, but as evolving echoes that form the self. In, Raat Pashminey Ki, for instance, night becomes both a metaphor for loneliness and a soft and protective cover, prior to sleep. The tenderness he exhibits towards memory creates a threshold for personal pain to become collective empathy. For Example:

"Din kuchh aise guzartā hai koī
jaise ehsān utartā hai koī
dil mein kuchh yuun sambhāltā hoon gham
jaise zavar sambhāltā hai koī
aa.ina dekh kar tasallī hūī
ham ko is ghar mein jāntā hai koī
peḍ par pak gayā hai phal shāyad
phir se patthar uchhāltā hai koī"[5].

3.2 The Everyday and the Intimate

For Gulzar, a child's laugh, an old fan's creak, and the smell of rain become opportunities to contemplate the ephemeral nature of life. Gulzar writes not from abstraction but from the heuristic of watching how small gestures represent wider truths. In this sense of "poetics of the everyday," Gulzar seems comfortable sitting next to modernists around the world. Actress Saiyami Kher in tribute to Gulzar on World Poetry Day says:

"Gulzar Saab's poetry transcends time and language barriers, touching the soul with its profound beauty and depth.... His ability to evoke raw emotions and capture the essence of life's complexities is unparalleled."[6].

"phūloñ kī tarah lab khol kabhī
khushbū kī zabāñ mein bol kabhī
alfāz parakhtā rahtā hai
āvāz hamārī tol kabhī" [2].

3.3 Time and Transience

For Gulzar, time is circular — it recurs in his poetry. His lines are also about this idea of passing time and how quick moments disappear and leave only a remnant. Dusk (shaam) and night (raat) are often the vehicles with which he refers to this notion of passing, fleeting moments in a rhythm of being human.

Gulzar's depiction of love is restrained and reflective. He prioritizes nuanced interpretations of separation, desire, and the silence between two individuals over romantic idealizations. His poem Mausam summarizes this nuance—where seasons changing reflect a relationship's changing emotional atmosphere. Theatre-director and translator Salim Arif says

“He does not follow the conventions of nazm ... but gives his feelings and images as honest an expression as he can.” [7]

Example of his poem

“aañs lenā bhī kaisī aadat hai
jiye jaanā bhī kyā rivāyat hai
koī aahaT nahīñ badan meñ kahīñ
koī saaya nahīñ hai ā.ankhoñ meñ
paañv behis haiñ chalte jaate haiñ
ik safar hai jo bahtā rahtā hai
kitne barsoñ se kitnī sadiyoñ se
jiye jaate haiñ jiye jaate haiñ”
(Gulzar, Pukhraj 2014, pg 18)

3.4 Love and Relationships

Despite its personal roots, Gulzar's poetry is obviously morally conscious. He recognizes socio-political realities without plotting activism. The very act of his linguistic inclusivity — of incorporating different cultural registers and dialects — becomes an act of democratization. As Global Indian points out, "Gulzar's poetry captures India's linguistic diversity, beautifully conjoining colloquial speech with art" (Global Indian, 2023).

3.5. Comparative and Critical Perspectives

In contrast to classical Urdu poetry, where the ghazal and nazm often use fixed motifs, Gulzar's poetry marries spoken idioms and visual imagery associated with film — a probable result of his cinematic sensibility. His poetry connects the literary and the popular: film lyrics like “Tujhse Naraz Nahi Zindagi..” or “Tere Bina Zindagi Se Koi Shikwa..” have the same philosophical quietude as his literary work. In both cases, Gulzar utilizes lyricism as a way to think aloud, turning feelings into thoughts and thoughts into song.

3.6. Translation and Reception

The function of translation is an important element in the dissemination of Gulzar's literature. The impact of his poetry translated into English compromises some degree of the sound beauty of his work, but he maintains the contemplative tone of his poetry.

Pallavi Kiran presents her own pragmatic-stylistic study that illustrates the translator's struggle to reproduce "the acoustic and emotional layering of Hindustani in English" (Rupkatha, 2018).

Still, the imagery that is universal and human in theme permits his poetry to exist beyond language.

His readings and anthologies have fostered the renewed interest in contemporary Indian poetry, dissolving the divide of Hindi-Urdu poetry.

3.7. Legacy and Contribution

Gulzar has changed how we conceive of art and everyday life. The formal, thematic, and linguistic changes he has made have been models for generations of poets and lyricists. Gulzar's receiving the Sahitya Akademi Award (2002) and the Padma Bhushan (2004) valuing him in both the world of literature, as well as in cinema, illustrates the essence of his cross-interest appeal. As a modern poet in India, Gulzar is distinctly situated to serve as a link between the oral and written, the popular and literary, and the local and universal.

Conclusion

Gulzar's work offers us the opportunity to reflect and contemplate the text in a time fraught with clamor and distraction. Gulzar's work is founded on personal memory and cultural polymorphism and allows him to articulate universal experiences — love, loss, time and belonging. The beauty of Gulzar's poetry does not rely upon grandiose or rhetorical phrasing, but the genius in finding poetry in the ordinary.

In his congruence and seamless blending of the lyrical qualities of the Urdu language and the intimacy of contemporary free verse poetry, Gulzar is sure to affirm poetry always remains— in his words, "a conversation with oneself— and the silence that follows."

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Research and Development Cell (RDC) of Rashtasant Tukadoji Maharaj Nagpur University (RTMNU) for granting me the opportunity to undertake my ongoing research project I also extend my heartfelt thanks to my Principal, Dr. Sharad Sambare, for his motivation and continuous support.

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