



Delhi Through The Senses: A Polysensoral Study Of Select Writings Of Mirza Ghalib

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Abstract:

Mirza Ghalib, one of India's greatest Urdu poets, has Ghazals, Letters, and Diary Entries in his literary oeuvre. Delhi, during Ghalib's life, was tumultuous and a space undergoing continual metamorphosis. Ghalib's writings capture this transformation through his sensorial perception of the spaces that he frequents and inhabits. The dynamic interrelation between Space, Time and Literature has given rise to an explosion in the realm of Interdisciplinary studies. The study of his works in light of Polysensorality, one of the key tenets of Geocriticism helps in understanding the layered nuances in spatial comprehension, in opposition to limiting space as a mere backdrop to lived realities.

Key words: Ghalib, Delhi, Polysensorality, Geocriticism, Spatial Comprehension

Introduction:

Mirza Ghalib's writings show the city of Delhi as it had existed more than one hundred and fifty years back. A Geocentric approach to the study of Delhi is ventured where the city becomes the focal point and Ghalib's writing captures this city in transition. Geocriticism is the theoretical base by which the Spatio-temporal nature of the city is explored through the tenet of Polysensorality and the writings of Ghalib serve as the historiographic premise to conduct the analysis.

The paper focusses on the methods of reading and interpreting the texts of Mirza Ghalib through a Geocentred framework focusing on Polysensorality. Space with its layered texturing as understood by the different senses are examined with an interest that well suits the arrival of the "spatial epoch" predicted by Foucault in the 1980's (Foucault 22). The primary text consists of *The Oxford India Ghalib: Life, Letters and Ghazals*, a compilation of Ghalib's oeuvre. The most important of Ghalib's prose and poetry in both Persian and Urdu were collected by the editor Ralph Russell and was first published in 2003.

Ghalib was born in Agra on 27 December 1797 and his forefathers bore a Turkish ancestry coming from "Transoxiana- beyond the river" (Russell 29). Ghalib's paternal grandfather had migrated to India seeking fortune in the Mughal army. Ghalib in a letter written on 15th February 1867 writes about his family history, "I am of Seljuk, Turkish stock. My grandfather came to India beyond the river in Shah Alam's time" (32). He grew up alongside two siblings, a younger brother named Yusuf and a sister called as "Choti Khanum (little lady)" (33).

In an article titled "Gin with rosewater, juicy mangoes and delectable kebabs: Delicacies that Ghalib loved & cherished" published in *The Economic Times* on 25 February 2020, Vikram Doctor reminds the coming of the 150th death anniversary of the great poet Mirza Ghalib on February 2020 and the relevance of the poet despite him passing away ages ago. A lover of life and mangoes, the poet was a man whose life and literature were met with the same amount of admiration. Mirza Ghalib had lived and witnessed a very momentous Space and Time in Indian history as the early nineteenth century was a hugely transformative age of India.

Theoretical Overview:

Space was formerly seen as a mere backdrop for the unfolding of events and the events as such were seen as disassociated from the space in which they took place. Emmanuelle Peraldo states that from a place of nothingness, Space started garnering the status of “a central metaphor and ‘Topos’ in literature” (Peraldo 1). Geocriticism as a theory was put forth by the French philosopher Bertrand Westphal in *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* (2007) and it concerns itself fully with the literal, socio-cultural, and philosophical practices associated with a geographical place. Geocriticism focusses on the varied elements of architecture, urban studies, history, and arts to form a greater comprehension of a geographic space. Geocriticism is described as “an exploratory practice, or set of practices, whereby readers, scholars, and critics engage with the spaces that make life, through lived experience and through imaginary projections, meaningful” (Tally, Translator’s Preface xii).

Polysensoral Descriptions of Ghalib's Delhi

The varied factors of Polysensorality are carried through the soundscapes that define a space, the olfactory receptions promoted by certain spaces and the haptic discourses coupled with the visual and the spoken narratives. The writings of Ghalib are filled with Polysensoral descriptions. Ghalib explains that as the distinction between the Britishers and Indians became evident as years passed by and the friction escalated as it approached the late 1820’s. Even when it was apparent that the Mughals were fast losing power, the public manifestations of sovereignty continued. Grand processions with elephants and musicians adding to the pomp and color were still present and communal harmony was favored by Bahadur Shah II.

The weather conditions prevailing in Delhi is another major attribute discussed by Ghalib in his works. By July 1860, Ghalib was in a lookout for a new house and he found one in the same *muhalla* (street) of Ballimaran. The unbearable climate of Delhi was explained in a letter that Ghalib had written on 19 July 1860. The heat, the cold, and rains all came together at once along with hailstorms. Ghalib enclosed a verse to describe the uncomfortable weather which says, “The flames of hell cannot give out such heat-/For hidden griefs burn out with a different fire” (181). In another letter also he writes of the weather by mentioning that it rained the previous night with a wind that was near to freezing. He goes on to describe a Delhi sky filled with clouds with no visible sun.

The cities that Ghalib visited are associated with the taste of mangoes that he had from there. Ghalib found Calcutta to have luscious mangoes with a “freshness and sweetness” which he had never found anywhere else (57). The nawab of Rampur tried to make Ghalib stay by promising him mangoes that would soon be ripe. Ghalib couldn’t stay longer as he missed Delhi and the prayers he could hear from the Jama Masjid. A Polysensoral reference to both the senses of hearing and taste could be found here.

The torrential rainfalls of Delhi are mentioned by Ghalib when he narrates how a letter that he had written to a friend got completely drenched in one and he had to dry it by the fire (201). On 29th July 1862 Ghalib writes to Majruh, his close friend, where he states that the rains are the final disaster to plague Delhiites. First came the rebels, then the British, followed by famine, fever, and cholera. The sun was as brief as a lightning flash in appearance. The nights being long and dark, burglars were all over the place. “Thousands of buildings have collapsed and hundreds of people have been buried beneath the ruins” (204). Water was gushing out of every lane.

In a letter to Alai, a friend, written on 6 August 1862, Ghalib writes as to how thankful he was for given the permission to stay in the house that belongs to Alai’s family. Ghalib tells him of the old servant of Ghalib’s home who goes out to shop. Being a very sociable person, she moves around, meets people by the canal, talks to the sentries posted near the gates and picks a few flowers for Ghalib’s wife. The description is beautifully crafted by Ghalib and the narration makes the reader follow the footsteps of the old maid. The Delhi night sky is portrayed after the morning’s description. The rains had stopped at last and Ghalib could see the moon while standing beneath the open roof. As a cool breeze blows over him, he could see the shining lights of Mars and Venus. The radiance of a clear Delhi night sky is mesmerizingly portrayed by the poet.

In a letter to Majruh written in the spring of 1863, Ghalib states that the winter showers have given a good harvest of wheat and gram. The weather of Delhi is a constant topic of discussion in the letters. On 1 April 1865, Ghalib writes to Hakim Ghulam Najaf Khan about a hailstorm that came to Delhi with hails “as big as hen’s eggs” (229). In a letter written to Alai’s father on 26 May 1865, Ghalib writes about a severe dust storm in Delhi. After the dust storm came a heavy rain that froze Delhi.

Ghalib visits Rampur, on 13 October 1865, to participate in the accession ceremony of the new Nawab. In a letter to Alai, Ghalib describes the majestic celebration which lasted more than ten days. The higher officials among the British were present along with their wives. The steward who was on top of an elephant that carried the new Nawab, threw money all along the route of procession. The huge feast along with the illuminations and the fireworks are beautifully described by Ghalib.

Ghalib being a writer beautifully constructs a Polysensoral space by describing beautifully the varied ways by which he perceives the Spaces in Delhi. The weather updates he constantly brings, the coldness of morning breezes he describes and the lusciousness of the mangoes of Delhi that he enjoys, all point to the intimate relationship that he has with the city.

In a letter to his wife's kinsman Ziya ud Din Ahmad who was visiting Agra Ghalib wrote:

Twin soul of mine, may Agra's air and water distilled from hapless Ghalib's sighs and heart rejoice your heart. Though we are far apart, yet the power of thought of my far-ranging mind has brought our oneness to the point where distance dares not to draw near.... There was a Time when in her soil, only mandrake grew and save the heart, her trees would bear no other fruit, and the drunken morning breeze of morning ranged through her gardens to lift up men's hearts. (4)

Ghalib had added picturesque details of Calcutta too in his writings. Addressing Calcutta in a poem Ghalib writes, "the mention of Calcutta's name.... Its greenery and verdure take away your breath.... All freshness and sweetness are its luscious fruits; its mellow wines are pleasing beyond all compare" (7). In a Persian letter to his friend Ghalib writes:

One should be grateful that such a city exists. Where else in the world is a city so refreshing? To sit in the dust of Calcutta is better than to grace the throne of another dominion.... how delightful are its cool breezes, and how pleasant is its water! How excellent are its pure wines and its ripe fruits! (57)

Ghalib continues to write of the weather in Delhi to his friend Haqir on 22 June 1853, "no one has seen such rain in the month of *Jeth* (May-June). Now the rain has stopped. When there is a breeze it's not hot" (109). On 4 June 1854, Ghalib wrote to Haqir, "Im dying of overheating, but I am on the alert to see when the mango crop is ready" (110). On July 1855 in another letter to Haqir he writes, "its rained until there is a river wherever you look and the sun appears as briefly as a lightening flash" (111).

Conclusion:

Geocriticism by connecting several disciplines like the urban studies, archeology, geography, and architecture provides a focus on the geographical place through varied and interdisciplinary literary routes. Ghalib paints a wonderful and detailed picture of the world that Delhi was to him. Delhi filled him with a sense of home and the British rule which was strongly established after the revolt of 1857, had a great impact in the way he perceived it to be. The seat of power, Delhi had to witness a large-scale metamorphosis with new buildings and roadways replacing the old buildings which belonged to the Mughal era. Ghalib's writing successfully captures the city in the 1800's. The Polysensoral depictions of the space adds meaning to what the city is and how it is understood, not only for Ghalib but also to his readers.

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