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## The Fear of Metaphor<sup>1</sup>

THOSE who started the “Follow the West” movement in our literature in the nineteenth century had actually never read Western literature themselves. What they had heard from others in translation gave them acquaintance not with the literature but with some new ideas. Since awe of the victorious people was powerful in their hearts, and everything that the rulers said or did inspired a sense of envy, it was natural that the ruling people’s ideas should seem weightier and more serious than their own. Though it may not have been said in so many words, the view that came to be established about the nature of literature was that literature is a site for ideas that are good and useful in a practical sense. As for the style and manner of expression, it was held that these things don’t count at all. At most they might have a secondary status. The style that was determined to be the best had simple language and short, clear, uncomplicated flowing sentences. To this was added the notion that these qualities can be acquired by intention, practice, and sincerity or by sheer concern for the state of the nation. The kind of Freudian notion that the style of a writer is actually his autobiography could never even have entered the minds of our zealous reformers. But even if such a notion was brought to their attention, they wouldn’t have made sense of it, nor would it have been acceptable to them. Besides, in those days, utilitarianism and rationalism were the rage of the times. Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan and his companions were expending all their power and energy in the effort to establish that Islamic laws and tenets were based on reason and were

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<sup>1</sup>Written c. 1955, “Iste’ārē kā Khauf,” is included in the anthology of Askari’s critical essays *Sitāra yā Badbān* (Karachi: Maktaba-e Sāt Raṅg, 1963), 20–34. Footnotes have been added by the translator.

extremely useful for worldly life. What then one was to make of the irrationality in man's nature was not a question that worried them at all.

So when the Qur'an itself was imagined to be a manual, à la Dale Carnegie, for winning friends and influencing people, there was hardly any chance for literature, the hapless one whose status was in any case no better than that of a poor widow's son-in-law. Thus a new canon was imposed on literature which made three main demands from it: (1) that it should be affective, that is, it should arouse emotions both visibly and instantly; (2) that it should be based on reality and should be rationalistic; and (3) it should present beneficial and practical ideas. When premodern Urdu and Persian literature was passed through this sieve, it proved to be excessively gritty. Even the simple-hearted Maulānā Ḥālī, who himself once declared,

*Sakht mushkil hai shēva-e taslīm*  
*Ham bhī ākhir kō jī curānē lagē<sup>2</sup>*

Submissiveness is far too hard to follow,  
Even I was obliged to become evasive

also started to complain that a major portion of our literature is devoid of emotion. So this literature lacks emotion, but why? What does it contain in place of emotion? Despite the lack of emotion, does this literature qualify as literature or not? These were questions upon which Ḥālī's generation never directed its gaze. Of course, how can you expect a question of this sort to occur to the Urdu prose writer when it didn't occur to a person like Mr. Macaulay?<sup>3</sup> Ḥālī is an amazing poet within his limitations, but his literary personality was so frozen that he was entirely out of tune with many kinds of poetry. Emotion was something that he granted, but he was so wary of emotional or spiritual absorption that he never dared to allow his reason even a little relaxation. He quotes this verse from Shāh Naṣīr to illustrate a style that is dry and lacks relish:

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<sup>2</sup>Alṭāf Ḥusain Ḥālī, *Dīvān-e Ḥālī*, Facsimile of 1893 ed. (New Delhi: Delhi Urdu Academy, 1992), 126. Ḥālī (1837–1914) was Urdu's first literary theorist and its major modernizer. He was also a substantial poet both in the "classical" and the "modern" modes.

<sup>3</sup>The "Mr." here is ironical; Urdu writers of that time often referred to English writers in this manner: Macaulay Sahib; Mill Sahib, and so on.

*Āurā'ī ĉādar-e mahtāb shab maikash nē jaiḥūn*  
*par*  
*Kaṭōrā ṣubḥ dauṛānē laḡā khurshīd gardūn*  
*par<sup>4</sup>*

Last night, by the bank of Amu Darya the  
 wine-bibber  
 Made away with the white sheet that was  
 the moonlight;  
 At dawn the sun ran the divining cup across  
 the sky.

For Ḥālī, this is not a poem, but a riddle. So why can't a riddle be poetic? After all, severing the mind's connection with emotions and playing with objects and thoughts just for the sake of playing can also be fun. But since such an exercise provides neither emotional gratification nor the means for the community's moral reform and social amelioration, the Maulānā chooses to walk miles away from this path. Consciousness of the nation's decadence and a desire for reform was a little too consuming for him and those of his ilk. To put it briefly, because he could find no better reason to account for the flaws and shortcomings of traditional prose and poetry, he hastened to peg the blame on what he felt was an excess of figurative language and an overabundance of quite remote and far-fetched similes and metaphors in our literature. Precisely why our literature is inferior to that of the West. On the one hand, Ḥālī could write a verse like

*Ik 'umr ṣabiyē keh gavārā hō naish-e 'ishq*  
*Rakk'ī hai āj laẓẓat-e zakhm-e jigar kahān<sup>5</sup>*

One needs a lifetime for love's sting to  
 become bearable  
 How could the wound in the heart begin to  
 feel pleasurable right away

<sup>4</sup>*Kulliyāt-e Shāh Naṣīr*, Vol. II, ed. by Tanvīr Aḥmad 'Alavī (Lahore, Majlis-e Taraqqī-e Adab, 1977), 39. Shāh Naṣīr (1755?–1838) was a famous master of the ghazal from Delhi whose poetry is marked by remote and abstract themes and images. This mode is generally called *khiyāl-bandī* ("depiction of [abstract] ideas").

<sup>5</sup>*Dīvān-e Ḥālī*, 109.

yet, in his criticalizing zeal, give such a definition of metaphor that would scare off any decent person, viz., (1) it provides the means of expressing an elaborate thought in a few words; (2) a dull and boring theme can be brightened up; and (3) in depicting certain types of emotions and thoughts “the flow of the true language becomes terribly constricted” and “ordinary language” sheds tears of frustration so that in such situations it is the metaphor that makes the poem effective and pleasurable. On top of all this, Ḥālī cautions that if the metaphor is difficult to understand its poetic quality is lost.

The sum and substance of Ḥālī’s whole argument is that “real language” is something different from metaphor. It is not that one cannot do without metaphor, but it doubtless is a useful ploy to turn a dull and lifeless idea into an enjoyable one. Of course, the only condition is that we should remain within the confines of reason. But, sir, what do we do if we want to describe an experience which is transcendental in nature or deals with the existential acts of life? As the oft recited line from Bēdil has it

How calamitous that you don’t reach from  
my side up to my side.<sup>6</sup>

Now I don’t know if there is a metaphor here or not. But whatever it is, is it close to reason or comprehension? Has this verse become a riddle because it eludes easy understanding? If Ḥālī had not been so anxious to found an Aligarh<sup>7</sup> in the world of literature, he would have found things

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<sup>6</sup>Mirzā ‘Abdu’l-Qādir Bēdil (1644–1720), arguably the greatest Indian Persian poet after Amīr Khusrau, the full verse runs as follows:

*Hama ‘umr bā tū qadh̄ zadam-o-narafi-ra  
ranj-e khumār-e mā  
Āhe qiyāmati keh namī rasī ze kinār-e mā ba-  
kinār-e mā*

I spent a lifetime drinking in your company  
but the grief of my thirst didn’t go away,  
How calamitous that you don’t reach from  
my side up to my side.

<sup>7</sup>The Muhammadan Anglo Oriental College at Aligarh which was established as a “modern Westernized” educational institution by Sir Sayyid Ahmad

in his own literature which could have afforded him an understanding of the nature of metaphor, had he so much as studied them. Anyhow, the cautiousness and the narrow-minded rationalistic attitude of critics like Ḥālī and others produced a fear of metaphor in the mind of the Urdu people. Walking the narrow path of this kind of “Follow the West” agenda, we arrived at a stage where one of our own critics pronounced the following verse to be devoid of sense:

*Ga'ē voh din keh thā shōr-e 'anādil ṣahm-e  
gulshan mēñ  
Khizāñ kā vaqt hai baiṭhē hū'ē kauwē uṛātē  
haiñ<sup>8</sup>*

The days are past when the chatter of the  
bulbuls filled the garden,  
Now it is the season of the sere; idly I keep  
driving away the crows.

Ḥālī was certainly a good poet himself, and also possessed a flair for a certain kind of poetry, but he also is the pioneer of such degradation of good taste. And this is not a problem of literature alone. A person or persons who are afraid of metaphor are actually afraid of the manifestations and energies of life, of the act of living itself. Ḥālī had the courage at least to confess:

*Ham kō bahār mēñ bhī sar-e gulistāñ na thā  
Ya'ñī khizāñ sē pahlē hī dil sbādmāñ na thā<sup>9</sup>*

I didn't have a desire for the garden even in  
the spring  
That is, my heart wasn't happy even before  
the autumn came

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Khan and which later became a university now known worldwide as Aligarh Muslim University.

<sup>8</sup>Askarī doesn't identify the poet or the critic. My efforts to do so failed to produce any result. However, the point is clear enough. The verse is not a particularly good one, but it makes perfect sense in the context of the domain of meaning in which the Urdu ghazal operates.

<sup>9</sup>*Divān-e Ḥālī*, 68.

but those who came after him kept running away from life even as they uttered life's name.

As I said earlier, Ḥālī's fundamental error was that he considered metaphor to be distinct from "real language." Probably what he meant by "real language" was that language came into existence to express only those emotions and thoughts over which our conscious mind has full control. But neither is the conscious mind the most basic and original element of human existence, nor are man's modes of expression limited to language alone. Man is neither only spirit nor only mind, but before all else, he is a living system. Moreover, as a medium of expression, language occupies only a secondary status in both our collective and individual evolution and only materializes after man has gone through several other stages of development. A baby expresses its experience first of all through bodily-actions. Even when it starts to speak its experiences are not rational or mental, but rather, instinctive. Thus, in man's social or individual existence, the experiences that he first has to deal with aren't philosophies of the rise and fall of nations but a combination of bodily facts and the clash of instincts. One may become an historian, social reformer or philosopher, yet even as he talks about the most profound philosophical matter he remains a captive of the struggle with his instinctual powers, though he may or may not be conscious of it. Man wants to escape from instincts through his mind. But instinct lies in ambush in the very back of the mind. In short, whatever words we utter, there lies hidden behind them some forgotten or suppressed experience, and in fact, a whole life's worth of experience. So, every phrase is a metaphor. There is no "real language" distinct from metaphor, because language itself is metaphor. This is because language arises from the effort to find congruence and connection between outward objects and inner experience, or from trying to make outward objects stand for inner experience. That's why almost every word is a dead metaphor, and this is what real language is.

It may be objected here that if every word is a metaphor then why discuss metaphor separately, or that a student of literature need have nothing to do with metaphors which can be understood only by experts in psychology for we are concerned with only those metaphors which can be understood as metaphors by us too—metaphors which the poet or prose writer creates in his capacity as an individual. All right, then let's call them "living" metaphors for the sake of distinguishing them from general words. But both living and dead metaphors are created by the same process and according to the same principle. The process of the birth of a metaphor is the same as the process of the birth of a dream.

Man wants to accept his experiences and also reject them. Since there is no way to present the experience directly, indeed it simply cannot be, reconciliation between both of these conflicting tendencies is possible only by selecting some external object to serve as a substitute for the experience. No matter whether this process generates a dream or a metaphor, the end product will include our conscious mind, our personal as well as collective subconscious, our feelings, emotions and thoughts, along with that part of our environment which we have internalized. Therefore, the creation of metaphors calls for two kinds of courage in a writer. One, that of squarely facing his unconscious, and two, that of breaking out of the cocoon of his ego and establishing links with the world around him.

Questions of logic or plausibility do not arise in metaphor. The thing to see is how well the maker of the metaphor has been able to establish connections between different components of the experience and blend them into a new and meaningful unity. The issue is not one of simply brightening up a dull and drab theme, but rather of creative expression itself. A distinction between prose and poetry too is unwarranted here in my opinion, for after Flaubert and Joyce it is no longer possible for criticism to keep the two apart. Whether writing poetry or prose, one must, of necessity, accept and blend both the outer and the inner world, which is precisely what gives birth to metaphor. Metaphor in fact oozes out of the nerves of human experience. This is not something to do with rationality and so forth. Just as a healthy person or a seeker of health cannot do without dreaming, the creation of metaphor is an inevitable process in literature. That one may reject this process or arrest it in order to cut back on his creative capabilities is another matter.

Dr. Johnson said about Swift that this rascal never risks using metaphor. Johnson was of course referring to a special mode of writing, nonetheless he has revealed a psychological truth in this phrase. For some people metaphor does indeed imply a grave danger. Such people shy away from both the life-giving as well as the destructive powers of instincts and construct a narrow rational system for themselves, or they shut themselves up behind the fortress of reason. Since metaphor defies reason and logic, their whole order of life feels threatened whenever a metaphor so much as raises its head in their mind. Such people can survive only with certain special conditions. Remove those conditions and their life becomes disoriented. Therefore, the fear of metaphor is actually the fear of non-rational experiences. Denial of metaphor is the denial of life itself.

As I said earlier, metaphor comes into being when one accepts unhesitatingly both one's inner experiences and the external world. If one

remained entangled within one's self, or became a victim of self-love to such an extent that no connection with the outer world remained, or if one lost the ability to accept his experiences, then never mind fashioning metaphors, he wouldn't be able to perform any creative task at all, perhaps not even earn his livelihood.

If a writer never uses metaphor, or hardly ever uses it, it obviously means that he has been able to accept only a small portion of his experiences and is totally lacking in the ability to acquire new ones. He may still be able to do a bit of writing, but he will, at the most, end up as another Ḥālī. Or else, in order to become a major writer such a person should be so puissant that even as he acquires new experiences he doesn't allow them to destroy his psyche, rather these become part of it somehow. Such a person may well become a major writer like Swift but his creativity would likely not develop fully; furthermore, he would have to pay a heavy price for preserving his mental balance. Swift himself turned mad toward the end of his life. Besides, we should not forget that even though such a major writer may consciously avoid metaphor and his writings may not display any overt metaphor, the whole of his creative product, whether a poem or short story, becomes a universal metaphor in itself. For instance, Swift's story of Gulliver has the power of "myth," let alone mere "metaphor." It is inconceivable that a person who has such a command over his inner and outer existence as Swift did, fails to create metaphor in some form or other.

Conversely, one could envisage a situation in which one literally stuffs one's writing with metaphor. This might mean that such a person, though he's impatient to acquire ever-newer experiences, is yet incapable of ordering them and, hence, the experiences are breaking free of his control. Or, if metaphors are being used pointlessly and compulsively, it could possibly mean that a person's mind and emotions have gotten misaligned and his mind is playing with objects and thoughts for the sake of amusement, or his mind is occupied with some sort of psychological self-indulgence. Finally—and this is the worthiest of all instances—metaphor should be used not just for expressing but also for ordering and organizing experience. Nevertheless, the presence of metaphor goes to prove that the writer has the capacity, small or large, to accept his experiences, acquire new ones and, if need be, crumble his earlier mental structure in favor of a new one.

Now let's take a look at what we get from metaphor. In the first place, it reawakens forgotten experiences. We are able to reach down to the very wellsprings of energy which lie buried beneath our mind and



reason; but even more importantly, metaphor closes the gap between emotion and thought and melds them into a unity. The union of conscious and unconscious, of mind and body, individual and community, man and universe is accomplished through it. Such union may not have a lasting impact but it does heal, however briefly, the fragmented self. If human existence can ever be seen as a unity, it is in metaphor. Maulānā Rūm<sup>10</sup> has said that when love enters the heart, it drives out the worship of the self. The same is the case with metaphor. Egoism and metaphor are the opposite of each other. For what else is metaphor if not the effort to find a kinship between personal experience and external objects. Only such a person is afraid of metaphor who cannot get past himself and regards the knowledge of the external world derived either through his senses or his intellect a calamity. The use of metaphor implies nothing less than the desire to get out of the dark hole of the self and move courageously forward to embrace the world. In fact, I would even go so far as to say that metaphor is used only by someone who has the capacity for true love. If you want proof, read Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. The moment Romeo falls in love with Juliet even the most ungainly things in the universe become a metaphor of love for him. Romeo's love was not some dreary, insipid affair that he was trying to make pleasurable with the help of metaphors; rather, metaphor was the "real language" of this love. As soon as he fell in love, Romeo's self-love evaporated, so much so that he started embracing the meanest things in the universe. Both universe-embracing love and metaphor flood the mind and heart of Romeo simultaneously because it's just not possible to use metaphor without, at the same time, loving the external world. On the other hand, its use compels us to fall in love with the world. The very condition for making a metaphor is that one should be ready to reach out to the ugliest thing in the universe and, in turn, allow oneself to be absorbed by it. Metaphor is a means of interfusing man and universe. All things, including ourselves, are metamorphosed in this process; man and universe become parts of a supreme Unity. Naziri<sup>11</sup> has expressed this very truth by no other means than metaphor:

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<sup>10</sup>I.e., Jalālu'd-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273).

<sup>11</sup>Muḥammad Ḥusain Nazīrī of Nishapur, Iran was a major Persian poet of the "Indian Style" (*Sabk-e Hindī*). He lived a good part of his life in India, where he died in Ahmadabad, Gujarat in 1614.

*Keh jilā yāfta az khār-e mughilān gashtam*

Sometimes I was burnished by the thorns of  
the acacia tree.

It is obvious that forming such a close relationship with the universe, one has to encounter not just pleasure but also pain and sorrow. The universe invites us lovingly but scares us away too. The soul of metaphor resides in this combination of joy and sorrow. This joy and sorrow are “beyond comprehension” and above and beyond rationality. This is why a metaphor becomes a metaphor only after it defies reason, even though Maulānā Ḥālī may not be up to it.

After love, the quality next needed for metaphor is humility, that is, the ability not to regard the very principles of one’s life as the only principles of life. Metaphor is all about the fact that diverse principles operate simultaneously in the universe—principles that may be different or similar, but which, in spite of their obvious and clear differences, are nonetheless able to absorb each other and forge a unity superior to their lone selves. For instance, Balzac has compared the buildings of Paris to the Russian Steppes and the street borders to the white and angry waves of an ocean. Both of these ideas are “above reason” and “nonsensical,” but Balzac has brought together two principles of existence with the help of metaphor. You have nature on one side and the artificial life of the city on the other. Balzac has hinted at the resemblance between the two and suggested that the city dwellers may have estranged themselves from nature but through their sheer *élan vital* they have managed to give such power and substance to artificial objects that these can compete with nature. Another meaning that can be derived from this is that however much man may create an unnatural environment for himself, the human soul will still tend to explain its deeper meaning in terms of nature and will end up submerging the unnatural environment too in nature. Now let’s see if Maulānā Ḥālī can tell us how all these ideas can be expressed in “real language.”

Before I conclude, let me look at another example. Proust has compared tablecloths in a hotel to the covers over the altar on which the rays of the setting sun fall. If one were to go by Ḥālī, this simile too would be inappropriate, far-fetched and beyond comprehension because a hotel can never be sacred like an altar. But Proust’s point is that for some people worldly life is no less serious than religion, and this happens in the most innocent way possible. This is also, like religion, a way of organizing one’s

life, and therefore worthy of respect. Then again, worldly sophistication, like religion, also demands major sacrifices. Proust's novel is full of such incidents. Thus, this metaphor is joyful on the one hand and sorrowful on the other. Proust has condensed his entire novel into this metaphor. Only metaphor can unite such antithetical principles and energies of existence and give them a wholly new character.

So what did I do wrong when I said that those who fight shy of metaphor actually fight shy of the energies of life. Since they lack the courage to absorb newer realities of experience, such people feel threatened by anything which may be illogical in nature, and it is in the nature of metaphor to drag along in its wake all experiences that are illogical or difficult to understand. And, therefore, metaphor is a truly fearful thing.

In short, if an occasional writer or two is afraid of metaphor, let him be afraid. But if generation after generation of writers for a whole century trembles at the thought of metaphor, what will the consequences be? Now, don't force me to tell all. □

—*Translated by Baran Rehman*