

Chapter – V

*Wit and Humour in
Ghalib's Compositions*

CHAPTER-V

WIT AND HUMOUR IN MIRZA GHALIB'S COMPOSITIONS

Ghalib's poetry and letters are replete with wit and humour. Infact, in his practical life too, he used to make witty remarks on things around him. This is the quality which made Ghalib dear among his friends. His humour neither bites nor stings and is still as effective as he meant it to be.

We can broadly categorize the use of wit and humour in Ghalib's compositions, under three headings:

1. Use of wit and humour in poetry.
2. Use of wit and humour in letters.
3. His witty remarks in day to day life.

1. Use of Wit and Humour in Poetry:

It seems most of the well known writers in history were endowed with certain dose of wit and humour. "Two of the greatest English authors, William Shakespeare and George Bernard Shaw almost solely thrived in jests and jokes. But, Ghalib's humour is a class apart. It is neither akin to the buffoonery of Shakespeare, nor the farce of G.B. Shaw. It is something sublime, self effacing and highly subtle." (Sud, 1989)

There are plenty of verses in Ghalib's Urdu Deewan which show how light hearted he was.

“Whenever a special dish was prepared in the palace, the king used to send a share of it to his courtiers and companions among who was Ghalib as well. The poet used to thank the royal patron by writing a stanza on the subject. He wrote the following two verses when the king sent him a loaf made from Gram powder.” (Sud, 1989)

نہ پوچھ اسکی حقیقت حضور والانے
مجھے جو بھیجی ہے بسن کی روغنی روٹی
نہ کھاتے گیہوں نکلتے نہ خلد سے باہر
جو کھاتے حضرت آدم یہ بیسنی روٹی

Na pooch iski haqeeqat huzoor-e-wala ne,
Mujhe jo bheji hai besan ki roghani roti.
Na khate gehun nikalte na khuld se bahar,
Jo khate hazrat-e-Adam ye besani roti.

Do not ask me to describe the reality (real taste) of the buttered besan (gram power) loaf which his majesty has sent to me. Only if Adam had eaten this loaf made of besan (gram power), he would not have taken wheat and therefore not been thrown out of paradise.

Wit and humour occurs like a constant refrain in his works. He does not spare anyone, not even his beloved. About the beloved he says:

پوچھ مت، رسوائی انداز استغنائے حسن
دست مرہون حنا، رخسار، رہن غازہ تھا

Pooch mat, ruswaai-e-andaz-e-istighnaa-e-husn,
Dast marhoon-e-hena, rukhsar, rehn-e-ghaza tha.

The beauty was complacent and over confident with the use of hina (colour) in her hands and blush on her cheeks. The poet feels this complacency is disgraceful.

Ghalib had the gift of saying the right thing at the right moment. Once, a creditor sued him for breaking his promise. Addressing the judge Ghalib said:

قرض کی پیتے تھے مے، لیکن سمجھتے تھے کہ ہاں
رنگ لائیگی ہماری فاقتہ مستی ایک دن

Qarz ki peete the mai, lekin samajhte the ki haan,
Rang laaegi hamari faqa masti ek din.

As I used to drink on borrowed funds, but I knew inside my heart that my revelry, hunger-haunted ways will one day bring me to my doom.

At this, the judge was so much delighted that he quitted Ghalib and paid his debt from his own pocket.

"Ghalib was at his humour best while describing his own poverty and plight. His house was in utter despair for lack of funds. During the rains, it leaked and the walls turned green due to the growth of moss on them. Ghalib wrote a couplet which typifies his sense of humour and at the same time tells us how hard up he was." (Sud, 1989)

اگ رہا ہے درو دیوار سے سبزہ غالب
ہم بیاباں میں ہیں، اور گھر میں بہار آئی ہے

Ug raha hai dar-o-deewar se sabza, Ghalib,
Hum bayabaan mein hain, aur ghar me bahar aai hai.

Grass is growing on the door and walls of the house,
Ghalib. It is a pity that I happen to be in a desolate place just
when the spring is visiting my house.

Ghalib pokes fun even on his own self which is not an
easy task for any other person.

ہو گا کوئی ایسا بھی کہ غالب کو نہ جانے

شاعر تو وہ اچھا ہے، پہ بدنام بہت ہے

Hoga koi aisa bhi ki Ghalib ko na jaane,
Shair to woh accha hai, pa badnaam bahot hai.

I doubt if there be anyone who does not know Ghalib by
name. There is no doubt that he is an able poet, but he is
known by ill fame.

During the last period of his life, Ghalib happened to live
in a house which was situated behind a mosque. Someone
asked him about his residence and he says:

مسجد کے زیر سایہ، ایک گھر بنا لیا ہے

یہ بندہ کمینہ، ہمسایہ خدا ہے

Masjid ke zere saaya ek ghar bana liye hai,
Ye banda-e-kameena humsaaya-e-khuda hai.

He (Ghalib) has made a house under the shade of the mosque (just look at him). This wicked slave is now a neighbour of God.

Ghalib was not in a habit of performing religious worships. Therefore he laughs at himself in these words:

جانتا ہوں ثواب طاعت و زہد

پر طبیعت ادھر نہیں آتی

Janta hun sawaab-e-ta'at-o-zohd,

Par tabieyat idhar nahin aati.

I know the reward that I would gain, if I were to pray and abstain. But strange enough, my nature is not inclined towards this side.

Wit and humour has always been used as a weapon for social reforms by eminent authors. In comparison to the age of Ghalib, today's society is in acute need of reforms. In the light of this if we look at Ghalib's verses, we find that these carry broad meanings in terms of social reforms. His delineation of wit and humour also shows how talented was he in understanding human psychology. Moreover, if we minutely observe some of his couplets, we find an indirect satire on the superficial religiosity and obsolete concepts of society. "In a jovial tone, Ghalib has tried to make people realize the real spirit of religious rituals by commenting meaningfully on the superficial following of religion like observing fast, prayer etc." (Umar, 1987) About fast, he says in a quatrain:

افطار صوم کی کچھ اگر دست گاہ ہو
اس شخص کو ضرور ہے روزہ رکھا کرے
جس پاس روزہ کھول کر کھانے کو کچھ نہ ہو
روزہ اگر نہ کھائے تو ناچار کیا کرے

Aftar-e-saum ki kuch agar dast gaah ho,
Us shakhs ko zaroor hai roza rakha kare.
Jis paas roza khol kar khane ko kuch na ho,
Roza agar na khaae to naachar kya kare.

Let those observe fast who can afford to feast in the evening (who have sufficient edible things available to eat). But he, who has nothing to eat when he breaks his fast, should be excused if he eats the fast itself.

The poet's casual references to the devotee and his satire at the priest show the real humourist in him. Moreover, it also presents a comment on those preachers who do not follow the religion in it's real sense. For example, Ghalib says about the preachers:

کہاں مے خانہ کا دروازہ غالب! اور کہاں واعظ
پر اتنا جانتے ہیں، کل وہ جاتا تھا، کہ ہم نکلے

Kahaan maikhana ka darwaaza Ghalib! Aur kahan waez,
Par inta jaante hain, kal who jaata tha, ki hum nikle.

O Ghalib! How apart are the preacher and the door of tavern. Yet I found the preacher entering there yesterday, as I was coming out.

Again, Ghalib says:

حضرت ناصح گر آئیں، دیدہ و دل فرش راہ
کوئی مجھ کو یہ تو سمجھا دو، کہ سمجھائیں گے کیا

Hazrat-e-naaseh gar aaen, deeda-o-dil farsh-e-raah,
Koi mujhko yeh to samjha do ki samjhaenge kya.

If the preacher must come here to preach, a hearty welcome to his grace. But will someone make me understand what has he got to preach?

واعظ نہ تم پیونہ کسی کو پلا سکو
کیا بات ہے تمہاری شراب طہور کی

Waaiz na tum piyo, na kisi ki pila sako,
Kya baat hai tumhari sharab-e-tahoor ki.

You can neither drink yourself, nor serve it to anyone of your mates, preacher. Then why should anyone care for your heavens pious wine (that you keep on promising).

Ghalib, in some of his couplets, does not spare even Angels, heaven and hell.

پکڑے جاتے ہیں فرشتوں کے لکھے پر نا حق
آدمی کوئی ہمارا دم تحریر بھی تھا

Pakre jaate hain farishton ke likhe par naa haque,
Aadmi koi humara dam-e-tahreer bhi tha

We are punished without a cause, on account of what angles write about us. Was there someone from our side, when the angles sat down to write?

About heaven the poet writes ironically:

طاعت میں تارہے نہ مے وانگبین کی لاگ
دوزخ میں ڈال دو کوئی لے کر بہشت کو

Taat mein taa rahe na mai-o-angabin ki laaq,
Dozakh mein daal do koii lekar bahisht ko.

So that devotion should be freed from the greed of heaven's wine and honey, let someone take hold of paradise and cast it into hell. Because that devotion is hardly a devotion which is based on the greed of heaven's prise.

ستائش گرہے زاہد اس قدر جس باغ رضواں کا
وہ ایک گل دستہ ہے، ہم بیخودوں کے طاق نسیاں کا

Sataaish gar hai zaahid is qadar jis baagh-e-rizwaan ka,
Wo ek guldasta hai hum bekhudon ke taaq-e-nisyaan ka.

The garden of paradise which the pious hermit keeps on praising so much is just a bunch of flowers, forgotten and out of sight, for us, the self-enthralled person.

Thus we see that Ghalib was fully aware of drawbacks of the society he lived in. He was annoyed at mere outward religious worship that was dissociated from it's real spirit. Therefore, with the help of witticism, the poet has tried to eradicate the above stated drawback.

USE OF WIT AND HUMOUR IN LETTERS

The Persian letters of Mirza Ghalib belonging to the early stages lack that subtle humour that became the distinctive feature of Urdu letters belonging to the latter period of his life.

This is because with due course of time Ghalib attained maturity in thoughts and perceptions and gradually he started feeling the sweet and bitter realities of life. Almost throughout his life, the poet suffered a lot. During the later period of his life, wit and humour were the best weapons in his hands to safeguard himself from agonizing memories of life. (Anjum, 1991)

All his life, Ghalib was subjected to plenty of distress and miseries that are reflected in his delineation of wit and humour. He started facing problems of life when he was a youngster. With the passage of time those afflictions got increased. His defeat in the case of Pension, the tragedy of being in jail for twice, the failed revolution of 1857, the murder of lots of friends, relatives and disciples, separation from remaining other closed ones, the poverty of the whole life and the long lasting illness of the old age were sufficient for making such a sensitive person as Ghalib, mad. But, his senses were intact till the last days because he had an extraordinary will power which enabled him to make an adjustment with the ups and downs of life. Ghalib strongly believed that the plant of life gets nourished under the shades of sorrow and happiness. He looks at life and its issues with a conscious and intellectual outlook. Therefore, in spite of being tired of hardships, he did not escape from life. Rather, those miseries created vigour, vitality, patience and courage in him, and at the same time teach us to face the problems of life whole heartedly.

Like a real humourist, the poet passes smiling through the unevenness and ruggedness of life. We can not find shallowness in his humour. On the contrary, we find a blunt expression of inconsistencies of life. The source of his wit and humour lies in the deprivations of life. This is why his humour is so vigorous and lively.

While writing letters, Ghalib is fully aware of the fact that he should not bother others with description of his troubles. He describes his griefs very interestingly. In one of his letters to Meer Sarfaraz, he laments his solitude and talks about those friends who have been separated from him. Then suddenly he turns the topic and says:

"O God! I am the mourner of the thousands of people who have died. When I shall die, who will be there to cry for me? Listen, O Ghalib, why this lamentation and crying. Let us talk of intimacy and friendship." (Ghalib, 1899)

We can hardly find a person who writes a letter informing about somebody's death and who uses humorous tone to change the mood of the addresses. We see Ghalib using this technique of wit and humour in his letters so that the letters should not be filled with pathos. He loosed one of his relatives, who happened to be his aunt. Let us see how he informs Munshi Nabi Bakhsh Haqeer about her death.

"Respected brother, I have also become a sympathizer with you. I mean to say that on Wednesday i.e. on 18th Rabi-ul-Awwal in the evening, my aunt passed away, whom I had taken

to be my mother since childhood and even she considered me as his son. Let me inform you, that, day before my nine people died. Three aunt, three uncle, one father, one grandmother and a grandfather. I mean to say that with her presence (late aunt) I knew that these nine people were alive and because of her death I came to know that all of a sudden these nine people have also died." (Anjum, 1987)

The poet passed whole life, safeguarding his ego. But practically when his ego gets hurt, he does not spare even his own self and makes fun of his own personality.

In one of his letters to Mirza Qurban Ali Beg Salik, Ghalib writes about his own self like this:

"There is no expectation even from God. None at all from men. Nothing seems to be possible. I am now my own spectator. I have learnt to enjoy even my grieves and insults. I imagined myself as a different entity, separate from myself. Whatever pain I receive, I, say, well served. Ghalib receives another slap on his face. He was proud of being a great poet and a Persian scholar and thought that he has no peer far and near. Well, deal with the money lenders now. Good riddance! Ghalib has died. An infidel and an atheist have died." (Ghalib, 1899)

In the above letter we can hear an echo of the collapse of his ego. Apparently he has poked fun at his weakness and deprivations but underneath this lies the extreme sense of mental agony.

Using wit and banter in his letters, the poet used to solve his day to day problems. Once he wrote a preface of the first collection of poems by Mirza Tafta. But when Tafta compiled the second collection as well and requested to Ghalib for the preface, the latter sought excuse. Munshi Nabi Bakhsh pleaded on behalf of Tafta and in turn Ghalib writes to him like this:

"I swear, I consider Tafta as my son and I am proud that God has blessed me with such a worthy son as him. Regarding preface let me inform you, that you do not know of my condition. I am about to die. I believe that he (Tafta) and you (Nabi Bakhsh) will accept my excuse and pardon me. God has remitted fast and prayer for me. Would not you and Tafta remit me a preface?" (Anjum, 1987)

Ghalib was passionately fond of mangoes. Writing to a friend he says:

"I can not think of anything which I can ask you to send me from Surat. What is there to be had which can not be had here? No doubt I like mangoes very much, not less than grapes. But how can they reach here safely from Surat and Bombay? The Malda is known here as Pewandi and Vilayati. They are fine indeed and they would be finer still in Surat. But, it seems you would be going out of the way to send them from there to Delhi. The expense of sending mangoes worth a rupee would come to about four rupees by the parcel post and even then perhaps only ten out of four a hundred will arrive here in a sound condition. Please give up the idea of sending me any. Delicious mangoes of every kind can be had here in plenty. The

Nawab of Rampur often sends presents of fine fruit from his garden. While I am writing this I have just received two baskets of mangoes from a friend at Bareilly. They have been opened in my presence but all except 83 out of 200 have become rotten." (Sud, 1989)

On an inquiry from Meer Majrooh if he was receiving his pension properly, Ghalib wrote: "I have learnt the art of living without a livelihood. You do not need to have anxiety on that account. The month of Ramzan I spend eating fasts and as for the future, I leave it to God. If I get nothing else, I can easily live on sorrow." (Ghalib, 1899)

In his correspondence with friends and admirers, the poet was absolutely informal. He enjoyed cutting jokes with them even in letters. Khwaja Bakhsh the tailor was very fat. He came to meet Ghalib for some purpose. Let us see how jovially Ghalib informs Yusuf Mirza about this event: "Yes Sir, yesterday Khwaja Bakhsh the tailor came to me in the afternoon. When I saw him, I knew that an elephant has climbed upstairs. He (Khwaja Bakhsh) said, please convey my servitude to the venerable elder brother when you write to him." (Ghalib, 1899)

Munshi Hargopal Tafta wrote to Ghalib informing him about the death of the second wife of his disciple Umarao Singh and the depressed husband's desire to marry for the third time, so that the new wife could look after his children. Ghalib wrote back the following words: "I pity as well as envy Umarao Singh. My God, here is a man who twice got rid of his shackles and yet does not want to remain free. On the other hand, I have been

carrying a noose (referring to his own wife) round my neck for the last 51 years; it neither breaks nor does it strangle me to death. Tell this fellow, not to make this mistake again. I am willing to take care of his children." (Ghalib, 1899)

Mirza Tafta was insisting to publish his works. Ghalib did not like this idea and tried to persuade him not to get it published. Tafta could not abstain himself. His 'Miratul-Sahaef' had been published and 'Sumbulistan' was under publication. Tafta informed Ghalib about this and the latter got enraged but very patiently he writes to the former (Tafta): "I received your letter from Merrut. I became the spectator of "Miratul-sahaef'. God bless you with the publication of 'Sumbulistan' and let he be your protector. Most part of life has been finished. The rest is passing nicely and will pass on with peace. I think what benefit Urfi got from the fame of his poetry, that I shall receive any from the publicity of my poetry. What reward did Sadi get from 'Boostan', that you are expecting from 'Sumbulistan'. Only God's being is real and everything other than him is only illusionary and transitory. Neither there is any eloquent poetry nor any eloquent poet." (Ghalib, 1899)

Ghalib wrote to a friend in the last week of December 1858. The friend received his letter on the first January of 1859 and sent his reply the same day. In his next letter, Ghalib complained: "My dear.....you replied in 1859 to a letter sent to you in 1858. This I don't like and on the top of it I point it out. You will say: 'I replied to your letter the same day.'" (Anjum, 1991)

Writing to a friend about his house the poet says: "The sitting room is in a worse condition than the ladies apartment. I am not afraid of death. It is lack of rest that is worrying me. The roof has turned into a sieve. If it rains for two hours, the roof continues to leak for four hours." (Sud, 1989)

Ghalib had lots of reverence for human relations. He was always careful of the fact that he should not say anything that hurts someone. In the same way if any friend or disciple would say anything that hurt him mentally, the poet expressed his anger or disliking under the veil of wit and humour. Someone told Nawab Anwar-ul-Daula wrongfully that Ghalib is no more. The Nawab had not been in contact with Ghalib for a long time. When he came to know that the news of Ghalib's death was wrong, he wrote a letter to the poet and mentioned about the rumour. Ghalib comments on that event in these words: "May I be a sacrifice for you on this inquiry, that, as long as you did not listen about my death, you did not ask after me." (Ghalib, 1899)

The poet was so much weighed down by age and worries that he began to pray for death. Meanwhile a pestilence broke out in Delhi. Mir Majrooh made inquiries about it whether the pestilence has gone away or it is still prevailing in the city. Ghalib wrote: "Is there any pestilence that you are asking about? Fie on this pestilence that can not kill even a seventy years old man and woman." (Hali, 1996)

"A few years before the poet passed away, he wrote his own probable date of death. It was the year 1277 according to

the Islamic calendar. By a co-incidence, an epidemic broke out in the city, the same year but the poet survived it. He wrote to a friend: "The prediction about my death was not wrong, i.e. I should have died in that year but I thought it is unbecoming of me to die in an epidemic. It was certainly below my dignity to do so. I shall now sort it out after the pestilence has blown over." (Sud, 1989)

The personal life of Ghalib was a tale of afflictions, sorrow and misfortunes. Moreover the whole society was a prey against grief and sadness. Though Ghalib could be able to escape from the murder, bloodshed, plunder and the resulting destruction of the failed revolution, but all these exerted great influence on his sensitive personality. Still the tragedies of life did not let the flames of his wit and humour extinguish.

GHALIB'S WITTY REMARKS IN DAY TO DAY LIFE

Wit and humour is the dominant feature in most of the talks of Mirza Ghalib. Though he was very lavable by heart, he always enjoyed an edge over others, in witty retort. He did not spare even King Bahadur Shah Zafar and his courtiers, whenever they tried to be funny with him. He particularly enjoyed his witty retort at the rival poets and critics, whose criticism of his compositions was motivated more by wrongful intention than a genuine love of art.

The poet's rich sense of humour made him able to pass his life smiling which otherwise weighed heavily on him on account of his lavish nature, the ungenerosity of his patrons,

the stubbornness of Government officials, the death of his father and uncle when he had not entered his teens and the death of his seven children. His jovial and lively nature saved him many an awkward situation. There are hundreds of anecdotes which show how quick witted was he.

Ghalib was very fond of mangoes and would go to any length for it. His friends and admirers, among who were several Nawabs and noblemen, sent him baskets of the fine varieties of mangoes from very far off places as Surat, Rampur, and Bareilly. Yet his passion for mangoes was impossible to be satisfied. At a meeting where besides Ghalib, a number of other person were present, everybody was expressing his views about the qualities of various types of mangoes. When it was the poet's turn to express his views, he bluntly declared: "All mangoes must have two virtues – they must be sweet and plentiful." (Sud, 1989)

Once Ghalib was walking with the King Bahadur Shah Zafar, in a garden of mango trees, whereupon the king asked him what was he gazing at. Ghalib answered "I am looking at the mangoes to see if any of them bears my name on it." (Siddiqui and Aasi, 1968) The king was very much amused at the implied request; therefore he sent him a large quantity of different varieties of mangoes from the royal garden.

One day Ghalib was talking in the verandah of his house with a friend Hakim Razi-ul-Din Khan who had a strong disliking for mangoes. Suddenly a donkey passed by, smelt the mango skins thrown in the way and walked away. "You see Sir",

remarked Hakim "mango is a thing even donkey does not eat". "Quite true" replied Ghalib, "a donkey does not eat it." (Siddiqui and Aasi, 1968)

Ghalib was fond of playing chess and Chaucer with friends. He was once caught up on the charge of gambling and sent to prison. When he was released, he went to live with Kale Khan who was his well wisher. Someone congratulated Ghalib on his release to which he replied: "Before this I was a prisoner of gore (white skinned i.e. the British) and now I am a prisoner of Kale (Dark Skinned)". (Hali, 1996)

When the Munity was over and Ghalib's pension had not yet been restored Munshi Moti Lal who was a head clerk in Punjab Secretariat of the British Government, came to meet him. During the conversation a sensitive issue as pension, was raised. He therefore said to the visitor: "Call me a Kafir (non-believer) if I have remained without wine for a single day and a sinner if I have offered Namaz even once. Still I am being treated as a rebellion Muslim." (Hali, 1996) Ghalib's close friends and disciples used to assemble at his abode usually in the evening. These people were always ready to serve him. One day the poet was lying down on a cot and suddenly Meer Majrooh came to meet him. Majrooh started pressing the poet's feet. He dissuaded Majrooh from doing so and said: "You are a son of a sayyed. (high cast Muslim) why do you want to load me with a sin", said Ghalib. On the contrary Majrooh continued doing the same when the poet again asked him not to do so Majrooh said: "If you think so you may pay me for my

services". As Majrooh was about to leave after sometime, he asked jokingly for his wages. "What wages, you robbed me of my fatigue, and I robbed you of your's money. That squares it up." (Hali, 1996)

Ghalib used to receive anonymous letters that often contained filthy abuses from his rivals and critics. He read one of these letters in front of Hali. In the concerned letter, someone had abused the poet's mother. Ghalib laughed and said: "Look at this fellow. He does not know the art of abusing someone. It is the daughter who should be abused in the case of an old man like me; for the young man the abuse should be directed at his wife. The mother should be the target while abusing a child." (Shahabi, 1947)

Among his contemporaries, the court poet Zauq was his principle rival. In a gathering, Mirza Ghalib was praising Meer Taqi Meer, while Zauq was all praise for Sauda. Ghalib remarked: "I thought you were Meeri (Protagonist of Mir) but now I find you are Saudai (an insane person)." (Hali, 1996)

Ghalib extended his hospitality to everyone who visited him, in spite of being in a poor financial condition. He never went out without his palanquin carried by four persons and met the nobles and elites of the city on equal terms. One day Deewan Fazal Allah Khan passed by his house without meeting the poet. When the poet came to know about it, he sent Fazal Allah a note saying: "I feel thoroughly ashamed today. What a greater offence can there be than that you should pass by my house and I should not be there to pay you my respects. When

Deewan got this note, he immediately came to visit Ghalib, in a carriage." (Siddiqui and Aasi, 1968)

Ghalib was sick of domestic affairs. On a winter morning he saw a parrot sitting in a corner of the cage with the head drawn between the wings. Addressing it the poet remarked: "O sweet tongued, you have neither a wife nor children. What are you then worried about." (Sud, 1989)

To conclude, Ghalib's wit has multidimensional characteristics. It is not only humorous, but also filled with morality, sadness, natural habits, pleasure, pain and historical events etc. There are education and admonition, as well as a reflection of human relations. If we read each every word of Ghalib's conversation we find spontaneous and natural humorist in him. Besides, Ghalib's use of wit and humour also reflects his intellectual maturity. The above said remarks can be justified if we go through his poetical works, letters, as well as daily conversation that have been dealt with, in the present chapter.