



# Ghalib Ki Dilli (Part II)

RAANA HAIDER

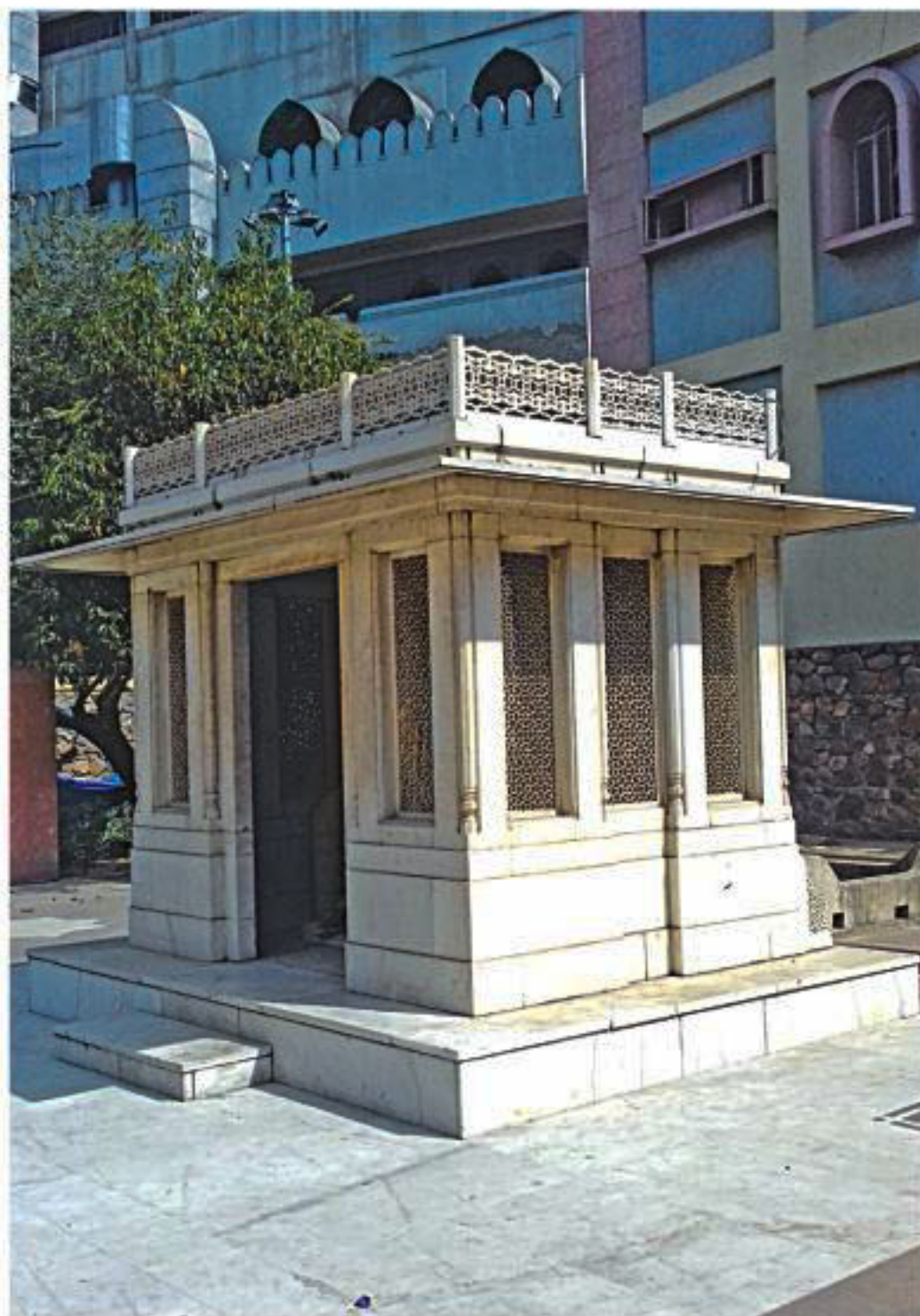
Some years back, I had read of the restoration of the Ghalib haveli. The premises in 1995 had served as a heater workshop. It opened to the public in 2011 and has remained on my bucket list of literary heritage destinations. Zig-zagging through honeycomb passage ways, the dilapidated ruin of a once handsome haveli can be glimpsed. "The interiors of the old havelis - the exquisitely carved residences that once housed the courtiers and craftsmen of Mogul Delhi - have been carved up into warehouses, shops, factories and tenements. The old city - my city - has been buried." This observation appears in a May 1997 copy of National Geographic magazine commemorating "India turning fifty" that I picked up at a second-hand book shop for \$1 in Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA in 2005. I now need to locate a copy of Pavan Varma's book *Mansions at Dusk: The Havelis of Old Delhi* (1992). Obviously, not all havelis are equal.

Getting down from our rickshaw, we stood in awe and humility before a dark and fairly dismal looking mansion. A semi-circular brick arch entrance leads into a small hall, which leads into an equally small courtyard, with open rooms to the left. On the right of the entrance hall is a room having as its centre-piece a marble bust of the nineteenth century poet Mirza Mohammad Asadullah Baig Khan Ghalib. It was presented by Shri Gulzar, the contemporary Urdu poet. He penned the following lines in honour of its revered resident:

*'In one such dark, dimly-lit street  
Where in a row of lit lamp starts,  
Where a new page of poetry begins  
There, the whereabouts of Asadullah  
Khan Ghalib can be found.'*

"Had Ghalib written in English, he would have been the greatest poet of all times, amongst all languages," opines the eminent British scholar of Urdu literature Ralph Russell of the man who was born in Agra in 1797 and began writing poetry in Farsi at the age of nine. The accolade appearing on a plaque adds further gravity to the occasion. Russell is the editor of *The Poet and his Age* (1997); whose contents provide the original Urdu and transcriptions in both Hindi and English scripts. Photographs of Ghalib taken in Agra, Benares, Moradabad and Rampur grace the walls; as do brief biographical sketches. Massive original copies of artistic poetry - *Diwan-e-Ghalib* lie in glass boxes. Large boards offer some of his poetry. One of his literary legacies was written following the reign of terror inflicted on Delhi by the British following the 1857 Uprising. Delhi became *Dilli-e-Marhoom* (the deceased Delhi).

*Every soldier of the English Army  
Is out to do as he likes...  
To get out of the house and walk to the market*



*Needs extreme courage on the part of men.  
Chandni Chowk has been converted into a place of  
execution;  
And my house, well, that is a veritable hell.  
None can go there up from here,  
And none can come here up from there.  
Every particle of dust in the streets of Delhi  
Is thirsty for the blood of the Muslims.*

The actual sighting of his modest accommodation speaks volumes of the life-long pecuniary position of this towering literary figure. It is said that "Happiness is a journey to a destination. No place, after all, is uninteresting to the interested eye." However, to add insult to injury; at the back wall in the corner stands *Aisha International Tours and Travels*. A stairway leading upstairs has sign posted: Photostat and pc. It also offers Sim Card and Fax. Mirza Ghalib must be turning in his grave....An affront to even my sensibilities. Could anyone convey the profound canvas of Life other than Mirza Ghalib?

*If I were given this life  
For some more days  
I have decided  
I would live it  
Some other way.*

*If I was destined  
To bear so much grief  
Then O God  
Why didn't you give  
So many hearts*

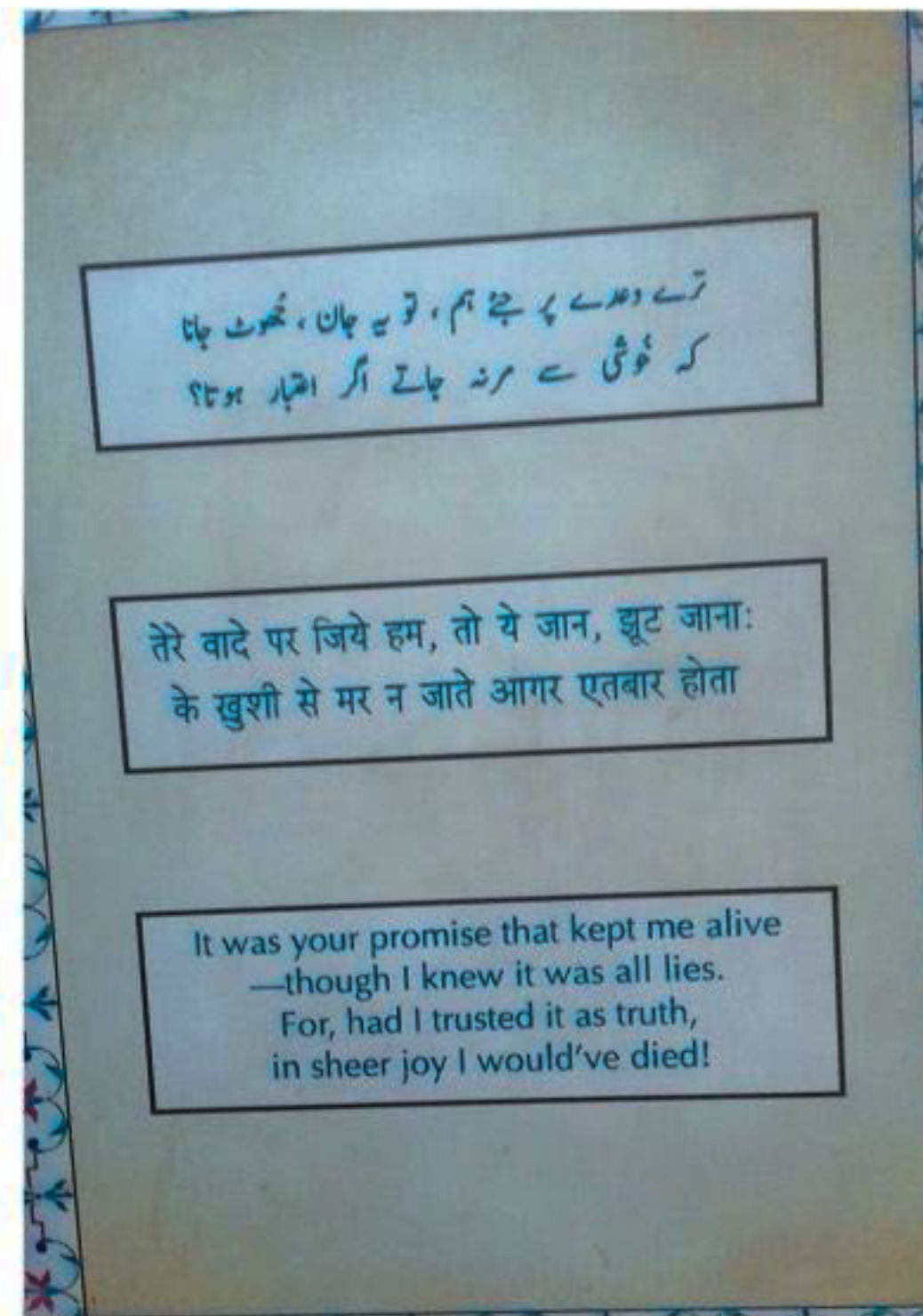


PHOTO: RAANA HAIDER

*To bear that grief.*

*When nothing was, then God was there  
Had nothing been, God would have been  
My being has defeated me  
Had I not been, what would have been.*

A pause from an overwhelming cultural space was then called. We were negotiating the past packed stalls of a crowded culinary canvas of the neighbourhood adjoining the Jame Masjid; tandoori chicken, *naan*, *rumali roti*, *nihari*, *jalebi*, and *kulfi*...However, our destination was Karim, the original eating locale. It claims to have served the Mughal Emperors since 1813. So says the paper napkin: 'Karim since 1813.' Their imperial patronage ceased abruptly with the exile of the last Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar to Rangoon in 1858. Apart from queuing locals; obviously the venue is mentioned in *Lonely Planet* and *Trip Advisor*. Our choice of *murgh pullao*, mutton brain curry and *feermi* was either poor on our part or poor on Karim's part. Myth has overtaken the legend.

From the India International Centre, I walked to Khan Market, the commercial complex built in the 1950s to aid Punjabi and Sikh refugees fleeing West Pakistan in 1947. Built then as shops with accommodation upstairs, these premises now constitute designer boutiques, upscale stores and trendy bistros; fetching enormous rental fees. My destination is Fakir-Chand & Sons, the first bookstore that opened in 1951. It is now run by the founder's grand-daughter. I was looking

forward that afternoon to an expected route in the Lodhi Gardens. I could not resist 'Sunset Club' (2010) by Khushwant Singh who passed away in 2014 at the age of ninety-nine. Three friends now in their eighties, meet during sunset at the vast historical green oasis, inclusive of fifteenth and sixteenth century Lodhi era mausoleums. The book blurb notes: "The Sunset club is Khushwant Singh at his best - as a storyteller, a chronicler of our times, a nature-lover and an irreverent sage." He was also one of those Partition refugees who became a renowned Delhi-wallah. His magnum opus 'Delhi' (1989) has occupied space on my book-shelf for ages. I now need to re-read it. My other purchase was the last copy in stock and out of print; *The Sufi Courtyard: Dargahs of Delhi* by Sadia Dehvi (2012). We were going to visit next morning Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia's Dargah, the fourteenth century Sufi Master and Mirza Ghalib's final resting place in the same neighbourhood. She has dedicated the book to Khushwant Singh. The book blurb notes: "It explores the spiritual, cultural and historical legacy of the Delhi Sufis, making this book as much about Delhi as it is about Sufism."

In the vicinity of the densely populated Nizamuddin Aulia Basti and next to the tomb of the poet is Ghalib Academy which I had visited some years back. Inaugurated in 1969, a museum is located a floor up. That time, I climbed the stairs and entered a hallway with a door ajar that looked like it was my destination. Not a soul in sight. I coughed, searched for someone but no response. Then came my moment to call out: 'Koi Hai!' No one appeared and so I hesitantly opened the door and entered a large room full of the legendary poet's letters, clothing, pen stand, head gear, his poetry, his books, prints and photographs of the Delhi of the day...I could have walked out with a treasure. One more 'Koi Hai'? Silence. I left. This time, a packed room was host to a seminar and the museum was closed.

The simple *jaali*-laced marble mausoleum of the poet laureate of the Urdu language was restored in 2010. We stood before the Mazar-e-Ghalib in reverence and in sublime solitude. None of the exterior hustle bustle intruded this space; this pocket of silence. He has left us with the following verse to ponder:

*What in the world  
Would stop  
When Ghalib  
Is gone?  
Then why  
This weeping  
And why  
This mourning?*

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# Dressed Like a Daydream

T. S. MARIN

I The pool was midnight blue, adorned by the reflection of thousands of stars. It blended perfectly well with my deepest, nearly-pitch-black blue robe - unabashedly studded with thousands and thousands of crystals - in perfect synchronisation with the sky above. *Twinkle twinkle little st...* Alright, focus! But right now, I could not concentrate on this surreal scene. The additive clicking of a professional camera seemed very nauseating, very distant. It was my husband, the famous photographer. I had never learnt swimming. Right now, I was drowning, faster than anyone could possibly imagine - just to serve as his model. His cherubic smile is the last thing I can recall.

II Change of scene. I felt cold, awfully cold. Cold beyond imagination. Was it zero degree Celsius already? Or lower than that? I had no idea. My limbs ached for a droplet of warmth. There was none. The light, sheer, grey dress was as cold as the Tundra snow. My vision became blurred, or was it simply because I was crying silently - in unbearable agony? My muscles turned stiff as did I. *Blue? Or pale blue? What would Pantone name this shade of the skin? Is this skin pretty enough to be the Colour of the Year?* Then, he put me in the big freezer in the kitchen almost in the same manner a mother cradles her first new-born. And of course, he was taking photos of me.

III I had waist-length hair once. As a matter of fact, even a few moments ago, my locks used to fall about my hips. Silky, straight, and shiny - they would take men's breath away and make women green with envy. *Hell, they could give Rapunzel a run for her money! Look you little narcissistic bitch, what your ooh-so-pretty hair has landed you into!* They were on fire now - vivid orange fire to match with my gown perfectly - fire set by him. A toxic odor began filling the room rapidly. Who knew something as elegant as pure crepe silk could smell so foul while on fire? Feeling the heat and groaning with agony,

I fainted. Nevertheless, the clicking continued, I assume.

IV The scene was entirely different this time. I was inside a mirror-made room - locked, to be precise. Before this moment, I actually had no idea that I was apophobic. The magnificent mirror-room was buzzing with millions of bees locked inside it, with me. I do not know when bees attack people - when they are hungry, or scared, or angry. At first, all I could feel was pain and a loud shrill scream. My scream. But after a while, the pain and the screaming ceased. I reckoned this room was sound-proof as I could neither hear his footsteps, nor the sound of lens. Looking at a mirror, I realized that my body was as red as my classic bridal *Benarasee saree*. *Leelabaali leelabaali bhor ojubatee shoi go, ki diya shajaimu tore?* I could also see his ecstatic smile, happy he was with his successful experiment.

V Another episode began. He dressed me in electric blue - in a catchy cocktail number - and tied me to the chair almost lovingly. The electric-chair. The room was semi-dark. I felt kind of tired, tired of anticipation. I could see his curious face. I could see his steady hands gripping the camera. Then it came. The shock. At first mildly; but then it started to increase very, very slowly. In a rhythm. *One-two, one-two-three. One-two one-two-three-four. Lavender's blue dilly dilly, lavender's green, when I'm King dilly dilly, you shall be Queen. One-two one-two-three-four, one-two, one-two-three-four.* My entire frame jerked violently to absorb the shock, and I bit my lips so hard that I could taste my own blood within moments. And then, I collapsed.

VI Have you ever Googled Goth? Image-searched Goth? Well, right now, I looked just like one of those search results - dressed by him in pitch-

black from head-to-toe - in a twentieth century gown - as if I am in a mourning scene from *Penny Dreadful* - with those creepy eye-makeup and scarlet lips. *I always loved Eva Green so, so much. There. There goes my Eva Green dreams - straight outta penny dreadful novel.* Suddenly, I had but one eye. Poisonous pain. I could not even figure out which eye it was! I sobbed uncontrollably. Only he and his lenses could see whether blood was pouring, or tears.

VII It was a lovely, lovely thing. Lethal, yet beautiful. Beautiful, but eerie. Eerie enough to seem divine. The knife was curved out from crystal, and as hard and as sharp as diamond. Did he get it from Swarovski? *Hey, do you remember those Swarovski figurines I used to collect when I was very little? Where are those now? Lurking in the attic? Who else is in the attic? Who else is lurking in the attic? Bertha is in the attic. Bertha Mason is in the attic. Bertha Rochester is in the attic. Nay, Mrs. Rochester is in the attic. The mad woman is in the attic. The mad women are in the attic. All the women are in the attic.* My brain tried to think anything to control the uncontrollable fear creeping inside me. Meanwhile, he quietly slashed my hands, my bare neck and shoulders, my back, my face. Dark crimson blood started to ooze. And then, he set to his real work. My snow-white, multi-layered, lace and tulle gown was painted with blood-red flowers by this time.

Epilogue

Gasping and sweating, I sat up and switched on the light. It was five in the morning. I gulped down half-a-bottle of freezing water, and tried my best to calm myself down. It did not work that well. It never worked. My heart was racing, racing as if I had been running for hours. I breathed deeply. I had no idea how many times I have had this same nightmare, over and over and over again...

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PHOTO: JESSICA SHARMIN