

Sultan Abdul Hamid II: 'The Unspeakable Turk' Fights Back (Part II)

BY GHAZALA SCHEIK AKBAR

Sultan Abdul Hamid's ties to the Indian sub-continent are a revelation for those more accustomed to seeing the name of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk on main thoroughfares or commemorative stamps. Our knowledge of the Ottomans is usually through the lens of our British authored, Euro-centric textbooks. While French, Czarist Russia and Austro-Hungarian Empires merit their own chapters, Ottoman Turkey is lumped with the Balkans under "the Eastern Question." In our own political history, engagement with the Ottomans is restricted to a paragraph or two on the Khilafat Movement of Fez-wearing Indian Muslims. Supported by Gandhi and the Congress Party, they had jointly protested the harsh treatment of Turkey after its defeat in the First World War, demanding the restoration of the Caliphate. Even after the Turkish monarchy was formally abolished by Kemal Atatürk, the ties between the Nizam of Hyderabad remained close enough for the daughter of the deposed Abdul Majid, (effectively the last 'Caliph') to have married Prince Azam Jah, his son and heir in 1930.

In the TV series, a grateful Abdul Hamid II is seen receiving chests of gold and other valuables sent by Indian Muslims to aid the cash-strapped Sultan in financing his pet

Railway project. In one episode, the possession of a notebook, containing the names of all his Indian donors is the cause of much bloodletting by his enemies, desperate to hand these names over to British intelligence. Similarly in Islamic history, we find few references to Sultan Abdul Hamid — a curious omission since the Ottoman Sultan was also the Caliph or Prince of the Faithful. He had wrested this title from the last Abbasid Caliph when the Ottomans conquered Arabia in 1517. Palestine, the Hejaz, Syria, Mesopotamia, Lebanon, Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria were all under Ottoman suzerainty and they

controlled the three Holy places, Makkah, Medina and Jerusalem.

In the light of recent events in the Middle East, the fall of Abdul Hamid and the consequences of his dethronement in 1908 are of utmost significance. It is now widely accepted that the wilful dismemberment of the Ottoman empire after World War I triggered by the 'Arab Revolt' of 2016, a British financed and armed operation, (glamorised and sanitised in the epic film, 'Lawrence of Arabia') is a crucial turning point in world history. The subsequent occupation and partitioning of former Ottoman lands by Britain, France (and even Italy who grabbed Libya in 1912) is the crucible of the Middle East conflict and the current refugee crisis in Europe.

History is full of if and buts and admittedly hindsight has a great vantage point, but it is fair to surmise that if Sultan Abdul Hamid been in office when World War I broke out, it is unlikely that the Sharif Husain of Makkah or his sons could be persuaded by the British to revolt against their Sultan and Caliph. Unlike the secular, hyper nationalist triumvirate of Pashas who ousted him, the conservative, Zikr-chanting Abdul Hamid was a Pan-Islamist, who saw religion as the glue that held his Muslim subjects together. Arabs had held high positions in the army and his administration. Abdul Hamid had also been instrumental in backing Husain as Sharif of Makkah, against the wishes of the Pashas. "I pray that God may punish those who have prevented me from benefitting from your talents," he told Husain before sending him to Makkah. Husain repaid the favour by assisting Abdul Hamid in the failed counter revolution in 1909, offering him a base and sanctuary in Makkah, an invitation the Sultan declined and would live to rue.

When the War reached a bloody stalemate in Europe, and following an unnering defeat of the Allies in Gallipoli by the Turks, the Arabian theatre



was activated. To prevent Turkish troops poised from attacking a vital artery, the Suez Canal, Arabs of the Hejaz were armed and financed to rebel against and harass the Turks in a bloody guerrilla style campaign. In his celebrated book Seven Pillars of Wisdom, Colonel T.E. Lawrence, the British agent who accompanied the fearsome Chieftain Auda Abu Tayi in the taking of the Port of Aqaba, describes one gruesome incident when "three hundred Turkish soldiers were killed in a few minutes."

And in return for this callous blood-letting? Sharif Hussain was given "assurances" he would be King of a unified Arab Kingdom from Palestine to the Persian Gulf; Simultaneously but secretly, Zionists in London were pledged the same piece of real estate for their own "Promised Land." And in a masterly stroke of double and triple cross, there would be a two-way division of the spoils: imperialist mandates in Palestine and Mesopotamia, for Britain, Syria and Lebanon for France, both areas intricately mapped as A and B in the infamous "Sykes - Picot" agreement. And what would become of Turkey? The third wartime ally, Tsarist Russia was to have a prize cherry, the city of Constantinople,

satisfying her long coveted ambition of a passage to the Mediterranean Sea. Fortunately, Russia's new Marxist rulers withdrew from the War and refused to partake in this imperial plunder.

Another revealing exposition of the war aims for the Ottoman territories is this letter by Mark Sykes to his friend Aubrey Herbert, an intelligence officer in the Cairo Bureau: "I perceive by your letter that you are Pro-Turk still...your policy is wrong. Turkey must cease to be Greek. Adalia Italian. Southern Taurus and North Syria, French, Filistin (Palestine) British, Mesopotamia British and everything else Russian. And Noel Buxton and I shall sing a 'Te Deum' in St. Sophia and a 'Nunc Dimittos' in the Mosque of Omar. We will sing it in Welsh, Polish, Celtic and Armenian in honour of all the gallant little nations... stir up mischief in Syria and you will get Germans massacred and the Turks ousted... keep worrying...never leave orientals alone too long. If you don't feel like fighting them, send money and cartridges— never give the Turks a moment of peace."

The desire for Crusader retribution and the singing of celebratory hymns

aside, it was the discovery of vast petroleum deposits, that tipped the scales first against Sultan Abdul Hamid, and later, his successors the Young Turks, who, despite their reforms and Liberal outlook were seen as "atheists and radicals who tried to ape the West without truly understanding it and who continued all the inbred oriental vices of intrigue, treachery and violence." The post-war betrayal of Arab hopes and the arbitrary and callous manner in which Ottoman territory was delineated into fractured nation-states, Israel/ Palestine, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Saudi Arabia suited entirely the commercial, strategic and geo-political interests of the Allies, with scant regard for religious sensibilities or ethnic fault lines. As a contemporary observed "Iraq was created by Churchill who had the mad idea of joining two widely separated oil wells, Kirkuk and Mosul by uniting three widely separated people, the Kurds, the Shias and the Sunnis." A hundred years later the aftershocks are being felt every day.

Mustafa Kemal Pasha is rightly revered as the founder of modern Turkey. After the Allies had occupied Constantinople, he prevented Turkey from being wiped off the map of Europe by organising a military fight back. Having secured its territorial integrity he then put Turkey on the path of modernisation and progress. But let's spare a thought for the much-maligned Sultan Abdul Hamid II. Like that other so-called historical "villain," the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, he merits a re-appraisal. If "bloody" Czar Nicholas II can be elevated to Sainthood by the Orthodox Russian Church, the "Unspeakable Turk" needs rehabilitation too. A road or building named after him might be a good idea in historical restitution.

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REVIEWS

On Intimations of Ghalib: Translations from the Urdu

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REVIEWED BY AHRAR AHMAD

Mirza Asadullah Beg Khan (1797 – 1869), popularly known by his takhallus (pen name) Ghalib (conqueror), makes it difficult for writers to sum him up easily or definitively. He himself would probably have taken great and impish delight in that knowledge. In one of his ghazals he suggests (Shahid Alam's translation):

"Cold, sly, insouciant? Many Gardens burn inside me..."

He is gone, Asadullah Khan-Sinner, lover, Ah what a man."

Some basic facts may be relevant in understanding Ghalib. He was of Central Asian ancestry, and belonged to a family with a long tradition of military service to various authorities (the Nizam's army, the French, the Marathas, the Mughals). His father was killed in a military engagement when Ghalib was only five and his uncle who was bringing him up in another skirmish four years later. He lived with his mother's family in Agra in reasonable comfort and a lively cultural environment with his grandfather himself a poet of some diligence and distinction, also with teachers like the learned Shaikh Muazzam, and the Parsi scholar and poet, Hurmuzd who were both keen and skilled students/practitioners of Persian language and literature. When he was thirteen, he was married to an unassuming and devoted woman who came from a family of fairly comfortable means and aristocratic bearings, and moved to Delhi. He spent the rest of his life in this city, except for a couple of years in Kolkata in 1828 to pursue a government pension to which he felt entitled (he did not get it).

That brief biographical paragraph was intended to highlight several features of Ghalib's early life which may have influenced, or have been reflected in, his life and literature. First, family tragedies he had encountered as a child gave him good reason to shy away from a life of

military service to any authority, and made him skeptical about soldierly bravado and glory. The viciousness of the military campaigns during the War of Independence in 1857, practiced both by the British (particularly in Delhi) and, perhaps in lesser measure, by "native patriots" elsewhere, left Ghalib horrified and grief-stricken (as described in his *Dastanbu*, his memoirs of the period).

Second, the fact that both his father and uncle had died when he was merely a boy meant that he grew up in an environment without the anchor, support and discipline that a male guardian or a father figure could have provided. This may partly explain his intellectual restlessness and angst as he was growing up, and perhaps, provided him with a sense of free-spirited autonomy that he relished, both in his life style and in his craft.

Third, his early education and his grandfather's literary leanings created the enabling conditions that nurtured his poetry. He was obviously a precocious child, writing poetry from a very young age and had completed most of his Urdu *divan* by his early twenties. But more importantly, his appreciation of and his induction into the Persian literary tradition became possible because of his early tutors. Since the language of the Court was Persian, and it enjoyed a higher status among the Delhi literati he began writing mostly in Persian and returned to Urdu only fitfully and casually in his later life. This is a bit ironic because his considerable and growing literary

presence today is largely, if not exclusively based on his Urdu writings, and his reception as a poet in Persia, though respectful, has probably been mild.

Fourth, Delhi itself became part of his identity and contributed to his flamboyance. The charms, seductions and opportunities presented by the city, both in terms of the gathering of poets and musicians who flocked there (the Emperor himself a poet of some sensitivity and substance was an ardent patron of the arts), and the "salon culture" that flourished during the period gave him occasion to pursue the indulgences that friends, female companionship and (French) wine provided.

But time and place cannot explain some of the paradoxes and contradictions that defined him. On the one hand he was a proud man. Once he refused the offer to teach in the Delhi College simply because he felt that the relevant official had not shown him due deference. But, he could also go to great and awkward lengths, e.g., appealing to noble men, petitioning the government (including Queen Victoria), filing legal briefs, and so on to pursue entitlements and claims in his relentless search for material comfort (which always seemed to elude him).

He could be very gracious in his praise of others and in his demonstrations of personal generosity. But, he could also be harsh, and ridicule rivals such as the "court poet" Zauq and even at times, the Emperor himself (though he could be quite fawning in his efforts to access the

Emperor's favors). He could be a dutiful husband. But his family life was not particularly joyful, he had seven children all of whom died in infancy and his wife remained at best a shadowy figure in his life or poetry. He could remain a practicing Muslim (quite emphatically maintained in his correspondence). But his faith was probably complicated by his wry, often irreverent, sense of humor, his eager embrace of non-Muslim friends and admirers, and his "need" to find solace in wine and other sensual pleasures to "forget himself" or "take away his sorrow."

The complexity of his life was reproduced in his literary oeuvre as well. Moreover, his verbal fluidity, intellectual audacity, and density of sentiment and expression- all present daunting difficulties for translators. As Alam points out in his brief, but informed and thoughtful, introduction in his new book, ghazals generally do not travel well across linguistic and civilizational divides, Ghalib even less so.

First, there is the suggestiveness and the abstractions inherent in Persian and Urdu, both languages rich in texture and allusion, internal rhythms, and subtle and shifting meanings of words. Second, ghazals represent a literature of utterance meant to be recited in an interactive public performance where resonance and cadence, tonality and imagery, rhetorical tension and auditory imagination (as Eliot would put it) take precedence over logic, realism, or thematic unity. Third, the formal conventions of the "ghazal" could be quite rigorous and stylized, difficult to replicate.

However, Alam rises to the challenge with heroic determination. Ever since Aijaz Ahmad's bold exercise in getting several Pulitzer Prize winning Western poets to "transcreate" the meaning of some ghazals of Ghalib in 1971 followed by the efforts of Robert Bly and Sunil Datta in 1999, and several individual and disparate efforts by others, and given the increasing popularity of ghazals and

Ghalib over time (even in the West), a new translation was long over-due. Alam deserves our gratitude for filling that need.

With his fidelity to the original form of the ghazal (including his use of the matla, maqtaad radeef, i.e., patterns of rhyme and refrain that ghazals demand), his alertness to contemporary linguistic norms and habits, and his own finely honed aesthetic sensibility and grasp of cultural nuance, Alam captures Ghalib's wit and lyricism with impressive confidence, integrity and resourcefulness. This is all the more extraordinary because Alam is an economist by profession, an activist for Palestinian causes by moral compulsion, and a poet only later. Perhaps the success of this project might inspire him to spend more time where his heart truly belongs.

My own Urdu is inadequate to be able to judge the quality of his translations, or compare them with others, but I can always attest to the beauty of what he presents. Here is an example.

He blanched, nearly died, at love's first swagger.
If love takes your head, surrender it, be free.

In silent arteries, time irrigates your flesh.
In this death-crafted life, we crave to be free.

Catch this fever once, it becomes your life.
The heart grows in pain till death sets you free.

My friends never found a cure for my rage.
Lashed to the cross, I walk the desert free.

In death Ghalib lay uncoffined, unwashed.
May God bless the man. He dared to be free.

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