

## Book Review:

Title	:	The Essential Ghalib
Author	:	Anisur Rahman
Publisher	:	Harper Collins
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The Essential Ghalib by Anisur Rehman is yet another feather in his cap following Hazaaron Khwahishein Aisi: The Wonderful World of Urdu Ghazals and Hazaar Rang Shaa'iri: The Wonderful World of the Urdu Nazm (both from HarperCollins, 2019 & 2022 respectively). Rehman is a veteran scholar, author, and translator. In *The Essential Ghalib*, he presents an exemplary selection of Mirza Ghalib's Urdu couplets, translated into English, along with critical commentaries. Ghalib, widely regarded as one of the most influential poets in the history of South Asian literature, is known for his complex yet profound poetry that engages with themes of love, pain, spirituality, and existential despair. Rehman's anthology of Ghalib's poetry aims to provide a curated and accessible insight into the poet's expansive work. *The Essential Ghalib* distils the essence of Ghalib's poetry, making it easier for those unfamiliar with the intricacies of his work to appreciate and understand his genius, particularly for a broader global audience that does not read Urdu. Thus, Rehman's *Ghalib* is both representative and digestible. He notes in the introduction to the book:

Ghalib created discourse around language and diction, evolved conceptual contiguities and antinomies with words....He recognized the merit of classical literature, as also of history, philosophy and ethics, which he nurtured on his own, and made his poetry metaphysically rich and stylistically accomplished. (xxv)

Finding a balance between interpretation of the meanings and faithfulness of the original text is one of the hallmarks of the present collection. Rehman makes sig-

nificant changes to Ghalib's poetry when translating it into English. The translation attempts to capture the spirit and emotional impact of the original text rather than a literal one. On the one hand, Rehman's translations recurrently encapsulate the tone and tenor of Ghalib's poetry, which is characterised by a subtext of longing and sorrow. However, translations sporadically veneer the original writings' more complex, multi-layered meanings:

Dhaa.npaa kafan ne daagh-e 'uyuub-e barahnagii  
Mai.n har libaas mei.n n.n na.ng-e vujud thaa

**Rehman's translation is:**

My Shroud veiled the blemishes of my nakedness  
from everyone's seeing  
In each of my dress although, I ever remained  
A disgrace to my being (8)

For instance, Ghalib's ghazals are notoriously difficult to translate because of their rich, idiomatic language and the deep intertextual references embedded within the verses. Rehman intermittently foregoes the multivalence of the original text in favour of clarity and accessibility. However, he retains the gist of Ghalib's verses, full of linguistic playfulness and philosophical depth.

*Ranj se khuugar hua Insaan,  
tho mit jaataa hai ranj  
Mushkilein mujh per padii itnii  
ke aasaan ho gaen*

**The Translation:**

When man is used to sorrow,  
sorrows leave man for good  
So many hardships I suffered  
So very well I stood

Poetry translation is inherently difficult, particularly for poets like Ghalib, who wrote in a language full of historical and cultural references. Ghalib's use of Persian, the language of elite culture in 19th-century India, makes things much more difficult because the poet regularly combined Urdu vernacular with Persian idioms. Ghalib's main themes of longing, disillusionment, and existential pondering are successfully made understandable to an English-speaking audience by Reh-

man's translations, despite their inability to fully convey every nuance. Rehman has chosen poems that are reflective of Ghalib's emotional assortment, which includes both the passionate longing for an idealized lover and the more contemplative reflections on existence, death, and the nature of God. Daisy Rockwell, an ardent translator of Hindi and Urdu, praises the collection as a:

...treasure trove of translations, analyses and vocabulary that enriches our understanding of the great poet.

However, the anthology leans too heavily on Ghalib's more melancholic and romantic works at the expense of the poet's more politically charged pieces. Though he was not just a poet of love and philosophy but also a social critic. Some couplets reflect his anguish over the political and social upheavals of his time, and some of them are directed at the colonial establishment and the decline of Mughal rule. Satyanarayana Hegde, an Advocate and avid scholar, is of the view that Rehman's Ghalib is a:

...magisterial selection, translation and commentary on two hundred verses from Ghalib's Urdu ghazal poetry blaze a clear path for contemporary readers through the densely daunting sylvan thickets and brambles of Ghalib's poetry.

It is evident from:

*Zindagi yun bhi guzar hi jaati  
kyun tiraa raahguzar yaad aaya*

This life would have passed on anyway  
Why did I remember your path, anyway

Another strength of The Essential Ghalib is Rehman's ability to contextualize the poetry of Ghalib within the historical and cultural milieu in which it was composed. In "Introduction", Rehman reiterates: "Ghalib balanced his racial memory against his contemporary backdrop and the Perso-Arabic poetic against the evolving poetics".(xxvi). Ghalib's struggles, financial difficulties, the death of his children, and his experience as a witness to the fall of the Mughal Empire permeate much of the sorrow and fatalism. He says:

*dard minnat-kash-e-davaa na huaa  
mai.n na achhaa huaa buraa na huaa*

**Translated as:**

My pain wasn't obliged to drug  
 to get a cure, for sure  
 That I didn't get well  
 wasn't too bad to endure (60)

Rehman adds a layer of depth to the collection by focusing on the philosophical and spiritual aspects of Ghalib's poetic oeuvre. Ghalib explores the nature of divine will, fate, and the human condition, which led him to deeply engage with existential questions, positioning him not only as a master of romantic poetry but also as a thinker on par with some of the great mystic poets of South Asia, such as Kabir and Iqbal.

Anisur Rehman's *The Essential Ghalib* offers an accessible and insightful introduction to one of South Asia's greatest poets. The anthology provides a useful window into the emotional depth, intellectual complexity, and cultural significance of Ghalib's poetry. Rehman's translations make Ghalib's work available to a wider audience, and his thoughtful contextualization adds value to the reader's understanding. Despite its occasional shortcomings—particularly in its selective presentation of Ghalib's poetic concerns—the anthology remains a significant contribution to the appreciation of Ghalib's literary legacy. Through *The Essential Ghalib*, Anisur Rehman has made a lasting impact in the dissemination of Ghalib's work to the global stage, solidifying the poet's position as a figure whose relevance transcends cultural and linguistic boundaries. The book is indisputably 'essential' for the lovers of Ghalib because:

adaa-i-khaas se ghalib huaa hai nukta-saraa  
 salaa-i 'aam hai yaaraan-e nuktaa-daa.n ke liye

**Translated as:**

Ghalib has opened his lips, as a connoisseur,  
 with a unique elan  
 Here is an open call for discerning friends to join,  
 if they can (400)

**Pradeep Trikha**