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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Breaking Ghalib, Saving Urdu*

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Abstract

No critic of Ghalib has acquired greater notoriety than Yas Yaganah Changezi, known in Urdu speaking circles as Ġhālib shikan, the "Ghalib breaker"—a title earned through his scathing critiques of Ghalib and everything the dominant Urdu milieu held sacred. For Yaganah, this defiance was inseparable from a larger reformist vision that demanded the cultivation of temperament, the reshaping of literary practice, and the reordering of the ethical world in which poetry circulates. To challenge the regionalism, patronage, sectarianism, religious chauvinism, derivative criticism, and nationalism in his world, Yaganah tackled Ghalib not just as a poet but an idiom, a capacious metaphor through which he could interrogate the full terrain of Urdu's intellectual life—its modes of literary criticism, spiritual vocabularies, narratives of progress and nationalism, and gendered assumptions. Yaganah's critique—and the backlash it provoked—offers a lens onto the making of literary authority itself, and onto the cultural forces that discipline those who dare to unsettle its foundations.

Keywords: Urdu; Ghalib; Yaganah; Lucknow; Shia

ḳhūd parastī kijīye yā ḥaqq parastī kijīye,
āh kis din ke liye nā ḥaqq parastī kijīye[1]

Worship the self, or worship the Truth;
Ah, what end is served by worshipping falsehood?

Tucked away in Karbala-e Munshi Fazl-e Husain Khan, a Shia cemetery in Lucknow, lies a grave marked by the couplet above—a grave that once stood out for the threats of desecration it faced, and that now holds one of the Urdu language's most provocative poets and critics, Yas Yaganah Changezi (1884–1956). Known first as Yās ("despair") and later as Yagānah ("unique"), sometimes also with the faux surname

*Dedicated to Nayyar Masud and C. M. Naim, distinguished scholars of Urdu whose insights into Yaganah's life—and whose generosity of spirit—made this work possible.

[1] Yaganah Changezi Lakhnavi, *Āyāt-e Vijdāni* (Delhi: Matbua Dilli Printing Works, 1934). The couplet appears on the book cover.

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Chañgezī (descendent of Genghis), he mastered the ghazal and the rubaʿi while leaving a lasting imprint on Urdu's engagements with literature, religion, gender, and land. During his lifetime, figures as distinguished as Maharaja Kishan Parshad of Hyderabad, Muhammad Iqbal of Lahore, and Josh Malihabadi of the Progressive Movement sought his counsel on the subtleties of Urdu, even though he held little regard for the latter two. After his death, his influence persisted among poets such as Habib Jalib, whose defiance of authoritarian power in Pakistan during the Zia era resonates with Yaganah's own uncompromising posture. Even Shamsur Rahman Faruqi—despite his reservations about Yaganah's poetic technique—acknowledged him as a progenitor of the new ghazal.

Yaganah baited his readers into challenging the heroes and ideas they had inherited, drawing them into a vivid history animated by debate and rebellion. In 1940, at a moment when India was consumed by arguments over its future and increasingly fixated on religious identity, he wrote with a provocative clarity that cut through the noise:

Sab tere sivā kāfir, āḳhir is kā maṭlab kyā
Sar phirā de insāñ kā aisā ḳhabṭ-e mażhab kyā[2]

What does it mean if everyone other than yourself is an infidel?
What good is such religious obsession that twists the human mind?

Throughout his life, he confessed to being tormented by the gap between the virtuous words people proclaimed and their failure to perform righteous actions—a dissonance that, in his view, hollowed out language itself and reduced the very idea of reform to mere rhetoric:

ḳhudā rā mere un ke aur ko ʾī darmiyāñ kyūñ ho
paiambar kyūñ bane āḳhir kisī kā rāzdāñ kyūñ ho
kahīñ rasmī ʿibādat rūḥ ko bedār kartī hai
namāz-e be ʿamal se ḥaqq-e mażhab rāʾegāñ kyūñ ho[3]

For God's sake, why should there be anyone between me and him?
Why were prophets made anyway? Who even needs a confidant?
How could ritual worship ever awaken the soul?
Why should the truth of religion be squandered by idle prayer?

Yaganah wrote this ghazal in 1939, adopting the very same combination of refrain and meter that Mirza Asadullah Khan "Ghalib" (1797–1869) had used in 1854, rendered beautifully into English by Frances Pritchett.

kisī ko de ke dil ko ʾī navā-sanj-e fiġhāñ kyūñ ho
nah ho jab dil hī sīne meñ to phir muñh meñ zabāñ kyūñ ho

If you've given your heart away
why sing a dirge about it?

[2] Yagānah Changezi, *Kulliyāt-e Yagānah,* ed. Mushfiq Khwaja (Karachi: Akadami Bāzyāft, 2003), 456.
[3] Yagānah Changezi, *Kulliyāt-e Yagānah* (Karachi), 481–83.

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If you don't even have a heart in your breast
why should you have a tongue
in your mouth?[4]

No critic of Ghalib has acquired greater notoriety than Yaganah, known in Urdu-speaking circles simply as *Ghālib-shikan*, the "Ghalib-Breaker"—a title earned not only through his scathing critiques of Ghalib but through his broader defiance of everything the dominant Urdu milieu held as sacred. For Yaganah, this defiance was inseparable from a larger reformist vision. Reform, as he understood it, demanded the cultivation of temperament, the reshaping of literary practice, and the reordering of the ethical world in which poetry circulates. And the world around him badly needed such reform to confront regionalism, patronage, sectarianism, religious chauvinism, derivative criticism, and the narrowing pressures of nationalism. To make this point in the most comprehensive way, at the very heart of the tradition, Yaganah turned to the poet most widely quoted, taught, and romanticized in Urdu: Mirza Ghalib.

In this article, I argue that rather than simply defining Yaganah's engagement with Ghalib as the breaking of an idol, we can appreciate how Yaganah casts Ghalib as an idiom, a capacious metaphor through which he could interrogate the full terrain of Urdu's intellectual life—its modes of literary criticism, its spiritual vocabularies, its narratives of progress, and its deeply gendered assumptions. To stage this confrontation, he turns to the tradition of *futūwwāt* or *javānmardī*—the classical Arabic-Persian ethic of chivalric virtue—and summons a figure revered by both himself and Ghalib: the namesake of Ghalib's own *taḳhalluṣ* (pen name), Ali. This heroic presence becomes not merely an arbiter of a poetic quarrel but a symbolic authority called upon to judge the cultural order that made Ghalib's dominance possible. Seen in this light, Yaganah's critique—and the backlash it provoked—offers a lens onto the making of literary authority itself, and onto the cultural forces that discipline those who dare to unsettle its foundations.

Yas, Yaganah, Changezi: Self-Fashioning

The man who would become known by the names Yās, Yagānah, Chañgezī was born in Azimabad under the name Mirzā Wājid Husain. Yas took pride in the formal training he received in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu (languages that, at the turn of the twentieth century, marked one as properly educated in the Muslim world) and in the informal training he painstakingly gave himself in English (the rapidly ascendant colonial language that had become essential for anyone seeking employment in the government sector). As for his skills in the art of writing poetry, he believed firmly that Persian was the language one needed to know inside and out.[5] He was also deeply read in the classics of English literature, consuming the work of John Milton, Frederick Richards, John Dryden, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley,

[4] Frances Pritchett, trans., "If You've Given Your Heart Away" (Ghazal 126), https://franpritchett.com/00fwp/published/txt_ghalib_trs_2.html#126.

[5] For instance, he wrote to Firāq Gorakhpūrī that although he might be rising as a ghazal star with good English training, until he had a complete grasp of Persian poetry, he would have no grounding in Urdu poetry—he might only be able to appease the fashion police. Nayyar Masud, *Yagānah Aḥvāl o Āsār* (New Delhi: Anjuman-e Taraqqi-e Urdu, 1991), 43.

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William Shakespeare, Samuel Johnson, Philip James Bailey, and Francis Bacon, both in the original English and in translation.

He moved from Azimabad to Lucknow around 1905. In the Perso-Indic literary world, poets routinely experimented with their names, but the ones he chose would, in time, contribute to the isolation and notoriety that followed him for decades. His first chosen name was Yās Azīmābādī—Despair from Azimabad. Azimabad, the earlier name for old Patna, the capital of Bihar, remained an inescapable marker of origin throughout his life. It was no literary backwater—despite how it was dismissed by many in Lucknow, and despite the way the state of Bihar continues to be perceived in India today. It had produced some of South Asia's finest poets, among them ʿAbd al-Qādir bedil and Shad Azimabadi (1846–1927). The latter not only mentored Yaganah but was himself celebrated across the subcontinent for the elegance and philosophical depth of his ghazals:

ḍhūñḍoge agar mulkoñ mulkoñ milne ke nahīñ nāyāb haiñ ham,
jo yād nah āʾe bhūl ke phir aye ham-nafaso voh ḳhvāb haiñ ham[6]

If you search from country to country—there is no finding me, for I am one of a kind
Friends, I am that dream that you can't remember, even by accident.

For Yas, the poets of Azimabad spoke with self-assurance but maintained the modesty he saw as essential to genuine intellectual growth. Poets there, he insisted, avoided cheap publicity, and the mere production of books was never mistaken for scholarship or worth. It was a world in which refinement was tied to intellectual reputation rather than to the volume of one's verse, and where literary excellence was pursued quietly rather than advertised loudly.[7] Lucknow for Yas represented the very opposite sensibility.

By the time Yas arrived in the first decade of the twentieth century, Lucknow had long been celebrated across the Indian subcontinent as the city that prized Urdu in its purest, most elevated form—a place synonymous with cultural finesse, fragrant cuisine, elaborate protocol, and a near-ritualistic devotion to linguistic refinement. Yet this prestige rested uneasily atop a deep historical vulnerability: the region's psychical and collective psychological wounds from the 1857 rebellion and the British deposition of its beloved ruler Wajid Ali Shah, the patron of the literature, music, and art that had defined Lucknow's identity and cultural power. Over the next two centuries, the city's reputation became further entangled in the gendered discourse of *reḳhtī* poetry, in which male poets wrote in women's voices—an association that, for many outsiders, rendered Lucknow's language and culture overly refined, even effeminate. At the same time, Delhi and Lucknow were cast into a "Two-School" rivalry, each ascribed supposedly inherent literary differences meant to bolster claims of aesthetic and cultural authority—claims that close archival study has shown to be mostly unwarranted.[8] These accumulated pressures made Lucknow's cultural establishment increasingly defensive of its linguistic and aesthetic boundaries.

[6] Kalimuddin Ahmad, ed., *Kulliyāt-e Shād, Volume 1* (Patna, India: Bihar Urdu Academy, 1975), 562.
[7] Sahil Ahmad, *Yagānah* (Allahabad, India: Urdu Writers Guild, 1986), 243.
[8] See Carla Petievich, *Assembly of Rivals: Delhi, Lucknow and the Urdu Ghazal* (Delhi: Manohar, 1992).

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Into this atmosphere of pride, vulnerability, and anxiety stepped Yas. He had married into a Lucknow family but, by his own account, never received the city's respect, or even the basic treatment owed to a South Asian son-in-law. The guardians of the city's canon believed their Urdu to be superior to all other modes, and although Lucknow and Azimabad lay within a three-hundred-mile radius, they looked down upon Azimabad as parochial for allowing local dialects to mingle with the lofty register of Urdu. While Yas never tried to minimize this association, he longed for acceptance, and his émigré experience in Lucknow became the dominant subtext of his life and writings. From the moment he arrived, he braced himself for a long struggle with this highbrow literary establishment—armed with an unshakable faith in "people of heart" and in his own worth:

jān se baṛh kar samajhte haiñ mujhe Yās ahl-e dil,
ābrū-e lakhnaʾo, ḳhāk-e ʿAzīmābād hūñ[9]

The people of heart hold me, Despair, dearer than life itself.
I am the glory of Lucknow, the dust of Azimabad.

The city's literary elites were affronted by the suggestion that the dust of a "provincial" town could achieve equal footing with the vaunted glory of Lucknow. While some celebrated his sharp, irreverent brilliance, others cast him as an arrogant outsider who needed disciplining. From an early age, his temperament had been fiercely contrarian—he trusted no claim about poetry, art, or faith until he had tested it against his own standards. If a poet was introduced as a "Sufi," Yaganah would scrutinize him not only by the standards of poetic craft but also by the standards of spiritual knowledge and practice, refusing to let any label, however prestigious, stand in for genuine accomplishment.

His intellectual independence shaped the positions that brought him into conflict with the powerful literary organizations (*adabī anjumans*), whose gatekeeping he believed was suffocating Urdu's intellectual life. The Anjuman-e Meʿār-e Adab held particular sway, its journal emblazoned with the names of Mir and Ghalib as celestial emblems above a colonial map of India, a symbolic reminder of the institutional authority Yas was determined to confront. While Yas had no objection to Mir's exalted station, he could not tolerate Ghalib's name being placed alongside Mir's. What baffled him was how a poet whose desperate petitions to colonial authorities were a matter of public record could suddenly be recast as an anti-colonial hero, a Sufi master, Urdu's most polished original voice. He thought everyone knew of Ghalib's repeated attempts to secure recognition, pensions, and favor from the British; how, then, could this same figure be elevated as a symbol of resistance?

In 1914, with his very first publication, *Nishtar-e Yās*, Yas Azimabadi issued a sharp rebuke to the Anjuman-e Meʿār-e Adab and its circle. He opened the book with a line from Ibn Khaldūn—"A Persian man, by appropriately utilizing the discourse of eloquent Arabs, may become worthy of being classified as a native speaker"—only to turn this standard back on Lucknow itself. "After all," he warns, "I am not even foreign to Urdu, yet because of regional prejudice I am cast out of the

[9] Masud, *Yagānah Ahvāl o Āsār*, 9.

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establishment."[10] In the same preface, he praises the Swedes for honoring Tagore, then contrasts their discernment with the people of Lucknow, who, he declares, "trample their own poets" (*apne shāʿiroñ ko pā-māl karte haiñ*). The tone throughout is unmistakably admonitory, and it is edged with divine authority. Yas closes the preface in the voice of prophetic warning, echoing the Qur'anic chapter *Yā Sīn*, verse 17: "*w mā ʿalaynā illā al-balāgh al-mubīn*"[11] (We are responsible for nothing except the clear delivery of the message).

The first ghazal in *Nishtar-e Yās* shares its metrical and rhythmic pattern (identified in metrical lexicon as *bahr-e-raml musamman mahzuf*) with one of Ghalib's famous ghazals:

Vāñ naqāb uṭṭhī keh ṣubḥ-e ḥashr kā manẓar khulā
Yā kisī ke ḥusn-e ʿālam tāb kā daftar khulā
chup lagī mujh ko gunāh-e ʿishq śābit ho gayā,
rañg chehre kā uṛā rāz-e dil-e muẓṭar khulā
ashk-e ḳhūn se zard chehre par hai kyā ṭurfah bahār,
dekhiye rañg-e junūn kaisā mere muñh par khulā
ḳhanjar-e qātil se jannat kī havā āne lagī,
aur bahār-e zaḳhm se firdaus kā manẓar khulā
hāth uljhā hai garebāñ meñ to ghabrāʾo nah Yās
beṛiyāñ kyuñkar kaṭīñ ziñdāñ kā dar kyūñkar khulā[12]

As the veil was lifted, the scene of Doomsday morning dawned—
Or was it the ledger of a world-illuminating beauty that opened?
A silence fell upon me; the sin of love was proven;
The color fled my countenance; the heart's unresting secret unfurled.
Tears of blood upon the pale face—what a spring they bring;
Behold how the color of madness upon my own face blooms.
From the slayer's dagger blows the breeze of heaven;
From the spring of every wound, celestial vistas open.
If your hand is caught within your collar, pay it no mind, Yas—
How will the chains be severed, how will the prison's gate open?

Sixty years before Yaganah composed this ghazal (in 1912), Ghalib had written one for the poetry assembly of the last Mughal ruler, Bahadur Shah Zafar, at the Red Fort, in 1852:

bazm-e shāhinshāh meṅ ashʿār kā daftar khulā
rakhiyo yā rab yeh dar-e ganjīnah-e gauhar khulā[13]

In the King's assembly, a register of verses opened
O Lord, let this door to the treasury of pearls stay forever open.

[10] See Yaganah Changezi, *Kulliyāt-e Yagānah* (Karachi), 94.
[11] Yaganah Changezi, *Kulliyāt-e Yagānah* (Karachi), 94.
[12] Yagānah Changezi, *Kulliyāt-e Yagānah* (Delhi: Educational Publishing House), 412.
[13] Imtiyaz Ali Khan Arshi, ed., *Divan-e Ghalib, Nuskhha-e 'Arshi* (Lahore: Majlis-e Taraqqi-e Adab, 1992), 188.

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Ghalib is at once invoking the king (Zafar), his own verses—elevated to the status of jewels worthy of royal presentation—and the Lord, whose favor has brought king and poet into the same exalted space. Divine grace has rewarded the king with Ghalib's "pearls," and rewarded Ghalib with a patron whose court confers prestige. The couplet, in short, draws attention to Ghalib's pride in the royal assembly—not necessarily because of his devotion to the monarch or the court itself, but because his verses have been deemed worthy of that setting.

Yas sought to lift the veil from these verses and reveal the servitude embedded within them. In doing so, he was also modeling what poets are expected to do with the archive they inherit: to take a familiar *maẓmūn* (theme), examine its inherited posture, and refashion it through *maẓmūn āfirīnī* (theme-fashioning)—the aesthetic practice of cultivating, developing, and transforming a theme so that it acquires new life. Thus, when Yas opens his own collection, he does so with a gesture to something far more expansive than the king's court—the universal court of Judgement Day. In this way, the *maẓmūn* of the ledger undergoes its own *āfirīnī* in Yas's hands. What was once a register opened in the Red Fort becomes, in his reimagining, the ledger of all Creation. The veil is being lifted not merely from past shortcomings but also from the latent beauty within language itself. Through this transformation, he keeps alive the very aesthetic resilience embedded in *maẓmūn āfirīnī*: the poet's obligation to inherit, interrogate, and renew the themes of the tradition.

In the classical ghazal, the tearing of the collar is not a single, fixed gesture. At times the lover rends his own collar in agony, unable to bear the pain of separation; at other times it is the beloved who tears it in a flare of anger, frustration, or passion. The lover's collar is always at the mercy of love's vicissitudes—shredded by longing one moment, by wrath the next. The version of Yas depicted and confronted by the poem has begun to enact this familiar gesture as though by habit, but is quickly reminded that his feet are bound in chains—that he is confined not by love but by convention, faction, and hostility. If we read the collar as a metaphor for Yas's worldly attachment, then his struggle with it—whether in defiance or futile despair—is reframed as a necessary prelude to his self-liberation from a tradition resistant to transformation.

After the publication of *Nishtar-e Yās*, from the pen name of "*Yās*"/Despair, he rose, in his own estimation, to become "*Yagānah*" (one of a kind, unique, unrivalled). The new name instantly summoned for the literate public a well-known couplet from Ghalib's ghazal:

use kaun dekh saktā keh yagānah hai voh yaktā
jo dūʾī kī bū bhī hotī to kahīñ do chār hotā[14]

No one can behold Him, for that Unique One is peerless
If there were even a trace of twoness, He would become visible

The couplet bows to the time-honored doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* ("the Oneness of Being," in Arabic) or *hamā ūst* ("All is He," in Persian). To say that the Unique One can be seen is to imply the existence of a faculty of vision capable of beholding the

[14] Arshi, ed., *Divan-e Ghalib*, 187.

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Unique; yet such a faculty would itself have to be unique, therefore violating the very principle it seeks to apprehend. The paradox is the point: true uniqueness admits no counterpart to comprehend it.

Yas Yaganah's genius lay in entwining such metaphysical vocabulary with the story of his own becoming. By shifting from *Yās* to *Yagānah*, he enacted a drama of self-naming, never disavowing the former identities he took, he fused autobiography with a more established mystical-lyrical ethos. The result caused a sensation in the Urdu public, making him even more impossible to ignore as he challenged Ghalib on equal terms.

Yas Yaganah's critiques acquired a new sting in 1921, when perhaps the most hagiographic work on Ghalib was published: Abdul Rahman Bijnauri's *Mahāsin-e Kalām-e Ghālib* (Virtues of the Discourse of Ghalib). This book was an instant hit and soon became a component of the Urdu college syllabus. Bijnauri claimed that India had two sacred books: the Divine Vedas and the *dīvān* (poetry anthology) of Ghalib.[15] He categorically stated that no man of knowledge in South Asia could read Ghalib and not bow to the supremacy of his art, to his philosophical disposition, pointing to Muhammad Iqbāl's reverential poetry for Ghalib as proof. On the stage of world literature, Bijnauri said that Ghalib could only be compared to the French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé and the German realist poet Alfred Mombert. Bijnauri's book became such a cultural creed that the most important South Asian Marxist literary reformist movement in the 1930s, the Progressive Writers Movement,[16] named Ghalib as the movement's founding father. Also, as Anand Taneja's ethnographic work demonstrates, Ghalib eventually turned into a *valī*, a saint or "prophetic figure," "within both authoritarian Islamic discourse and Urdu public culture in north India."[17]

Breaking Ghalib and Other Idols

As Ghalib's *dīvān* was ascending to the level of scripture, Yas began to discern idioms in Ghalib's Urdu poetry that were acceptable in Persian but not in Urdu. He set out to prove these flaws in a series of essays and quatrains critiquing Ghalib's language. These writings ultimately formed the book he is most closely associated with, *Ġhālib-Shikan* (The Ghalib-Breaker).

Despite its bold title, *Ġhālib-Shikan* is presented not as a public manifesto but as a private, intimate appeal. The book takes the form of one long letter: Yas writing to Masʿūd Ḥasan Rizvī (a trusted friend and scholar of Persian and Urdu in Lucknow) as one scholar to another, urging him to intervene before the cult of Ghalib hardens into dogma. Yas launches his critique along three intertwined fronts, each aimed less at Ghalib's poetry than at the inflated aura that has grown around it. He begins with a moral critique, arguing that Ghalib did not live by the principles he so eloquently articulated. He then advances a receptive critique, challenging the claim that Ghalib

[15] Abdul Rahman Bijnauri, *Mahāsin-e Kalām-e Ġhālib* (Islamabad: Abdul Rahman Bijnauri Trust, 2001).

[16] Urdu's Progressive Writers Movement, formed in the 1930s, was conceived in the spirit of ethical utilitarianism, with the belief that literary aesthetics should expand to appreciate that which has been denied entry in the past—issues of class, gender, and sexuality; it must ultimately address social ills.

[17] Anand Vivek Taneja, "The (Critical) Edge of Tradition: Understanding Ġhālib as *Valī* in Contemporary Delhi," *Journal of Urdu Studies* 1 (2020): 211.

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was an unprecedented original—in Yas's view, Ghalib drew freely from earlier masters such as 'Urfī, Bedil, and Mir, even to the extent of plagiarism. Finally, he offers an aesthetic critique, highlighting what he sees as slips of prosody, stretches of verbosity, and pretentious Persianization that render Ghalib's ghazals needlessly contrived.

Yas had previously aired many of these grievances in scattered essays, journal pieces, poems, and—perhaps most influentially—oral exchanges. For instance, his tongue-in-cheek remark, which I heard recalled in Hyderabad (where Yas lived for a decade in the 1930s and 1940s), Lucknow, and Lahore, that a certain well-known Ghalib couplet becomes far more "meaningful" if one reads its Urdu words *as though they were Persian*:

kaun hai jo nahīñ hai ḥājitmañd,
kis kī ḥājitravā kare koʾī[18]

Who is there who is not in need?
Whose need should one fulfill?

This is the conventional, uncontroversial interpretation: Everywhere one looks, people need something or the other, and with such universal neediness; how can anyone hope to fulfill anyone else's needs? In Yas's opinion, Ghalib had merely versified a banal observation in plain language—but since he was so often obsessively Persianizing in his diction elsewhere, his readers might as well train themselves to read his perfectly ordinary Urdu words *as Persian*. At least then, he joked, something amusing might emerge.

And indeed, with only a slight shift in diacritics—fully permissible in the classical script—the couplet yields an entirely different, outrageous meaning:

kūn hai jo nahīñ hai ḥājatmañd,
kus kī ḥājat-ravā kare koʾī

It is the ass that has no need;
It is the cunt whose need one must fulfill!

Yas's joke is not vulgar for its own sake but a reminder of how precariously meaning depends on the reader's intervention. A couplet that seems earnest and reflective can, with the slightest shift in vocalization, collapse into bawdy comedy. The effect is double-edged: Ghalib's underlying idea is exposed as pedestrian, and his penchant for Persianizing his Urdu becomes an open invitation to such mischievous rereading—so much so that even his Urdu verse can be made into a satire of itself. What Yas exposes, then, is not simply the instability of script but the instability of Ghalib's reputation. A poet hailed as the pinnacle of refinement can, through the smallest philological shift, be made to speak in an entirely different register. And for Yas, that is precisely the problem—and the provocation—of reading him.

[18] See Mushfiq Khwaja, Pasha Rahman, and Amna Mushfiq, eds., *Mirzā Yagānah: Shaḳhṡiyat aur Fan* (Aligarh, India: Asif Publications, 1992), 109.

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Yas extended his polemic into Ghalib's personal life and public posture, using biography to unsettle the sanctified image constructed by later readers. He highlighted Ghalib's obeisance to the British, reminding his audience that Ghalib composed a panegyric for Queen Victoria—which the British were shrewd enough to ignore. For Yas, that silence was damning, and deserved: the last poet of the Mughal court degraded himself by offering praise, and the colonial power did not deem it worthy of a reply.

añgrez chupaṛ meñ kahīñ āte haiñ janāb
kyā dūr thā ā jātā koī aur ʿitāb
kyā ʿabd-e vafādār bane the mirzā
kaisā sūkhā milā qaṣīdeh kā javāb.[19]

Do the British ever fall prey to flattery, Mister?
It wouldn't have been too far-fetched for another wrath to descend
Oh what a faithful slave Mirza [Ghalib] became
[And] what a flat refusal came in return for his praise!

From here, Yas turned to another cherished claim of Ghalib's admirers: that his poetry reveals a Sufi temperament, and therefore Ghalib himself must have been a Sufi—understood here as one who renounces the world, and has esoteric knowledge of God's creation. Yas bluntly dismantles this notion:

Ġhālib bhī hai vallāh anokhā sūfī
añgrez ke darbār kā bhūkā sūfī
penshan jo hu'ī bañd to bhūk aur khulī
hai aisā ko'ī peṭ kā bandah sūfī[20]

By God, Ghalib is a rare Sufi
A Sufi who starves for the British court
When his pension was stopped, his hunger grew
Is there a Sufi so chained to the stomach?

All the wine-drinking, the social clout–chasing, the longing for courtly acceptance—these, Yas argues, are hardly the marks of a renunciant. To call Ghalib a Sufi on the basis of a few mystical inflections in his verse is, for Yas, either ignorance or a deliberate misreading of the poet's life.

The stakes, in his view, are not merely literary but ethical and historical. When Ghalib is exalted as a Sufi exemplar, both history and the very meaning of Sufism are distorted. Readers who take Ghalib's life as evidence of spiritual renunciation will walk away with a false understanding of what a Sufi is. The problem, then, is not Ghalib himself but the interpretive excess that surrounds him—a mythology that compromises both linguistic and historical accuracy as well as moral clarity.

Yas recounted meeting a man in Agra who confidently informed him that Ghalib's poetry had rendered the work of all earlier poets obsolete. Ghalib, he insisted, was

[19] Yagānah Changezī, *Kulliyāt-e Yagānah* (Delhi), 534.
[20] Yagānah Changezī, *Kulliyāt-e Yagānah* (Delhi), 533.

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sufficient in the same way the Qur'an had been deemed sufficient by the Second Caliph, who purportedly ordered the destruction of the libraries of Alexandria on the grounds that no other knowledge was needed. By this logic, the man told Yas, the entire corpus of Urdu literature deserved to be set on fire.[21] Yas responded with characteristic irony: Ghalib was "saved" only because in his final years he began to emulate Mir. Furthermore, praise of this absolutist kind stripped Ghalib of the dignity he deserved. It turned him into a divine voice, a figure beyond criticism, and—most problematically—an "original" poet untouched by influence or precedent.[22] Such divinization was tied to Bijnauri's *Mahāsin-e Kalām-e Ghalib*, which helped institutionalize the cult of Ghalib's uniqueness.

Central to Yaganah's project of "breaking the Ghalib idol" is debunking the myth of Ghalib's originality. All other criticisms are secondary. Again and again, he attempts to show that Ghalib's poetry is derivative. Such demonstrations may succeed in challenging Ghalib's supposed uniqueness, but they do not amount to substantive criticism of the couplets themselves. Yaganah knows that in a literary world sustained by its engagement with prior archives—where poets gain stature precisely through comparison and intertextual play—proving that Ghalib's ideas resonate with earlier ones does little to diminish his achievement. His real target is not Ghalib but those who insist that Ghalib says what no one has ever said before. His corrections may put such admirers in their place, but they do little to bring Ghalib down.

There are moments when Yaganah argues that another poet has expressed an idea more effectively than Ghalib, but the examples he offers are debatable and rarely analytical. Much of this work feels provocatively conceived rather than critically grounded. When his criticism does land, it does so not by dismantling Ghalib but by pointing to a more compelling articulation of a similar idea elsewhere. As an example, Yaganah points to this Ghalib couplet:

Bandagī meñ bhī voh āzādah o ḳhudbīñ haiñ keh ham
Ulṭe phir āʾe dar-e kaʿba agar vā nah huā[23]

Even in bondage I am so liberated and self-regarding that
If the door of the Kaʿba was not open, I would turn back

Yaganah then presents ʿUrfī's couplet, which he holds in higher esteem:

vaqt-e ʿUrfī ḳhush ke nakushūdand chūñ dar bar ruḳh-ash
bar dar nakushūda sākin shud dar-e dīgar nazad[24]

Wonderful was the moment for ʿUrfī, when the door was not opened for him
He remained steadfast at the unopened door; he did not knock at another

[21] Mirza Yaganah Changezi Lakhnavi, *Ghālib Shikan (Do Ātashah)* (Ghalib Breaking [Double Distilled)]) (No publisher or location given, 1935), 8–9.
[22] Mirza Yagānah Changezī Lakhnavi, *Ghālib Shikan,* 9.
[23] Mirza Yaganah Changezi Lakhnavi, *Ghalib Shikan,* 41–42.
[24] Mirza Yaganah Changezi Lakhnavi, *Ghalib Shikan,* 41–42.

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For Yaganah, this contrast exposes Ghalib's lack of steadfastness: Ghalib retreats when the door does not open; he does not persist like ʿUrfī does. Yet this is a surface-level reading, one that a defender of Ghalib could easily counter by pointing out that the very appearance of the Kaʿba—invoked not as any door but as *the* door reached only after a long, arduous journey—already signals steadfastness. The lover has done everything within his power: he has traveled, sought, arrived. If, at that final moment, the beloved refuses to open the door, then turning back is not weakness but dignity.

Even putting this aside, Yaganah's moral judgement of their respective lovers is a cherry-picked false dichotomy. Both portrayals are part of the identity of the archetypal ghazal lover, and neither Ghalib nor ʿUrfī has one consistent lover persona throughout all their poetry—only Yaganah does.

Yaganah proposed a three-part standard criteria for judging art—*nisbat* (deep, organic knowledge of the subject), *khulūṣ* (sincere, passionate engagement), and *tarz-e adā* (a style that rises above the derivative)—but the force of this framework lies in how it places him beyond the confines of Urdu's critical tradition. His affinities run not only through Altaf Husain Hali (Ghalib's student and first major biographer) and the nineteenth-century ideal of "naturalness" shared across England and India, but through Samuel Johnson, whose judgments on Thomas Gray had already entered Urdu via Ali Haidar Nazm Tabatabai's celebrated translations—Tabatabai was Ghalib's first major commentator and commissioned in the princely state of Hyderabad to annotate Ghalib's ghazals so they could appeal to secondary and college students.

By invoking Johnson, Yaganah positioned himself as a poet whose moral and imaginative reach linked him to a broader, translingual lineage. One couplet he believed would have earned Johnson's praise is the following:

ṣabr itnā nah kar keh dushman par
talḳh ho jāʾe laẕẕat-e be-dād[25]

Do not be so patient with your enemy
That the pleasure of oppression turns bitter for him.

The Measure of a Man: Yaganah on Ali, "Great Men," and Masculinity

Through the interplay of poetry and history, Yaganah inherited a set of value-laden concepts used to describe not only heroes but exemplary members of the community whose lives embodied a holistic moral profile. Foremost among these, and most relevant to this essay, is *javānmardī*—or, in its Arabic counterpart, *futuwwat*—the Perso-Arabic ideal of the one who embodies valor, chivalry, loyalty, honesty, and courage. The figure who most powerfully animates this tradition is Ali ibn Abi Talib, the first Shia Imam, celebrated across centuries as the "Lion of God" par excellence. Iqbāl's encapsulation of this ethos in Urdu had tremendous circulatory power in Yaganah's world:

Āʾīn-e javāñ mardāñ ḥaqq goʾī o be-bākī
Allāh ke sheroñ ko ātī nahīñ rūbāhī[26]

[25] Mirza Yaganah Changezi Lakhnavi, *āyāt-e Vijdāni jadīd* (Hyderabad: Azam Press, 1945), 12.

[26] Muhammad Iqbāl, *Bāl-e Jibrīl* (Lahore: Taj Company, 1935), 83. While citing Iqbāl's couplet here, I would like to say a few words about Yaganah's approach to Iqbāl: In the 1920s, Yaganah admired Iqbāl's

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The custom of the *javāñ mardāñ* is truth-speaking and fearlessness;
The lions of God do not know the ways of the fox.

These themes of courage, speaking up, loyalty, and confidence sweep Yaganah's writings:

aisā nah samjhiyo keh ḳhelā hūñ maiñ
dhun kā pakkā hūñ go akelā hūñ maiñ
dam kyūñ nah bharūñ phir maiñ ʿAlī kā har dam
maʿlūm hai kis gurū kā chelā hūñ maiñ[27]

Do not mistake me for a fool.
I stand resolute, even in solitude.
Why would I not praise Ali with every breath?—
Do you not know whose master's disciple I am?

When Yaganah invokes Ali—the one whose sword is believed to have descended from the heavens inscribed with the words "*lā fatā illā ʿAlī, lā saif illā Dhū'l-fiqār*" (There is no young hero like Ali, and no blade like the one he wields, the Dhū'l-fiqār)—he is reminded of another figure of sacred heroism whose abode, Mathura, lies not far from Lucknow. This is Krishna, the divine guide of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, who leads Arjun toward Truth regardless of the cost, even when that truth demands the sacrifice of one's own kin. For Yaganah, Ali and Krishna stand side by side as embodiments of moral courage: men who speak uncompromising truth, who act without fear of consequence, and who elevate duty above sentiment, clarity above comfort, and righteousness above all worldly ties.

Krishan kā hūñ pujārī ʿAlī kā bañdah hūñ
yagānah shān-e khudā dekh kar rahā nah gayā[28]

I am the worshipper of Krishna and the slave of Ali
Yaganah, having seen God's glory, I simply could not hold myself back

The poet's religiosity is not scriptural in orientation; it is grounded in an ethic of chivalry—masculine, uncompromising, confrontational when required, yet tender

concept of the self (*khudī*). He conceded that Iqbāl deserved credit for giving the philosophy of *khudī* its most prominent theoretical formulation, but he also insisted that Iqbāl's treatment remains purely conceptual rather than practical. In effect, he said that Iqbāl articulated the ideals of *khudī* with great force yet did not embody them—he framed the doctrine but did not "walk the walk" of the very principles he advanced. He said that Iqbāl might be a motivational speaker, but he was certainly indifferent to intellectual consistency when advocating reform for the Indian subcontinent. For Yaganah, religion and spirituality arose from the specific societies that produced them and, in turn, shaped those societies. Reformers like Iqbāl, he argued, ignored the broader historical conditions of Indian Muslims, instead favoring an Islam exogenous to South Asia. Yaganah thus accused the "Poet of the East" not only of turning to the seventh-century Hijaz and its martial ethos for twentieth-century solutions, but of turning his back on the subcontinent itself. (See Mirza Yaganah Changezi Lakhnavi, *āyāt-e Vijdānī* [1927], 55).

[27] Mahmud ur Rahman, *Yagānah Chañgezī: Ek mutāl'ea* (Islamabad: Dost Publications, 1997), 49.

[28] Yagānah Chañgezī, *Kulliyāt-e Yagānah* (Delhi), 410.

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toward the figures he holds most dear, Krishna and Ali. Though these two heroes are the mightiest forces of nature on the battlefield, their strength is inseparable from their gentleness: they are loving, forgiving, and endowed with profound knowledge. The *Bhagavad Gītā* belongs to Krishna and his path toward Truth; in Islam, Ali is the Gate of Knowledge—one cannot enter the realm of understanding without passing through him. In invoking these two figures together, the poet aligns himself with a lineage of sacred courage and enlightened tenderness, a chivalry that binds power to wisdom and valor to compassion: Yaganah was well acquainted with the words of Ali:

> The measure of a man is in accord with the measure of his resolution, the measure of his truthfulness is in accord with the measure of his chivalry, the measure of his valor is in accord with the measure of his self-respect, and the measure of his chastity is in accord with the measure of his jealous sense of honor. Victory is reached through resolution, resolution is reached through reflection, and reflection is reached through guarding your secrets.[29]

In the 1921 edition of his second major publication, *Chirāġh-e Suḳhan* (Lamp of Discourse), ostensibly a treatise on Urdu prosody in which he also delivers sharp critical judgments on canonical poets, he includes a short Persian poem titled "Tarānah-e Shaqshaqiyyah" (Melody of Shaqshaqiyyah). *Shaqshaqiyyah* refers to Ali's celebrated sermon from the collection of his discourses *Nahj al-Balāgha*, in which he asserts his rightful claim to the leadership of the Muslim community and refuses to grant legitimacy to the caliphs who assumed authority after the Prophet. Yas, in turn, fashions his own *shaqshaqiyyah* sermon in the form of a ghazal.[30] The poem's title is in Arabic: "*Ismaʿū Ifhamū,*" (Listen and Understand!):

manam ke chāra-gar o dard-āshnā-ye ḳhudam.
manam ke dard-e .ḳhudā-dādam o davā-ye manam.
manam ke āʾīna-ye ḥaqq-numā barā-ye ḳhudam.
manam ke mushtarī-ye jins-e be-bahā-ye ḳhudam
manam ke sar namīāram ba sajda-e nā-ḥaqq
manam ke dar rah-e ḥaqq maḥv-e naqsh-e pā-ye .ḳhudam
manam ke muntaẓir-e inqilāb mī-bāsham.
manam ke silsilah junbān-e ġham barā-ye ḳhudam.

manam ke manzil-e maqṣūd zīr-e pā dāram
shikasta pāyam o tā ham be muddaʿā-ye manam.
qadam ġhamkada-ye ḳhud che mīnaham bīrūn?
gadā-ye ḳhāk-nashīnam, valī gadā-e ḳhudam
hazār fitna bar-pā gasht o man ḳhabar na shudam.

[29] Al-Sharif Al-Radi, *Nahj al-Balāghah: The Wisdom and Eloquence of ʿAlī,* ed. and trans. Tahera Qutbuddin (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2024), 693.

[30] According to Najib Jamal, Yaganah wrote this in 1920, so it was not included in the first edition of *Chirāgh* (1914). The first, third, and fifth couplets of this poem were published in the prestigious journal *Maḳhzan*, under the title of *Surūr-e Ḳhudī* (Melody of the Self). The *Maḳhzan* poem appeared under the name Yas Azimabadi in volume 21, no. 1 (May 1921): 46. Yaganah proceeded to publish his *tarānah* in a version of his later critical work *Āyāt-e Vijdānī*. See Najib Jamal, "Chiragh-e Sukhan ka tahqiqi o tajziyati mutalea," in Mirza Yas Azimabadi, *Chirāgh-e Suḳhan*, ed. Ahmad Raza (Lahore: Majlis Taraqqi-e Adab, 1996), 21.

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hazār kūh shud az jā o man be jā-ye ḳhudam.
ṣalā-ye nuṭq karā dādam-e be zāġhistān.
ke ʿandalīb ham-āhang o ham-navā-ye manam
manam ke Lakhnau rā jān-e tāza dādam.
ḳhudā-ye sukhan, Yās, o nā-khudā-ye ḳhudam[31]

I am my own healer, I am best acquainted with my pain
I am the God-given pain; I, its remedy
I am the truth-revealing mirror for myself
I, the customer of my own precious goods
I am not the one to bow to falsehood
I, on the path of Truth, am absorbed within my own footprints
I am the one waiting for revolution
I, the instigator of sorrow for myself

I am the one who holds the destined goal beneath my feet
My feet are broken, yet I am driven by my purpose
How could I set foot outside the realm of my own sorrow?
I am a dust-dwelling beggar, a beggar only to myself
A thousand tumults arose, and I remained unaware
A thousand mountains were uprooted, I remained anchored
Who shall I call out to, in a land of crows?
The nightingale alone is attuned to me and sings in my voice
It is I who gave Lucknow a fresh life
Yas—the god of speech, and navigator of my own self

Although devotion to Ali is a staple of Islamic poetry—Mir, Ghalib, and Iqbāl all wrote lavish praises for him—Yas goes further than the others by directly identifying with Ali. Where poets like Iqbāl gesture toward Ali's spiritual grandeur yet avoid the fraught, controversial hours after the Prophet's death that led to the election of Abu Bakr as the First Caliph (which Shias view as rigged and corrupt), Yaganah does the opposite. He names that moment as a conspiracy to keep virtue out of Islam, an instance of religion being used to justify self-interest, a demand for allegiance where no such allegiance was deserved:

ʿAlī se baʿyat Ṭalabī?

yāroñ kī voh sāzish voh ḳhilāfat ṭalabī
Islām ke parde meñ ḥukūmat ṭalabī
afsos yadullāh se yeh be-adabī
kis din ke liye ʿAlī se baʿyat ṭalabī[32]

Demands of Allegiance—from Ali?

That conspiracy of friends, that hunger for the caliphate
In the guise of Islam, that craving for power

[31] Mirza Yas Azimabadi, *Chirāgh-e Sukhan*, ed. Ahmad Raza (Lahore: Majlis Taraqqi-e Adab, 1996), 33.
[32] Mirza Yas Yaganah Changezi Lakhnavi, *Tarānah* (Lahore: Urdu Book Stall, 1933), 112.

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Alas—what sorrow, what a slight to the Hand of God!
To what end is this demand for allegiance from Ali?"

Yas's readers understood immediately that a demand for Ali's allegiance to Abu Bakr was, in his idiom, a demand for Yas's allegiance to Ghalib—and the literary order that had grown around him. In Yas's view, this order was upheld by what he called the *Ghalib-chīs* (Ghalib-bearers): those who praised the poet out of professional habit rather than discerning engagement with his work or ethical concerns for truth-telling. Their loyalty, he felt, was less to Ghalib's poetry than to the cultural authority of his name. Such verses were provocative enough to invite censorship. The first edition of his quatrains (1933) included these verses; in most subsequent printings they disappeared. But the culture of memory being what it is, the lines survived in recitation and recollection, held in the minds of those who had already committed them to heart—many of whom would weaponize them against the poet in the years to come.

These "censored"[33] verses reveal Yas's deepest theological and ethical orientation. In Ali's words and unfaltering deeds, he finds a moral anchor. We must remember that the ethical space that he accords to Ali (and by extension to himself) is deeply skeptical of the term "*mażhab*," often tossed around to mean "religion":

> The worst part is that the independence of mind—the right to think and understand freely—has also been taken away in the name of religion. In effect, religious texts often frame matters in such a way that they warn: do not think beyond what is being presented to you; if you do, you risk being branded an infidel. This, too, is a form of mental enslavement. And now, precise prescriptions exist for enslavement of human bodies as well—and those prescriptions are being put into practice.[34]

Yaganah's provocations sharpened over time. His attacks on Ghalib were never isolated gestures; they were entwined with challenges to other cherished logics—ideas many people treated as badges of pride that Islam was thought to bestow. One striking example was his skepticism toward the moral value of animal sacrifice, especially the assumption that performing it signaled spiritual closeness to God. He treated such claims not as sacred truths but as habits of thought that needed to be questioned, much as he questioned the literary pieties surrounding Ghalib.

Yūñ hī sahī

qurbānī ka ḥukm hai chalo yūñ hī sahī
gardan pe kisī ġharīb kā ḳhūn hī sahī

[33] I place "censored" in quotation marks to remind readers that much of the literature deemed offensive by the colonial establishment, religious authorities, or journal editors—especially when written by well-known authors—continued to circulate through a wide range of informal channels: orally, in handwritten copies, and in print. Censorship in this period therefore functioned less as an absolute barrier to circulation and more as a public declaration of what those in power approved or disapproved of. It signaled official disfavor, not the disappearance of a poem or prose piece from the literary world.

[34] Sahil Ahmad, *Yagānah*, 12.

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niyyat hai apnī baḳhair to parvā kyā hai
bakrā nah sahī moṭī sī ek jūñ hī sahi[35]

Very Well, So Be It

The injunction to sacrifice—very well, so be it
To have some poor thing's blood on your hands—very well, so be it
If our intentions are noble, then what's there to worry about?
If not a goat, then a fat louse will do just as well—so be it

The story behind the ritual tied to the festival of Eid al-Adha/Bakri Eid, of course, is that Abraham's son was spared when Abraham resolved to sacrifice him, and God accepted the intention by substituting a ram in the son's place. If God was rewarding intention alone, then the *object* of sacrifice should be irrelevant. Spare the helpless animal, Yaganah suggests, and offer up instead what actually afflicts you—the "louse" (a parasitic religious leader, perhaps) feeding on your blood and making your head itch.

The point of the quatrain is unmistakable: the powerful win divine credit by sacrificing a defenseless animal—by getting blood on their hands. In Urdu idiom, that blood is said to stain not the hands but the neck (*gardan pe ḳhūn*) of the executioner, a linguistic twist that intensifies the irony. Yaganah exposes the moral absurdity of a ritual in which the suffering of the weak becomes the spiritual capital of the strong.

Acclaimed Urdu writer Nayyar Masud once told me that this was a quatrain whose wit was quickly overshadowed by its audience's discomfort. It was a direct assault on a festival regarded as the great one in the Muslim world. Not surprisingly, most later editions of Yaganah's poetry quietly omitted it. Two decades later, it resurfaced as evidence in the charges brought against him for insulting Islam's cherished institutions. What Yaganah may have intended as sharp humor was seized upon eagerly by his detractors as a testimony of irreverence.

The detractors received more fuel from Yaganah when he adopted the name Changezi, folding another layer of self-fashioning into an already volatile persona. Like Ghalib before him, he came to believe he was from Mughal stock; both poets treated this genealogy as a sign of inner resolve—a lineage that conferred historic, hard-won strength. By appending Changezi to his name, Yaganah aligned himself with the legacy of Genghis Khan (d. 1227), the Mongol conqueror whose campaigns reshaped continents and whose name became synonymous with unrestrained force. Over time, the name *Chañgez* (a variant of Genghis/Chingiz) entered the cultural lexicon across Central and South Asia as shorthand for strength itself. Three centuries later, the Mughal dynasty would likewise claim descent from both Genghis Khan and Tīmūr (Tamerlane), weaving its political legitimacy from these dual ancestral lines. For Yaganah, the name was a way of signaling that he saw himself destined for combat with the world around him:

Chañgez bachchah hūñ Shaiḳh chillī to nahīñ
tāriḳh pukāregī hameñ Graiṭ Muġhal[36]

[35] Yaganah, *Tarānah*, 189.
[36] Mahmud ur Rahman, *Yaganah Changezi*, 43.

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I am a son of Genghis, not a Shaikh Chili;
History will hail me as the Great Mughal

In the classical poetic universe, the *shaikh* is the hypocritical preacher—pious in posture, hollow in action—whom the lover routinely mocks for his sanctimony. *Shaikh Chillī*, literally "chief" plus "one who keeps a forty-day vigil," had long come to signify a fool, a braggart sustained only by words. By calling himself a "son of Genghis," Yaganah aligns himself not only with the ferocity and decisiveness associated with Genghis Khan but also with a familiar cast of anti-piety figures in the ghazal tradition: the *brahman*, the *pīr-e mughāñ*, the *rind*—all rebels who stand up to the moralizing preacher and expose the emptiness of his claims. Yaganah's point is unmistakable. He is no sermonizing *shaikh*, no idle boaster trading on lineage or inherited authority, but a figure of action, resolve, and charisma—one who overturns the preacher's world (or the world of *Ghālib-chīs*) rather than submits to it. And in a gesture typical of his poetry, the lover speaks with the beloved's authority: the one who wields the sword, who slays the submissive lover, who commands rather than pleads. The line becomes a playful assertion of superiority grounded not just in genealogy but in the sheer force of his deeds—and in the poetic right to speak from a position of power rather than supplication. From that claim of self-fashioned authority, Yaganah pivots to an even sharper provocation: the reference to the "Great Mughals" is a snide nod to the European habit of stamping Indian history with its own hierarchies. The sense that *tārīḳh* (history) will hail him as a Great Mughal is his way of telling the Lucknow establishment that they ultimately control very little: just as Europeans decreed that only the first six Mughal rulers deserved the epithet "great," they will also decide that *he* deserves it. So even if Lucknow's literati denigrate him now, history, written in the future—structured by powers far beyond their present provincial gatekeeping—will vindicate him.

This confluence of history refashioning, lineage, and devotion reaches its most striking expression when he binds together the two seemingly incompatible figures of Genghis Khan and Imam Ali:

Chañgez kā potā hūñ ʿAlī kā bañdah
Bañde ko ātā nahīñ landā phandā[37]

I am Genghis's grandson and Ali's servant
This servant does not know how to bait and switch

Here the blood of the Central Asian conqueror meets spiritual allegiance to Ali, the emblem of courage, justice, and chivalric truth. In that fusion Yaganah fashions the persona that animates his poetry—unyielding in strength, uncompromising in devotion, and unwilling to bend before any worldly authority. But how did that persona compare to the Yaganah that existed off the page?

I had the good fortune of speaking with people in Lucknow and Hyderabad who had personally known Yaganah. Among them the Urdu writer Nayyar Masud, in whose family home, Adabistan, Yaganah stayed for several months and to whose father he had

[37] Mahmud ur Rahman, *Yaganah Changezi*, 43.

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first shown his critique of Ghalib. Masud remembered him as a man of extraordinary sensitivity: someone who washed his own clothes, cooked his own food, treated household help with unfailing kindness, and could not bring himself to hurt anyone. The only battles he picked were with those in power. He knew history too well to be impressed by authority, and he despised slogans—whether for freedom, for progress, for Ghalib, or for religion. He felt no need to justify the wide spectrum on which his politics, devotion, and aesthetics existed. While some of his verses seemed to strike directly at Islamic institutions and practices, others were tender love poems to the Prophet, acknowledging his cosmic radiance and the humility signified by the rugged black cloak, in language that carries the melody of the finest Sufistic and folk verses:

aye āʾīnah-e anvār-e azl,
aye jalvah gah har ḥusn o ʿamal,
hai der se ṭhañḍā dil kā kañval,
dīdār dikhā parde se nikal,
mere andhere ghar ke ujāle,
uṭh mere kāli kamlī vale[38]

O mirror of the primordial lights,
O seat of every beauty and every righteous act—
For long now the lotus of my heart has remained cold;
Reveal your vision, come out from behind the veil.
O light of my darkened house,
Arise, my black-cloaked one.

Masud also recalled how certain of Yaganah's verses circulated orally and could not be reprinted once they had appeared in print, rendering censorship futile. People gossiped endlessly about him—his supposed temper, the audacity of his criticism, the impropriety of his themes. Yaganah's bold engagement with all that was held sacred—religion, Ghalib, literary associations—unfolded in a Lucknow already roiled by parallel discourses of outrage. The most notorious of these controversies was *Angāre*, the 1932 collection of ten short stories (by young writers who would later form the Progressive Writers' Association) whose experimental prose and provocative depictions of sex, gender, and religion scandalized the city.[39]

Yaganah would never have wished to be associated with those writers; he regarded their work as crude and puerile. Yet in the public imagination he was increasingly grouped with anyone perceived as threatening Lucknow's cultural reputation, anyone charting literary paths that ran counter to the established sacred ones. In fact, a leading newspaper/journal calling for *Añgāre*'s censorship was the Shia-oriented newspaper/journal *Sarfarāz*, which would play a major role in his downfall twenty years later.[40] Yaganah's independence of mind became a liability, an easy pretext for detractors to cast him as an enemy of tradition rather than a steward committed to its rigorous assessment and revitalization.

[38] Nayyar Masud, *Yagānah Aḥvāl o Āśār*, 96.
[39] Khalid Alvi, ed., *Añgāre* (Delhi: Educational Publishing House, 2013).
[40] Khalid Alvi, ed., *Añgāre,* 12.

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Paralleling Yaganah's writings were the politics in which Urdu's religious identity was hotly contested as the future of India's Muslims remained uncertain. Yaganah saw the new political class as performers of empty pageantry—no different, in his view, from the *Ġhālib-chī*s. This pessimism had taken shape long before independence: as early as 1930, he was already questioning the moral and political authority of the freedom movement's most celebrated figures, including Mohandas Gandhi. The irony is that in certain habits Yaganah resembled Gandhi—especially his refusal to depend on others—yet he rejected nonviolence. He also scorned Gandhi's shift from a suit to the loincloth, blasting it as a gimmick that exoticized Indians rather than empowered them:

Lañgoṭī Hī Sahī

Taqdīr pe kyā zor hai khoṭī hī sahī
Boṭī nah milī to rūkhī roṭī hī sahī
Charḳhah to chalā'e jā'o Gāñdhījī kā
Dhotī nah sahī tan pe langoṭi hī sahī[41]

The Loincloth Is Just Fine

No power over fate? Then a counterfeit [power] is just fine
If no piece of meat can be found, dry bread is just fine
Just keep spinning Mr. Gandhi's wheel
If not a respectable dhoti, a loincloth is just fine

Writing in *Chāñd*, a popular journal in which both Gandhi and Yaganah published, he offered a blunt assessment complementing his quatrain:

> With all due respect to Gandhiji, everyone knows that the spinning wheel cannot confront the cannons. The philosophy of Noncooperation and Nonviolent movements cannot be implemented in a practical way. If you have no control over destiny, then accept stubbornness. If you cannot have meat, accept dry bread. Keep spinning Gandhiji's wheel. And if your dhoti—your outer garment—is snatched away, accept the undergarments. Rely on the spinning wheel, and you will be left with nothing but your undergarments. Time flies like the wind. You want to attain freedom through Noncooperation, Nonviolence, and the strength of the spinning wheel. This is all nonsense.[42]

For Yaganah, the moral grandeur of nonviolence could not compensate for its political futility. In rejecting the spinning wheel as a symbol of liberation, he was also rejecting the fetish for "honest" labor—insisting instead on a politics grounded in agency, clarity, and the courage to confront force with force when necessary.

Lest one imagine that his opposition to Gandhi placed him on Muhammad Ali Jinnah's side, a couplet written during the height of World War II—when Jinnah's

[41] Yagānah Changezi, *Kulliyāt-e Yagānah* (Karachi), 393.
[42] Yagānah Changezi, *Kulliyat-e Yagānah* (Karachi), 791–92.

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prominence as the sole spokesman of Indian Muslims was rising—hints that Yaganah viewed him with equal suspicion:

nibhānā bhī ḥasīnoñ se ik baṛā fan hai
tujh aise bāvale ko ʿāshiqī phale kyūñkar[43]

To sustain a bond with beautiful ones is itself an exquisite art—
How could love ever bear fruit for a lunatic like yourself?

On its surface, the couplet reads as a standard, elegant articulation of the lover's complaint. Yet, as Mushfiq Khwaja notes, any contemporary reader encountering the word "*bāvale*" (lunatic) would have immediately heard an echo far beyond the ghazal's symbolic world. The term resonated with a sensational criminal case that had dominated the newspapers in the mid-1920s—one in which Jinnah played a conspicuous role as defense attorney. A courtesan named Mumtaz Begum had fled the court of the Maharaja of Indore and fallen in love with the Bombay industrialist Abdul Qadir Bawla. On the evening of January 12, 1925, the Maharaja's men ambushed the couple, killing Bawla and attempting to abduct Mumtaz, who was saved only by the intervention of nearby British officers. The assailants were arrested and tried, and the scandal consumed the press. Among the defense lawyers was Jinnah, whose presence added a further layer of intrigue to an already lurid affair.

Within the logic of Yaganah's couplet, this episode acquires a sly, allegorical charge. Jinnah appears, however obliquely, as the defender of those who slay the "mad ones" (*bāvale*, or Bawlas)—the archetypal lovers and lunatics of the ghazal tradition. Invoking this contemporary scandal collapses the distance between poetic convention and political reality. The lovers of the ghazal become a mirror for the moral dramas of Yaganah's own moment, and the political leaders of that moment are clearly not aligned with the values—love, beauty, truth—that he seeks to maintain a bond with.[44]

Yaganah's attitudes toward the supposed "great men" of his time have much to do with his critical relationship to masculinity itself. Despite the swaggering macho persona he fashioned from the legacies of Ali and Genghis Khan, his true nature—as witnessed by his friends and evident in his writings—was gentle and deeply sensitive, particularly to the plight of women. While Yaganah acknowledged the significance of the 1940s as a time that women began to make appearances in Urdu poetry as real, complex human subjects, he was still disturbed by the way women were portrayed by his contemporaries, especially Shabbir Hasan Khan "Josh" Malihabadi (1899–1982).

Josh, who would later come to be celebrated as the "Poet of Revolution" and the "Poet of Youth," was the Urdu poet who most closely mirrored Yaganah's confrontational aesthetics and ethics. Josh wrote with the same fierce pride in manliness and the same uncompromising commitment to truth-telling that defined Yaganah; he, too, paid the professional and personal costs of speaking against power. In a 1946 letter to Yaganah, Josh acknowledged this kinship with striking candor: "Not just for me, but before the celestial spheres, you hold the rank of *imām-e fan* (master of

[43] Yagānah Changezi, *Kulliyāt-e Yagānah* (Karachi), 467.
[44] Yagānah Changezi, *Kulliyāt-e Yagānah* (Karachi), 830.

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Art)."[45] Even though Josh held Yaganah in high esteem, received clear inspiration from him even when writing film songs,[46] and came to Yaganah's rescue during the most dire times, Yaganah wrote in *āyāt-e Vijdānī* that he could not see himself growing tall by standing on his toes as Josh had.[47]

According to Nayyar Masud's biography, Yaganah conceded that Josh was a "genius," although misguided and a neophyte. He felt that his cordial personal rapport with Josh did not affect his critical judgment. While he readily acknowledged Josh as the finest versifier of his generation, he stopped short of calling him a great poet.[48]

Some of Yaganah's harshest critiques of Josh pertain to his depiction of women. Yaganah wrote that Josh introduced women's voice into his poetry not through their virtues or interior life but through cosmetics and trinkets. Yaganah cited the following verses:

ham dikhāʾeñ nah agar ḥusn-e javānī kī phaban
shab-e mahtāb meñ jhalkeñ nah agar yeh kañgan
apne chehroñ se nah tāleʿ ho agar ṣubḥ-e chaman
agar in tāzah jabīnoñ se nah damke kundan
surḳhī-e maʾi nah rahe rañg-e bahārāñ nah rahe[49]

If we did not display the splendor of beauty and youth,
If these bangles did not shimmer in the moonlit night;
If our faces did not give light to the garden's dawn,
If from these fresh foreheads gold did not glitter—
The redness of wine would not last, the colors of spring would not last.

For Yaganah, Josh's verses create the troubling sense that a woman's personhood rests on nothing more than her two bangles, her presence announced by a rhyming vocabulary that jingles like borrowed finery from Naḳhḳhās, Lucknow's famed market where goods are loaned out. In reality, he scoffs, "A woman does not think in such terms" (*ʿaurat aisī zabān meñ nahīñ sochtī*),[50] and such imagery reduces the feminine figure to ornament rather than a bearer of meaning. This reflects a broader trend in poetry of the period—women appearing as objects arranged for male appreciation—borrowed from Western fetishistic discourses about Eastern women, even as the poets involved claim to be advancing women's causes.[51]

Such "progressivism," Yaganah claimed, was common in the literature of the 1940s. It was the age of New Literature (*adab-e jadīd*)—of modernist and Progressive writers who foregrounded the mundane without aestheticizing it. He believed political liberation would embolden them further in their conviction that "anything

[45] Waseem Karanjvi, *Yagānah Chañgezī: Shakhsiyat o Fan ma Intikhab-e Kalam* (Jhelum, Pakistan: Book Corner, 2015), 330.
[46] Karanjvi, *Yagānah Chañgezī*, 337.
[47] Yaganah Changezi, *āyāt-e Vijdānī jadīd* (1945), 345.
[48] Nayyar Masud, *Yagānah Aḥvāl o Āśār*, 47.
[49] Yaganah Changezi, *Ayat-e Vijdānī Jadid* (1945), 342.
[50] Yaganah Changezi, *Ayat-e Vijdānī Jadid* (1945), 346.
[51] Yaganah Changezi, *Ayat-e Vijdānī Jadid* (1945), 338.

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goes," that poetry required neither discretion nor discipline. In 1944, at the height of the freedom movement and the competing debates over "art for art's sake" and "art for life's sake," he offered a caustic commentary:

Adab-e Jadīd, Thū!

Sañtre ras bhare karāre gol
Niyyateñ kyūñ nah hoñgī ḍānvāñ ḍol
ḥusn o ʿismat kī ab voh qadr kahāñ
kyūñ nah bik jāʾeñ kauṛiyoñ ke mol
chal rahī hai havā-e āzādī
tū bhī ghūnghaṭ uṭhā de ṭāñgeñ khol[52]

New Literature, Ptooey!

The oranges—so juicy, tangy, round—
How could intentions not waver?
Now, there is no respect for beauty nor for honor;
Why should they not be sold off for pennies?
The winds of freedom are blowing—
You, too, lift your veil, spread your legs.

For Yaganah, the orange represents his contemporary moment, in which freedom stripped of aesthetic and ethical restraints blends into license, collapsing boundaries and taste under the illusion that vulgar permissiveness is progress. That this critique ultimately hinges on a misogynistic analogy of sexual promiscuity shows the biases still present in Yaganah's own progressivism.

Still, Yaganah's consideration of women's perspectives was notable for the time, and evident not only in the abstract realm of literary representation but also in his real-life relationships with them, especially with his wife, Kaniz-e Husain. From the earliest years of his marriage, Yaganah anchored his artistic confidence in his wife's judgment.[53] Among his problems with Ghalib was how the latter seemed dismissive toward his own wife, the idea of marriage, and monogamy. For all Yaganah's quarrels with her, he treated his wife's opinion as the final measure of his craft. His daughter recalled that when he composed verses late into the night, he would gently wake her, recite the freshly minted *sheʿr* (poem), and, smiling, ask whether she thought it was her husband speaking or whether the lines had descended from some divine source. Her approval mattered more to him than the praise of any critic.

In letters, he called Kaniz-e Husain his *rafīq-e zindagī* (the companion of a lifetime) who shared his joys and sorrows and awakened in him what he called *rūḥānī masarrat* (spiritual delight). His masculine pride, so central to his public persona, was in private tenderly shaped by her love. He often described himself as her servant, indebted to her understanding, consumed by thoughts of her when he was away and inspired by her presence when he returned. In his poetry, he imagined not only his own longing

[52] Yagānah Changezi, *Kulliyāt-e Yagānah* (Karachi), 617–18.
[53] See Karanjvi, *Yagānah Chañgezī*, 254.

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but hers as well, as in this verse where the crow—messenger of reunion in the Indian tradition—announces the beloved's return and the household bursts into joy:

dukh dard ke māroñ kā naṣībah jāgā
ghar boltā hai āj dildar bhāgā
din kāṭe haiñ gin gin ke isī din ke liye
sājan āte haiñ rāstah de kāgā[54]

The fortune of the grief-stricken has awakened
The house speaks: "Misery has taken its leave"
I have endured day after day for the sake of this day
My beloved is approaching, O crow, clear the way

This devotion, and the ethic of restraint that grew from it, formed a quiet counterpoint to the literary culture around him. Many of his peers—Ghalib and Josh openly, Iqbāl more discreetly—drank with an entitlement he found ethically hollow. And even his refusal to drink was shaped by his wife's presence in his moral horizon; he dismissed alcohol as an "asymmetrical delight," insisting, "I cannot subject my innocent wife to such mental torture. If drinking is required to retain love and friendship, then I bid farewell to such friendships from afar."[55] He was clear that his stance had nothing to do with religious law, as he mocked the logical contradictions of prohibition with characteristic sharpness: "Eat sugar freely, but beware of the donut… Grapes are lawful, yet the wine pressed from them is not" (*guṛ khāeñ gulguloñ se parhez… añgūr ḥalāl aur ma'i-e angūr ḥarām*).[56] His sobriety was not a gesture of piety but an ethic of care, a way of protecting the person whose regard he cherished above all.

Shattering Paradise: Pakistan and the *Sarfaraz* Controversy

Partition transformed from an abstract and bewildering idea into a personally devastating reality when it took from Yaganah the great love of his life. In 1947, Yaganah's son Agha Jan, who worked for All India Radio Bombay, left for Pakistan along with his brother Mirza Haidar Baig. Kaniz-e Husain went with them. She visited briefly in 1953, but by then she had renounced her Indian citizenship. Each return to India subjected her to bureaucratic suspicion and surveillance; she no longer wished to remain. Yaganah, for his part, refused to move to Pakistan. Writing to Agha Jan in 1955, he confessed, "Your mother has so exasperated me that I have moved into a shack at the house of Masud Hasan Rizvi Adib." He recounted her words to him upon his most recent visit: "Why have you come to my house? When you know I am here, why did you come?"[57] The marriage that had shaped his temperament, nourished his art, and grounded his ethics could not withstand the pressures of history, displacement, and political rupture.

[54] Karanjvi, *Yagānah Chañgezī,* 78.
[55] See Khwaja, Rahman, and Mushfiq, *Mirzā Yagānah: Shaḳhṡiyat aur Fan.*
[56] Yaganah, *Tarānah*, 192.
[57] Yagānah Changezi, *Kulliyāt-e Yagānāh* (Delhi), 61–63.

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Yaganah's excellent editor Mushfiq Khwaja reminds us of Yaganah's deep disdain for the parochial nationalisms of both India and Pakistan. One anecdote captures this perfectly. This couplet, published in *Humāyūn* in 1951, was originally submitted to the Indian journal *Āj Kal* and was rejected:

vaṭan ko chhoṛ ke pahuñchā ġharīb jannat meñ
yahāñ se aur kahāñ jā'e kis jagah jā'e[58]

After leaving his homeland, the poor one reached Paradise
From here, where else can one go? To which place does he go?

In the version submitted to *Āj Kal*, Yaganah had scratched out *Jannat* (Paradise) and replaced it with Pakistan; and scratched out *kis jagah* (where/to which place) and replaced it with *Jahannum* (Hell). This version would translate to:

After leaving his homeland, the poor one reached Pakistan
From here, where else can one go? Does he go to Hell?

Khwaja posits that the government-supported journal *Āj Kal* rejected this ghazal because it missed the irony of these substitutions, which satirize Pakistan as a suffocating "heaven"—a place where movement is impossible, where growth is stilled, where the only escape is hell. The editors of the Indian journal likely just assumed Yaganah was praising Pakistani nationalism.[59]

The leading Shia *żākir* (reciter of Karbala events in commemorative assemblies) Rashid Turabi attempted to persuade Yaganah to move to Pakistan as Turabi had, offering to host him in Karachi. Yaganah made the trip, and during his stay, Turabi liberally quoted Yaganah from the pulpit, invoking him as a man who questions superficial religiosity, who holds onto his devotion for Ali while questioning God himself:

ʿAlī kā bandah ho ke bandagī kī ābrū rakh lī
yagānah ke liye kyā dūr thā mansūr ho janānā[60]

After becoming Ali's servant, he [Yaganah] rescued the honor of servitude
It was not difficult for the One to turn into Mansur al Hallaj—the iconic Sufi martyr whose popularized remembrance lends itself to casual invocation, unlike the deeper and more esoteric significance attached to invoking Ali.

I make this point to draw the reader's attention to the fact that the Urdu-speaking Shia community has never been a monolith across South Asia. Even as Yaganah was condemned in Lucknow, in Hyderabad and Karachi—cities shaped by their own regional rivalries with Lucknow—he was embraced as a rebel who had put Lucknow "in its place."

[58] Najeebuddin Jamal, Yagānah Shaḳhṣiyat aur Fan (PhD diss., Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, 1988), 376.
[59] Yagānah Changezi, *Kulliyāt-e Yagānah* (Karachi) 920.
[60] Yagānah Changezi, Kulliyāt-e Yagānah (Delhi), 460.

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After several weeks with Turabi, Yaganah visited a friend in Lahore. While there, he realized how much he missed Lucknow and tried to persuade his wife to move back with him. She refused, and he undertook the journey back to Lucknow alone, his forty-year marriage permanently shattered.

When Yaganah approached the Wagah border, he was immediately arrested for not having the proper documentation to travel to Lahore (his visa only permitted him to visit Karachi). After spending two weeks in a Lahore prison, he was freed at the behest of his old students and patrons—the most important of whom was Yaganah's most consistent financial supporter, Dwarka Das Shola, a wealthy pharmacist from Lahore who moved to Delhi in 1947.

Yaganah returned to Lucknow a more broken man than ever. Weighed down by the personal loss of his marriage, Yaganah was beset by more professional blows as many of his past confidants turned against him. One of the most impactful and public of these betrayals came from his long-standing friend Niyaz Fatehpuri, editor of Lucknow's most prominent literary journal, *Nigār*. Yaganah sent Fatehpuri some of his intimate thoughts about religion, including the following ruba'i, confident that the exchange would stay private:

sachchā naqqād aur sachchā shāʿir,
mardānah ṣifat but shikanī meñ māhir,
kis dil se yagānah ko bhulā de koʾī,
qurān pe bhī choṭ dhamak deñ ākhir[61]

A true critic and a true poet,
A possessor of manly attributes, expert in breaking idols,
Whose heart could ever forget Yaganah?
He can even strike the Qur'an, if need be.

Without Yaganah's permission or knowledge, Fatehpuri forwarded the letter to Abdul Mājid Daryabadi, a leading Sunni scholar of Lucknow who controlled North India's renowned Islamic journal *Ṣidq-e Jadīd*. Whether Fatehpuri's intentions were simply mischievous or outright malicious, the consequences for Yaganah were devastating.

In addition to being an authority on the Qur'an, Daryabadi was also close friends with the Me'ar party poets who had previously sought to discipline Yaganah for his treatment of Ghalib. Daryabadi wrote an editorial accusing Yaganah of insulting the Prophet and the Qur'an, saying, "If a non-Muslim had the nerve to launch such a contemptuous attack, Muslims would have raised hell. Let us wait and see what actions are taken against the atheistic writings of a Muslim." The city's popular Shia newspaper, *Sarfarāz*, echoed this outrage alongside the offending verses.

A group of young men marched to Yaganah's home, forced him into a rickshaw, blackened his face, hung a garland of shoes around his neck, and dragged him through the markets of old Lucknow, spitting on him and cursing him. Sunnis and Shias—so often at odds—found rare unity on the Yaganah front. The charge of insulting the Prophet and the Qur'an had become the powerful's most convenient weapon. Literary

[61] Khwaja, Rahman, and Mushfiq, eds., *Mirzā Yagānah Shaḳhṣiyat aur Fan*, 35.

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power brokers joined forces with religious authorities to break Yaganah the man, and they succeeded. The poet survived.

The last line of poetry he penned, we are told, was, as follows:

Mirzā ṣahib rah gaye tanhā aik aik sāthi chhūṭ gayā[62]

Mr. Mirza remained all alone, as one by one his companions drifted away

Yaganah died in Lucknow in 1956. He summoned three witnesses the night before he died, recited Islam's creed of God's unity, Muhammad's prophecy, and Ali's guardianship, and asked them just two questions: "Am I a Muslim? Am I a Shia?" Upon hearing an affirmative answer to these questions, Yaganah fell silent.[63]

When his body was taken to Lucknow's Shia cemetery and prepared for burial, a few young men confronted the corpse-washer and insisted that Yaganah did not deserve a Muslim grave. The man quietly replied that it was against his ethical obligations to mistreat the dead. Yaganah could not have hoped for a more principled caretaker at the end.

As for his quarrel with Ghalib, by his final years—indeed from the moment he left for Pakistan—the real struggle was no longer with the nineteenth-century poet himself but with his and Ghalib's readers; with Ghalib, he felt, the score had long been settled.

donoñ dīvāne haiñ 'Alī ke ṭ̣ālib
jān ek hai go judā judā haiñ qālib
mażhab meñ shā'irī meñ qaumiyyat meñ
ġhālib hain yagānah aur yagānah ġhālib[64]

Both mad ones seek Ali
Their soul is one, although their bodies are separate
In faith, in verse, and in belonging
Ghalib is peerless (Yaganah) and Yaganah is triumphant (Ghalib)

[62] Yagānah Changezi, *Kulliyat-e Yagānah* (Karachi), 593.
[63] Rahi Masum Raza, *Yās Yagānah Changezi*, 65.
[64] Yagānah Changezi, *Kulliyat-e Yagānah* (Delhi), 461.

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