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The Poetics of Micropoetry: *Pluto Poems* of Gulzar

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Abstract

Indian literature has upheld a rich tradition of micro-poetry right from the ancient time to the present day. Gulzar stands out as one of the contemporary Indian poets who have steadfastly dedicated themselves to the craft of micro-poetry. The paper conducts a close study of the collection of Gulzar's micro-verse titled *Pluto Poems* (2015) translated into English by Nirupama Dutt. The study attempts to analyze its structural craft as well as rhetorical artistry that shape the unique aesthetics of these brief creations. These little poems capture single moment or emotion in a few words. They exude a distinctive charm, highlighted by the masterful utilization of personification and imagery that imbues his poems with a delicate character and a sense of vivid animation. The study highlights the power of evocative and concise language that conveys deep emotional truths.

Keywords: micro-poetry, Gulzar, *Pluto Poems*, triveni, brief, imagery, personification, nature.

The heritage of micro-poetry in India has largely been neglected in the past and unfortunately, it continues to be ignored in the present day. The short poetic forms including riddle-poetry, *shloka* hymns, *doha* etc which emerged in the ancient and medieval India never could grasp as much attention for their unique poetics as for the devotionism they preached. Similar is the case with contemporary micro-poetry which is consumed more for its fandom-

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popularity than for its craftsmanship. In the realm of contemporary Indian poetry, a select few luminaries such as N. Gopi (who is known as the father of “Naneelu”/“The Little Ones”) and Gulzar have ardently dedicated themselves to the unrelenting pursuit of the form. The present article examines Gulzar’s *Pluto Poems* (translated into English by Nirupama Dutt in 2015), a collection of his micro-poems looking into the structural craft as well as rhetorical artistry that shape the unique aesthetics of these brief creations.

Gulzar’s trajectory as an artist is truly remarkable. He has had a multifarious career as a film director, lyricist, script writer, biographer, fiction writer and of course as a poet par excellence. It is a canvas which explores almost all aspects of creative expression. Gulzar once mentioned that writing lyrics for films is his profession, but poetry is the source of his life and creativity. For him, poetry is an expression of his intimate feelings on the one hand, and on the other, it gives vent to the concerns of his time. Most of his poems are commentary on today’s time and changing scenario. With simple lyricism and witty wordplay, they allude, evoke, or suggest a thoughtful commentary on personal or social issues and provoke the reader to react.

Gulzar’s love for small things or fragmented existences broken off from something can be discerned from his dedication note in *Pluto Poems* where he gifted his “pint-sized” poems to Pluto, the little icy dwarf planet in the Kuiper belt. Pluto is excluded from the status of what IAU (International Astronomical Union) re-defined as “planet” in 2006. In Gulzar’s words:

Pluto lost its status as a planet recently. Scientists said: ‘Away with you. We will not include you in our family of nine planets... you are not one!’ (*Pluto Poems* xi)

He feels sad for Pluto’s pain of being excluded thus. He offers all his small poems to Pluto: “It is so far away...so tiny... so all my ‘pint-sized’ poems I gift to it” (*Pluto Poems* xi). In the oscillating trajectory of Pluto, Gulzar drew a strong personal analogue as an artist who is ever haunted by the awareness of rejection and a strong sense of divide right from his early

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days. He writes, “I had lost my place long ago when my family said, ‘How come a *mirasi* in a family of businessmen?’” (*Pluto Poems xi*). Furthermore, with India’s partition, the poet’s sense of depravity and tragedy received a deeper empathy for the little broken things and fleeting experiences of life. The brief poems captivatingly capture the ephemeral moments, otherwise lost in elaborate design of life. Gulzar writes:

Some moments are fleeting, ephemeral. We often fail to grasp them. I like to hoard them. As far as the themes are concerned, many poems in this collection are unconventional...but then that is not such a bad thing, is it? (*Pluto Poems xi*)

Similar to the fleeting position of cosmic entities, these little moments do not often unfold themselves prominently to us, and we fail to grasp them in the general scheme of life. Gulzar wanted to preserve them in his unconventional tiny poems. In “Translator’s Note” Nirupama Dutt writes:

Gulzar sahib is an artist of the little things that matter: the short fleeting moments that he captures so originally and the small wonders that still excite him. (*Pluto Poems xiii*)

In the mid-1960s Gulzar famously experimented with another short poetic form called *Triveni* —three-line verse structure, so deliberately crafted as to leave the reader with a lingering thought or question while still imparting a sense of completion. The first two lines evoke a thought which seems apparently complete in itself. But it contains a subterranean flow of another possibility which is suddenly visible in the third line. With a striking quirk it not only changes the meaning constructed by the first two lines, but also projects a new poem altogether in its entirety. Gulzar uses the simile of river to explain the form: “I called it *triveni* because the first two lines meet like the Ganga and the Yamuna and complete a thought, it forms a poem on its own. But beneath the two there is the subterranean flow of another, the

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Saraswati. Hidden. Not visible to the eye” (“Trivenis,” Scroll). Here are two examples in *Shantanu Ray Chaudhuri’s translation*:

1. Why is the newspaper wet today?

Time to change the hawker from tomorrow.

“Five hundred villages washed away in floods.”

2. Like a lonesome firefly in a berry bush

A drop glitters in the cascading hair

Why complain of a leaking roof!

(Chaudhuri, “Trivenis: On Gulzar's 81st birthday”)

Instead of following a gradual course reaching a metaphysical crescendo, the third addition shuts down the transcendental possibility erected by the initial couplet with its platitudinous declaration. *Pluto Poems* do not follow any such definite structure in terms of either quantitative measure or arrangement of thought, but they do often entertain a structure where the virgin progression of thought is followed by an interruptive culmination which adds a deeper dimension to the meaning of the poem. For example, in the poem “My Friend, the Poet” the last sentence adds a greater depth to the central question: whether a poet can write a poem as he breathes his last:

In jest, I once asked a close poet friend:

‘So, will you write a poem

Even as you breathe your last?’

He looked at me and, with a smile, said:

‘It’s impossible to write one before you die, my friend

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I die a million deaths for every poem I write.’(65)

The answer of the friend suggests that each time the poet composes a poem he goes through a figurative death. Writing poetry is not simply a matter of putting words on paper but rather an intensely personal and challenging experience that demands a great deal of personal sacrifice. In the poem “Holding My Hand” the initial quintet talks about the fleeting nature of human connection and relationship, but it is the concluding proclamation that imbues it with a strikingly altered dimension:

Suddenly holding my hand, he said,
‘We can take the narrow lane to the left.’
Before I knew what to ask of the stranger,
He called my name, pulled me into the crowd.
My hand slipped through his grasp.

The first brush with a heart attack wasn’t bad! (98)

With a clever twist the final line encapsulates a profound glimpse into a moment of medical crisis which was subtly withdrawn from the initial part of the poem. The abrupt insertion of the medical context adds a layer of ironic humour to the poem.

With masterful touch Gulzar could chisel a thought to a point where it reaches its fullest potential and telescope it in the scope of just very few lines if necessary with an image in the thought so embedded as to strike the reader almost with physical force. Image constitutes the flesh and blood of his poetry. His use of imagery is so evocative that it feels like a scalpel cutting through skin. It jolts the reader out of the usual state of consciousness, propelling him into the emotional space of the poem. In the poem “Mid-Sky” the image of the beloved blowing away the moon with her deep sigh transcends ordinary perception and encourages a movement from representational to transcendental meaning of reality (5). The

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images like chalking on the moon, a shadow tripping over its own shadow, poem as a bandage to staunch the tears of a silt vein are strikingly innovative and visually evoking.

The serenity and the lyricism of the poem are not affected until the image hits the reader with all its force leaving him or her taken aback or in recoil. It resembles the *mushaira* verse in its retrospective efficacy adding a different dimension to the meaning. This tendency to postpone the thrill, this delayed gratification, until the end can be seen in the poem “Unseasonal”:

Only the other day my younger son
Brought an annar, leftover
From a Diwali of yesteryears.

Its spark and dazzle,
Out of season, devoid of context,
Accentuated the silence in the courtyard.

Your letter arrived, seasons old. (27)

The collection is roughly organized into distinct sections, each of which explores a particular theme such as love, time, city, nature and various other aspects of life. Each section is spearheaded by a couplet that serves as a symbolic herald signaling the overarching concerns that the subsequent poems will deal with. The first section, for example, begins with the following couplet:

Such a long journey through silences
So many things have I tried to tell her... (1)

If we analyze the poems closely, a three-fold structure of expression seems to be at work: narrative (telling of event), vivid portrayal of things, place, persons or situation

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(visually evocative details) and reflective (reflection on life or the philosophy of the poem). And these elements are relevant to each other in one way or other. One can draw an easy parallel with a braid: it has three separate strands plaited into a singular form. However, one works with only two at a time, the third expectantly looming in the background, reintroduced to the forefront to create the purposeful, interlaced pattern, each strand exchanging turns. The poem “And You Were Gone” effectively combines these three elements together:

It was all too sudden
When you went away.
A power cut. Instant darkness.
And I, in this closed room,
Getting used to it.
See the edges of the door outlined. (15)

The poem narrates the sudden departure of some loved one followed by a power cut. In the resulting darkness the speaker is left alone in a closed room as he tries to adjust to this newly created absence. The description of a power cut followed by an instant darkness which emphasizes the suddenness of departure implies a stark contrast. The minute detail like the edges of the door outlined in darkness is visually evocative. The poem touches upon the philosophy of loss and adaptation. The sudden departure of someone very close which is compared to an abrupt power cut can transform one’s relation to one’s surroundings. The absence of light which signifies the absence of the beloved plunges the speaker into the darkness of loneliness.

In the poem “Mid-Sky”, the speaker sets a scene of conversation between lovers. The mention of the mid-sky moon and the way Gulzar describes its sudden disappearance tend to conjure up the imagery within the reader’s mind: “as we talked/The moon, mid-sky,/ Went out suddenly” (5). The addition of the simile “Like a candle flame/Blown away...” adds to the visual mode of the poem (5). In the concluding couplet, the poet tenderly implores his beloved to refrain from heaving deep sighs since the weight of sadness and disappointment

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has the power to destroy the beauty of love much like the luminescence of the moon is snuffed out like a flickering candle flame:

“Listen love,
Do not sigh so deep!” (5)

A dialectical tension arising from the interaction of opposing constituents is a salient feature of the poems. It functions as a means of exploring various aspects of life. The poem “She was Alive” which is a brief and poignant reflection on the fleeting nature of dream, contrasts life and death, sleeping and awaking. Dream and awaking are often recurring motifs in his poem.

She lived when I was asleep
Died, when I woke up.
Such is the nature of dreams.

How many times, then, will she return?
How many times will I let her die? (17)

The poem underscores the idea that dreams are beyond our control. The repetition of the phrase “How many times” emphasizes a sense of helplessness and uncertainty. The questions posed in the poem “Whirlwind” emphasize contrasting ideas: “If Time spreads/Where does one find the shore? / If the space shrinks/Where is the core?” (52). The poem “Tunnel” uses the closing and opening of one’s eyes as symbolic gestures to explain the moment of transcendence: “If only for a moment, close your eyes.../... You’ll never again to open your eyes (54). A variety of binary structure such as “big or small” (126), “A drop or the sea itself” (57), “high and low”, (25), “arohi to avrohi” (25), “Intimacy and separation” (4) permeate the poems.

The use of personification is widespread in Gulzar. Although Ruskin considers “the bestowing of human form or living form upon an abstract idea... as mere recreation of the

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fancy” (qtd. in Bronson 167), personification, in the true sense of the term, is “a radical tendency of the human psyche, embedded in the very roots of language, basic to every impulse toward dramatic representation” (Bronson 166). The rhetorical device is normally applied to abstract concepts, nouns and inanimate objects such as love, death, time, truth, river, cloud, sun and so forth. Often such animations lose their vividness due to repeated use and become dull. A river is thus expected to run, wind to howl, time to run and so on. But what is uniquely distinctive about Gulzar’s use of personification is that he breaks out of such muted dullness of prolonged associations by recruiting unanticipated verbs generally not expected in the noun-verb combinations. In his poetic universe a moment stops midway as if it “has tied itself in a knot” (29). In the poem “Man-Eater” we have personified red letterbox that “gobbled up” fingers (118). In “A Matter of Habit” water pools into deep slumber (76). In the poem “Goa” the sea swings the city like a mother (74). The dry leaf in “Still Life” “waits for the sigh of a gentle breeze” (72). In the poem “Why” “The poor day whines/And drags itself to the slaughter house / Before the final hour” (34). The verb exalts the inanimate object or concept with vivid personalities. In “My Drinking Buddy” the poem itself becomes the poet’s drinking buddy:

My poem keeps me company
As I nurse my drink in the evening.
I take a swig or two
While my friend partakes
Of the elixir late into the night.

Yet, the poem holds its drink well
While I emerge with a hangover,
Drunk on every verse for days. (61)

Gulzar is exceptionally sensitive to the natural objects and phenomena in his poetry. In the poem “The Evening is an Interlude” he captures the ephemeral nature of Time, a natural phenomena that is a constant reminder of the fleeting memories of life. Evening,

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which is a transitory period between day and night, seems like a temporary interruption in the flow of time; so are the moments of our life. The fleeting memories of separation and pain continue to haunt us repeatedly like still evenings:

The evening is but a pause,
A cold sigh
Or a new paragraph.

All days and nights pause here
Time turns over and continues the narrative.
The evening is but a pause. (31)

Nature becomes a springboard for human activities. Like a practical minded philosopher Gulzar endows the panorama of the natural world with human issues. The train, passing over the river, slows down as if strangers “[p]ause briefly, nod at each other, before moving on” (“Crossing” 78). Nature with her free spirit acts out her human aspect. In the poem “Bandra” the sheesham tree curls her hair like a girl:

Stylishly braiding its branches
And like a girl curling her hair
Admires its reflection,
Swaying in the breeze. (73)

In “Scene I” the mahua blossoms are flowering once more after Kanchi hung herself from its branch as if the tree is responding to the human tragedy. The beauty and fragrance of nature are juxtaposed with a tragic incident of sexual violence and suicide:

The mahua blossoms are flowering once more.
And the tree is fragrant again.

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In its shade, drunk on mahua
Those soldiers raped Kanchi
From its branch, Kanchi hung herself.
The mahua blossoms are flowering once more. (99)

In Gulzar's hand, the cosmic un-localized entity which is inconceivable in its vastness and potency becomes one of us. When in the poem "Sometimes..." Gulzar writes, "the moon peeks / From behind the mountains / And measures the snow" (37), or the herd of shy little stars "glitter all over the sky / Until their shepherd comes calling, 'Hoosh, hoosh...' and herds them home", the personification facilitates imagining cosmic entities in their corporate entirety which are "manageable" by human incarnation. It constitutes a very different kind of reality from that of Miltonic unmanageable construction. Even abstract nouns like death "stalks / Waiting in the shadows to pounce" ("Pali" 28). When Gulzar writes in "Prayer Beads", "The earth chants over a beaded loop/ Of nights and days, its rosary/ Year after year it circles the sun" (49), the generalization of the ordered universe is encouraged by the discoveries in the realms of physical laws. Here our imagination is rightly impressed to trace them to their conceivable human forms without discounting their corporate entirety because he uses these cosmic forms as means to reach greater truths.

Gulzar uses plain and ordinary mode of everyday speech in his poetry but there's an ornamental garb in his writing. But this rhetorical enrichment of language is concealed beneath his simplicity. Gulzar reduces an idea or thought to the utmost precision. He sculpts every word to constitute the barest essentials which suggests a fuller and ampler version of the experience. The little poems constitute microcosmic worlds which are rich in potency granted we choose to see it. To bring the little and the larger, the literal and the figurative together has been his chief aim.

Gulzar's poetry is smeared with what Harold Bloom said of Ghalib— "the sorrowful beauty of human nostalgia" (qtd. in Raza, "Praise for the Book"). A common thread of "tahseeb" runs throughout the poems. It conveys a sense of plaintive beauty and delicate nostalgia but it is not devoid of a sense of crisis, inner turmoil, protest and failure. All this is

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transmuted into a charm by the poet's perennial wit. There can be anguish, concern and resistance in his poetry but there is no personal malice or acrimony. Gulzar's acute perception of the strangeness of the commonalities of human life, coupled with his suave recital of thoughts elevate his poems from merely observatory rhymes to philosophical treatises in a pill sized format – one gulp, and the vision is reformed.

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