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Sunlight in the Shadows: Anti-Authoritarian Polemic and the Political *Ġhazal*-s in Dushyant Kumar's Poetry

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Abstract

This paper examines how Dushyant Kumar's collection, *sāye meṅ dhūp* (lit. Sunlight in the Shadows), reinvented the classical *ġhazal* genre as a vernacular weapon of anti-authoritarian dissent—not by abandoning ambiguity, but by recalibrating it under conditions of constraint—during India's Emergency. This study argues that Kumar's work constitutes a radical departure from the genre's traditional emphasis on the abstract longing of the lover for the beloved and other tropes which are peculiar to writing *ġhazal* in the Perso-Urdu world. Instead, Kumar systematically repurposed its conventions—its ambiguity, its metaphors of the beloved and the garden, its themes of sacrifice—to mount a sharp polemic against Indira Gandhi's regime. Through an analysis of *ġhazal*-s selected for their range of polemical strategies—from direct satire and political allegory to the recasting of traditional themes like martyrdom—this paper demonstrates how Kumar's conscious use of a blended Hindi–Urdu vernacular was central to his political project. By writing in "the language I speak," he dragged the elite *ġhazal* into the public square, transforming it into a medium for articulating collective disillusionment, resistance, and a scathing critique of a democracy in crisis. Kumar's work thus stands as a testament to the *ġhazal*'s potent, and often overlooked, capacity for explicit political engagement.

Keywords: *ġhazal*; Dushyant Kumar; emergency; India; Hindi–Urdu; Hindustani

1. Introduction

India's National Emergency of 1975—when civil and political rights were suspended—has been examined extensively from multiple perspectives (Kothari 1989; Jalal 1995; Chatterjee 1997; Dhar 2000; Chandra 2003; Tarlo 2003; Ramraj and Thiruvengadam 2010; John 2014; Jaffrelot and Anil 2021; Bose and Jalal 2023). Beyond its well-studied historical, political, and socio-economic dimensions, the Emergency also left a lasting cultural imprint, shaping the contours of Indian literature—particularly English literature—and cinema (Mathur 2004; Rajadyaksha 2009; Chauhan 2009; Ben-Yishai and Bar-Yosef 2015; Merivirta 2019; Bhattacharya 2020; Ben-Yishai 2023). Beyond English, Indian literature—spanning multiple languages—have long engaged critically, and continue to do so, with social and political crises, producing both implicit and explicit forms of resistance that have crystallised across genres and movements (Nagpaul D'souza 2015; Lal 2018). In Hindi and Urdu, literary movements such as the Progressive Writers' Association mobilised modernist, progressive, and realist modes of writing to challenge both colonial authoritarianism and postcolonial state power, and these interventions have received excellent scholarly attention (Mahmud 1996; Mir and Mir 2006; Ahmed 2009; A. Singh 2010; Jalil 2014; Russell 2022). While earlier Urdu poets, most notably Faiz Ahmad Faiz, had already expanded the

Check for updates

Academic Editor: Mohd Muzhafar bin Idrus

Received: 22 October 2025
Revised: 10 February 2026
Accepted: 11 March 2026
Published: 13 March 2026

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ġhazal's metaphorical repertoire to accommodate political critique, Kumar's intervention is distinguished by its Emergency-specific urgency and its systematic vernacularisation of the form across an entire collection rather than in isolated poems, an urgency that reorganises not only thematic content but the grammar, affect, and imperative structure of the *ġhazal* itself.

While much scholarship highlights the collective role of such movements in opposing communalism and divisive politics, especially at the turn of the 1930s and 1940s, individual poets and writers—who emerged after these movements and were unaffiliated with them—also transformed literary form itself into a subtle site of defiance. Resistance in the literature, thus, does not arise from a single, cohesive ideological programme but from a spectrum of creative gestures—formal, linguistic, and affective—that continually negotiate the boundaries between art and politics. In what historian Prakash (2019) terms the "afterlife" of the Emergency, the literature that resisted the state during that period also acquired its own "afterlife," resurfacing in moments when authoritarian tendencies re-emerged in new guises—chauvinism, exclusionary nationalism, and populism—within Indian politics (Prakash 2019). Reading such literature, and its afterlife, against the grain demands attention to how writers creatively crafted dissent, often by breaking away from established conventions of genre and language. The poetry of Kumar —particularly his collection *sāye meṅ dhūp* (lit. Sunlight in the Shadows)—exemplifies such a rebellion at the intersection of politics, poetics, and language.[1] His work simultaneously challenges the state, its subject-citizens compliance to political emergency imposed on them, and the conventions of the *ġhazal* as a genre, while writing in a vernacular space; a space where Hindi and Urdu merge fluidly, without boundaries.

This paper argues that Dushyant Kumar's *sāye meṅ dhūp* refunctions the *ġhazal*'s constitutive ambiguity under conditions of authoritarian constraint, transforming inherited indirection into a vernacular mode of politically legible dissent during the National Emergency. The significance of this research lies in addressing a substantial scholarly gap: despite Kumar's important contributions to modern Hindi poetry, there exists a near-total absence of critical analysis or standard English translations of his work. The most substantive engagements remain confined to the Hindi intellectual sphere—appearing in critical prefaces and essays that have yet to enter wider academic discourse. To bridge this divide, the analysis first examines Kumar's own poetic manifesto in the preface to *sāye meṅ dhūp*, establishing his conscious intent to forge a public and dissident language. Building on existing studies of *ġhazal* conventions, it contrasts these inherited forms with Kumar's creative departures, highlighting how he reformulates the *ġhazal*'s traditional ambiguity to articulate a political urgency and need for a collective action and consciousness. To illustrate the range and complexity of Kumar's anti-authoritarian poetics, this paper focuses on a representative selection of *ġhazal*-s from *sāye meṅ dhūp*, including a sustained close reading of one complete *ġhazal* presented in full translation, that most directly engage the socio-political imagination of the Emergency and its 'beforelife' and concludes discussion with its 'afterlife.'

The close readings move across a spectrum of registers and strategies: the mobilising imperative of *ho gaī hai pīr parvat-sī pighalnī chāhiye* (lit. the snow/pain has become like a mountain that must melt), where the *ġhazal*'s ambiguity is converted into an imperative for collective flow; the disciplined pragmatism and refusal of being a mere spectator in *āj saṛkoṅ par likhe haiṅ saiṅkṛoṅ nāre na dekh* (lit. do not see the hundreds of slogans written on the streets today); the corrosive satire of *tumhāre pānv ke nīche zamīn nahīṅ hai* (lit. there is no land beneath your feet), which exposes the hollowness of political rhetoric; the polemical irony of *mat kaho ākāsh meṅ kohrā ghanā hai* (lit. do not say that the fog in the sky is dense), where accusations of 'personal criticism' are inverted to reveal the absurdities of

https://doi.org/10.3390/literature6010004

Indian political leadership and democracy; and the vernacular elegy and localised iconography of *kahāṅ to tay thā chirāġhāṅ har ek ghar ke liye* (lit. how the lamps were promised to every home), which relocates classical garden imagery into the streets and gulmohar of Kumar's world. Across these readings, this study shows how Kumar systematically retools the *ġhazal*'s formal devices—*bahr*, *qāfiya*, *radīf*, and tropes—so that the genre's antinomian capacity can do political work: sometimes by mobilising, sometimes by exposing, sometimes by lamenting, and often by vernacularising. Whereas the *ġhazal*'s historical endurance has often been ascribed to its productive ambiguity, Kumar's intervention demonstrates another source of longevity: the genre's ability, when wedded to contextual clarity and lexical innovation, to serve as a sustained language of dissent. In this way, Kumar's *ġhazal*-s compel us to rethink not only the political limits of lyric form under authoritarianism, but also the assumptions that continue to separate aesthetic ambiguity from political legibility in South Asian literary criticism.

2. The Many Lives of Ġhazal—History, Conventions, and Literary Forms

A *ġhazal* is often defined as an amatory poem or ode centred on longing, separation from the beloved, the poet's suffering during estrangement (*hijr*), and the yearning for union (*vasl*), alongside the transgressive acts that love inspires (Pritchett 1993). Originating in the Arabian Peninsula, the *ġhazal* entered the Indian poetic corpus as early as the eleventh or twelfth century, with the poets from the Indian subcontinent writing as heir to the great traditions of literature of Islamicate world (Pritchett 1993). Beyond its recurrent tropes, the *ġhazal* distinguishes itself from other forms of Perso-Urdu poetry, such as free-styled verses or *nazm* and an ode or *qaṣīda* through the consistency of its *bahr* (metre), its concision—typically comprising fewer than fifteen couplets, often between five and seven—and its aesthetic of anonymity, wherein the beloved's identity remains perpetually veiled (Faruqi and Pritchett 1984; Faruqi 1986). With a consistent metre or *bahr*, both lines or *miṣraʿ* of the couplet or *shiʿr* are marked by rhyming words or *qāfiya* and the repeated words or *radīf*. The first *shiʿr* of a *ġhazal* is called *matlaʿ*, and the last *shiʿr* is called *maqṭaʿ*, which may include the poet's pen name or *taḳhallus* (Petievich 1992).

While these formal features define a *ġhazal*, the tropes of the garden, flowers, and nightingale have been used by poets for centuries. In defining the garden as "…the single greatest source of imagery with contradictions…," Faruqi and Pritchett (1984) highlight that in garden, the nature is "…cherished and nature subjugated, nature as both responsive and alien to human emotion, nature as flourishing and then decaying, nature as both mirroring love and failure of love (Faruqi and Pritchett 1984, p. 111)." These conventions do not imply that the *ġhazal* has a fixed meaning, or as Faruqi (1986) highlights, any traditional 'symbols' (Faruqi 1986, p. 59); rather, like the game of chess with its infinite possibilities, the *ġhazal*'s ambiguity, generates multiple meanings, each contingent on the reader. The genre of the *ġhazal* in the Perso-Urdu literary corpus of South Asia has left a lasting imprint on its culture and language, with major poets from every century—from Mirza Ghalib in the nineteenth century to Iqbal and others in the twentieth—leaving their distinctive marks on its evolution (Schimmel 1975; Petievich 1992; Pritchett 1993).

A *ġhazal* is a metrical, lyrical composition with its own set of imageries, which can be contested, interpreted, and understood in multiple idioms due to their nature as "…abstract, aphoristic utterances…"—ranging from the longing for the beloved to divine ecstasy, and, at times, to more distant but possible political meanings (Petievich 1992; Pritchett 1993). This freedom to generate variable—and often incompatible and contradictory—interpretations give the *ġhazal* a singular place in the world of poetry. Yet the question of whether the *ġhazal* can be interpreted politically has long remained contested within Urdu literary scholarship.

Urdu and Persian literary critics, such as Faruqi (1986), have argued that since the *ġhazal* sustains a deliberate ambiguity and resists fixed meaning, neither the author's intention nor any "essential" interpretation—such as a political one—can be determined (Faruqi 1986, pp. 59–60). However, Faruqi and Pritchett (1984) also identified that rather than understanding the transformations in lyrical poetry of *ġhazal* as disruptive or unnatural, this "…growth and evolution is an encouraging sign…" showing that the genres of poetry are "…alive, developing, far from exhausted (Faruqi and Pritchett 1984, p. 126)." In this vein, situating the discussion within the context of the Progressive Writers' Movement of the 1930s and 1940s in late-colonial South Asia, Mir and Mir (2006) interpret poetic engagement contextually, arguing that the Progressive Writers' Association's manifesto marked the emergence of both a political subject and a non-conventional political style in Urdu literature (Mir and Mir 2006). Partly inspired by the Soviet Revolution and internationalism, and partly by the rise of class-conscious, anti-colonial opposition within South Asian intelligentsia and politics, the *ġhazal* acquired a new social context of writing and circulation—even if not a definite or fixed political meaning (Narang 2020a).

Dushyant Kumar's poetry, particularly his *ġhazal-s* in *sāye meṅ dhūp*—written during and in response to the National Emergency and Indira Gandhi's authoritarianism—should be read at the intersection of both Hindi and Urdu literary theory and literary traditions. On one side, Kumar does not situate himself as an Urdu poet in the conventional sense, nor does he claim the lineage of classical *ġhazal* poets; yet he writes self-consciously as an heir to that tradition, exercising the freedom that, as Faruqi and Pritchett (1984) and Faruqi (1986) argue, has always been intrinsic to the *ġhazal* as a genre capable of renewal within continuity (Faruqi and Pritchett 1984; Faruqi 1986). In assessing Kumar's writing, therefore, the *ġhazal* is not a borrowed or imitative form but an available vernacular resource whose conventions can be reactivated to express the moral disquiet and political tension of his time. Kumar's adaptation exemplifies Faruqi (1997) readings of classical and early modern *ġhazal*, the genre contains formal capacities to absorb new idioms and contexts; its conventions allow renewal within continuity rather than only essentialised and ossified repetition (Faruqi 1997).

On the other side, Kumar's poetry emerges in postcolonial India after *chāyāvāda* (mystical-romanticism), *prayogavāda* (experimentalism) and *pragativāda* (progressivism) movements in Hindi literature—movements extensively analysed by critics such as Namvar Singh and Ram Vilas Sharma (Sharma 1954; N. Singh 2018). The *pragativādī* or progressive poets had already established poetry as a site of social commitment and ideological resistance, while the *nayī kavitā* poets, following Agyeya's manifesto in *tār saptak* (1943), sought to reconcile political consciousness with subjective experience and linguistic experimentation, with the main problem being "…the choice of a poetic form…" which "…had some ideological implications (Rosenstein 2004; Tripathi 2011; Czekalska 2012, p. 163)." Kumar's poetry bears traces of both impulses: the anger and empathy of *pragativāda* and the introspective, lyrical refinement of *nayī kavitā*. Yet, unlike his progressive predecessors, Kumar avoids overt ideological alignment. His genius lies in transforming political consciousness into affective immediacy—channelling dissent in vernacular.

Kumar's *sāye meṅ dhūp* should be situated at the confluence of Hindi and Urdu literary histories, theories, and criticisms. His decision to compose *ġhazal* in a vernacular register—blending Hindi and Urdu linguistic forms—demands to be read with a similar hybridity. Whether or not the *ġhazal* possesses inherent political meaning, Kumar's *ġhazal*-s demonstrate how their formal and linguistic intersectionality invites interpretation within their political context. Yet his *ġhazal*-s cannot be confined to that historical moment alone. Rather than standing as exceptions to tradition, they are disruptive only in the sense that they draw simultaneously from multiple lineages—Urdu's aesthetic am-

biguity, Hindi's progressive realism, and the introspective modernism of *nayī kavitā*—to forge a vernacular poetics of dissent suited to the authoritarian milieu of the Emergency. In the preface to *sāye meṅ dhūp*, Kumar himself gestures toward this intent, acknowledging the poet's responsibility to speak within and against his time, thereby inviting readers to approach his poetry with an awareness of this self-declared political motivation.

3. A Poet's Preface: Unusual Start for Unusual Times

Beginning *sāye meṅ dhūp* with a preface titled "I acknowledge…,"[2] Dushyant Kumar breaks from the convention of the Urdu *ġhazal* poet directly addressing the audience within the poem itself. This departure is consciously acknowledged by Kumar, who concedes that while the *ġhazal* "…does not need a preface," nevertheless "…an account of its language is required (Kumar 1975d, p. 1)."[3] His justification, unconventional by his own admission, serves a specific purpose: to frame the linguistic register of the *ġhazal*-s that follow as distinct from the classical norm. Kumar illustrates this through examples such as "…the word is not *shahar* (city) but *shahr*, it is not *vazan* but *vazn* (weight) (Kumar 1975d, p. 1)."[4] Whereas Urdu poets traditionally omitted vowels—often dropping soft-vowel *a*—to maintain metrical precision, Kumar rejects such prescriptions as neither immutable conventions nor inviolable rules. He clarifies, "I do not know Urdu of this kind; however, I have not used these words in these forms out of ignorance, but deliberately (Kumar 1975d, p. 1)."[5] Through this insistence on deliberate choice, Kumar (1975d) redefines poetic agency as the freedom to challenge inherited norms. For him, the task of poetry is not merely to innovate in symbols or imagery but to reconfigure the very language of the *ġhazal*—its sound, metre, and idiom—as an act of creative resistance.

Further clarifying his stance, Kumar notes that he could easily have avoided such criticisms by replacing *shahar* with *nagar*—a synonymous term for 'city' shifting the word's etymology from Persian to Sanskrit origin—but he deliberately chooses not to. This act of refusal is significant. Kumar's conscious retention of *shahar* over *nagar* signals not linguistic negligence but a purposeful intervention in the politics of language, one that foregrounds the vernacular hybridity of his poetic idiom against the backdrop of divisive politics of language. As we turn to analyse his *ġhazal*-s, this deliberate choice invites closer attention to how the play of synonymous words—Perso-Arabic and Sanskritic, Urdu and Hindi—becomes an aesthetic strategy mirroring the vernacular usage. Kumar justifies it by suggesting that this process of 'mixing' and vernacularisation has occurred both ways, where the Urdu words, like *shahr* become *shahar* in common Hindi, whereas, Hindi–Sanskritic origin words such as brāhmaṇ (Brahmin) became *birahmana* and *ṛtu* (season) became *rut* (Kumar 1975d, p. 1).[6] It reveals an authorial agency rooted not in etymological purity of literature but in the creative friction and an active choice between languages and linguistic registers, where selecting one form over another becomes an act of meaning-making and resistance.

This is where the politics of language in the Indian subcontinent becomes crucial. During the 1930s and 1940s, nationalist movements increasingly sought to delineate linguistic boundaries along religious lines—making Hindi progressively more Sanskritised and Urdu more Persianised to align them with the communal and divisive politics of Hindu–Muslim demands for separate nation-states. These political currents reconfigured and reconstituted registers of language, Sanskritised Hindi and Persianised Urdu, eventually became emblematic of rival national projects which were growingly defined by hostility between religious identities with decolonisation at helm, culminating in the violent partition of the subcontinent in 1947. Against this background, Kumar defines the aim of his poetry as "…bringing both the languages as close as possible (Kumar 1975d, p. 1)."[7] For Kumar—who hailed from Bhopal, a city long shaped by a composite linguistic and cultural ethos—

the divide between Hindi and Urdu, at least in their standardised, upper-register forms, dissolved in the vernacular. He articulates this linguistic reality when he writes that once Hindi and Urdu "…descend from their respective thrones, …among the common people, it becomes difficult to tell them apart (Kumar 1975d, p. 2)."[8] Thus, Kumar's *ġhazal-s* embody a twofold antinomianism. On one level lies the *ġhazal*'s inherent antinomianism—its defiance of singular meaning, its paradoxical imagery, and its subversive play of symbols that blur the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, the erotic and the spiritual. On another level, Kumar's *ġhazal-s* extend this rebellion to the plane of language itself: departing from the classical Perso-Urdu lexicon, he turns to a vernacular idiom—"the language that I speak"—where Hindi and Urdu intermingle without hierarchy (Kumar 1975d, p. 2).[9]

In doing so, Kumar transforms the *ġhazal* from a genre of elitist refinement that may have no implications on politics into the one of popular and democratic intimacy, fusing linguistic experiment with political dissent that he aims to show. That said, Kumar was not alone in employing words from multiple lexical traditions simultaneously. Other stalwarts of Urdu poetry before, during, and after his times—such as Muhammad Iqbal, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Sahir Ludhianvi, Ali Sardar Jafri, to name a few—also drew upon Sanskritised vocabulary in certain compositions, both *ġhazal* and *nazm*, mixing and contrasting them with Persianised Urdu in the metrical composition of the genre they used.[10] Despite this fact, Kumar's innovation and original contribution lies in transforming this linguistic permeability into a conscious, collection-wide experiment rather than something limited to a poetic text alone. For him, drawing from the vernacular is neither incidental nor ornamental, i.e., restricted to aesthetic and other metrical concerns, but constitutive of the *ġhazal*'s new expressive potential that is vital for its outreach and popularity. In this pursuit, Kumar distinguishes himself from other poets and literary movements in two ways.

First, he situates his work within a continuum of poetic experimentation, acknowledging that "…the great poets of Urdu and Hindi—such as Nirala, and today's songwriters and many new poets—have written in this form [i.e., the *ġhazal*]," thereby placing himself modestly yet deliberately within this evolving tradition (Kumar 1975d, p. 2).[11] Kumar's distinct reference to "new poets" in the preface also implicitly indicates that he did not find himself accurately represented in the contemporaneous boundaries of the *nayī kavitā* movement nor he found his work completely fitting in or drawing from the classifications of *chāyāvāda* or other later movements in the Hindi literary sphere. Second, he confesses that he is "…not as hesitant as I should be," for several *ġhazal-s* and independent couplets what later becomes the collection, *sāye meṅdhūp* had already received critical affirmation from readers, critics, and fellow poets and writers whose opinions he valued (Kumar 1975d, p. 2).[12] These statements in the preface reinforce Kumar's self-awareness as a poet who simultaneously inherits, extends, and localises the *ġhazal*—turning it into an instrument of linguistic as well as political renewal.

Kumar's politicisation of the *ġhazal* was a conscious formal and ethical choice rather than a retrospective critical imposition, even in the absence of recorded interviews or explicit political statements. Alongside the preface to *sāye meṅ dhūp*, a short reflective note published with the collection further clarifies Kumar's self-understanding of the *ġhazal* as a vehicle for making suffering public. There, Kumar describes these *ġhazal-s* as emerging from a moment when *taklīf* (affliction) seeks expression through "gunggūnāhaṭ ke rāste"—a murmured, lyrical route rather than overt declaration (Kumar 1975d). Explicitly reflecting on his decision to write *ġhazal*, he asks why Mirza Ghalib chose this form to render private pain public, and whether his own *duhrī taklīf* [13]–both personal and social—could, through the same medium, reach a wider readership (*ek apekṣākṛt vyāpak pāṭhak varg*) (Kumar 1975d). This framing is crucial: Kumar does not claim equivalence with Ghalib's ge-

nius, but insists that the suffering of his historical moment is no less real, and that history itself bears witness to it.

Read together with the preface's insistence on deliberate linguistic and formal choice, this reflection establishes Kumar's use of the *ġhazal* as a self-conscious attempt to transform individual affliction into a socially legible mode of dissent, one calibrated to speak publicly under conditions where direct political speech was increasingly constrained. Unlike the Progressive *ġhazal* of the mid-twentieth century, where political critique often remained allegorical or programmatic, Kumar's *ġhazal* experiments are shaped by the Emergency's specific conditions of surveillance, censorship, and moral exhaustion. These conditions do not merely supply themes; they reorganise poetic form itself. The recurrent use of imperatives (*chāhiye*), the escalation from metaphor to direct address, and the turn toward satire and negation reflect a poetics calibrated to speak under constraint. In this sense, Kumar does not abandon the *ġhazal*'s ambiguity but compresses it, intensifies it, and renders it historically legible as dissent. The Emergency, thus, functions not as backdrop but as a formative pressure that reshapes affect, urgency, and the very grammar of poetic address. In a political climate where conformity becomes an enforced norm, this linguistic refusal—to choose between Hindi and Urdu—becomes a political act itself, resisting both state authoritarianism and the longer communalisation of language.

4. The Sorrows Like the Himalayas: *Ġhazal* as Mobilisation and Call for Action

One of the most explicit ways in which Dushyant Kumar refunctions the *ġhazal* form is by structuring a sustained call for mobilisation and collective action within it. This intervention is most clearly visible in the *ġhazal* '*ho gaī hai pīr parvat-sī pighalnī chāhiye*,' which exemplifies how Kumar converts the genre's inherited ambiguity into an escalating political imperative. Rather than reading individual couplets in isolation, a close reading of the *ġhazal* as a complete formal unit reveals how political meaning is generated progressively—through repetition, semantic intensification, and the disciplined use of refrain—culminating in a collective ethics of dissent under conditions of authoritarian constraint.

Ġhazal:

ho gaī hai pīr parvat-sī pighalnī chāhiye
is himālay se koī gaṅgā nikalnī chāhiye
āj yah dīvār, pardōṅ kī tarah hilne lagī
shart lekin thī ki ye buniyād hilnī chāhiye
har saṛak par, har galī meṅ, har nagar, har gāṅv meṅ
hāth lehrāte hue har lāsh chalnī chāhiye
sirf hangāmā khaṛā karnā merā maqsad nahīṅ
merī koshish hai ki ye sūrat badalnī chāhiye
mere sīne meṅ nahīṅ to tere sīne meṅ sahī
ho kahīṅ bhī āg, lekin āg jalnī chāhiye (Kumar 1975f)

English Translation:

The snow has become like a mountain—it must melt;
from this Himalaya, a river—the Ganges—must emerge.
Today this wall has begun to tremble like a curtain;
the condition, however, was that the foundation must shake.
On every road, every street, every city, every village,
every corpse must walk, waving its hands.

My aim is not merely to raise an uproar;

my effort is that these conditions must change.

If not in my chest, then in yours—

wherever it may be, the fire must burn. (Translation mine)

In the opening couplet (*matlaʿ*) of *ho gaī hai pīr parvat-sī pighalnī chāhiye*, Kumar innovates the *ġhazal* form by embedding within it a call for action and mobilisation. While the imagery of the lover's suffering—walking to the gallows through the streets of the beloved, or the noose hanging from the branches of the *dār* tree—is typical of the Urdu *ġhazal* (Faruqi 1986), Kumar redefines this imagery of affliction as a political appeal. In his *ġhazal* titled *ho gaī hai pīr parvat-sī pighalnī chāhiye* (lit. the snow/sorrow has become like a mountain—it must melt), the *matlaʿ* hinges on a play of meanings *(ho gaī hai pīr parvat-sī pighalnī chāhiye/is himālay se koī gaṅgā nikalnī chāhiye*) (Kumar 1975f). The term *pīr* carries an intentional ambiguity, signifying both 'snow' and 'pain.' Each reading, thus, inflects the *matlaʿ*, and consequently the first *shiʿr*, with a distinct character: the mountain of sorrow must melt for the river of transformation to flow, or the mountain of accumulated inaction must give way to movement and renewal, each symbolically contained in the possibility of a burst and flow of the Ganges from the Himalayas. The Himalayas are, therefore, not merely a geographical reference; they implicitly evoke a weight or heaviness on the national psyche, showing the grandeur of the problem but also the potential inherent in its melting.

In this *shiʿr*, the polyvalence of *pīr* transforms the meaning of the second *miṣraʿ*: whether understood as the melting of pain, of social inertia, or of frozen resolve, whether personal or collective, it signals an awakening that must lead to flow mighty as Ganges. Kumar, thereby, employs the metrical and semantic conventions of the *ġhazal* to intensify his message. The insistent refrain *–nī chāhiye* (lit. it must) converts what might have been a lament into an imperative, and by extension, a certainty of something to come. Similarly, the rhyming words *pighalnī* (lit. to melt) and *nikalnī* (lit. to emerge, to come out) are not mere formal fulfilments of the *qāfiya*; they are semantically generative, assuring one action must make the way through another. Through this interplay of sound and sense, Kumar transforms the *ġhazal*'s traditional register of suffering into a collective call for change—the frozen mountain of sorrow must melt so that a river of transformation can flow.

Similarly, in the subsequent *shiʿr* of this *ġhazal*, Kumar sustains the imperative for action through the *qāfiya*, yet the context in which these imperatives arise shifts from the subjective experience of pain to a more external, imagistic register. Here, his innovation in *ġhazal* symbolism becomes most apparent. In the second *shiʿr*, Kumar employs the metaphor of a *dīvār* (lit. wall) that begins to tremble—an image of the authoritarian state, an edifice of power that appears stable but is, in truth, fragile and volatile (*āj yah dīvār, pardōṅ kī tarah hilne lagī/shart lekin thī ki ye buniyād hilnī chāhiye*) (Kumar 1975f). The simile *pardōṅ kī tarah* (lit. like curtains) undercuts the wall's apparent solidity, rendering it theatrical, flimsy, and barely concealing the reality. The real polemical force, however, lies in the second *miṣraʿ*. The *shart* (lit. condition) for transformation is not a superficial tremor but a fundamental upheaval—one that shakes the *buniyād* (lit. the foundation) itself. This image of foundational disruption calls for more than symbolic protest; it demands a total reconfiguration of what sustains the existing order. In this sense, the *shiʿr* advocates not reform but revolution—nothing short of what unsettles the very premises of power and the structure that is maintaining the apparent rigidity of the wall.

At the same time, Kumar's imagery retains the *ġhazal*'s lyrical and symbolic inheritance. The trembling wall and shifting curtain evoke the beloved's veil, long the site of longing and revelation in classical Perso–Urdu poetry and Sufi allegory (Narang 2020b).

The wall that quivers like a curtain, and the curtain that stirs on the verge of unveiling what lies behind it, signify not only political awakening but the moment of *kashf* (lit. unveiling)—when concealment yields to vision, and desire becomes indistinguishable from dissent. Yet the term *āj* (lit. today) lends this unveiling a temporal immediacy. Rather than locating crisis or transformation in a deferred future, Kumar situates it in the urgency of the present. His *āj* transforms prophetic anticipation into an immediate and necessary political demand, sustaining the *ġhazal*'s ambiguity through the grammar of certainty. The third couplet extends this paradigm further (*har saṛak par, har galī meṅ, har nagar, har gāṅv meṅ/hāth lehrāte hue har lāsh chalnī chāhiye*) (Kumar 1975f).

Here, the refrain *–nī chāhiye* (lit. it must) modifies *chalnī chāhiye* (lit. must walk) in the second *miṣraʿ*, while the *qāfiya –alnī* maintains the poem's formal coherence, tying each *shiʿr* to the next. The allegory of 'the dead bodies marching' across the land reactivates a classical trope of the *ġhazal*—the procession of lovers walking to the gallows in the beloved's street—but translates it into a contemporary register of protest. The aim here is not simply to mobilise but to summon those who have been rendered invisible, denied agency, or treated as expendable—even the 'dead,' both metaphorically and politically. The imagery of death in the *ġhazal* does not connote literal demise but the metaphysical separation of the lover from the beloved, a condition in which devotion itself becomes a form of martyrdom. In Kumar's rewriting, that martyrdom becomes the emblem of collective resistance: the dead that must walk again. Read sequentially, the *ġhazal* reveals a deliberate escalation—from metaphorical thaw, to structural rupture, to ethical demand—rather than a series of isolated political gestures. The first three *shiʿr* of Kumar's *ġhazal* embed political meaning within inherited metaphors and tropes, but the fourth and fifth mark a rupture in this pattern; a rupture that becomes legible only when the *ġhazal* is read as a complete formal unit. Without abandoning the poem's structural unity, these couplets draw the explicit political to the surface, translating the metaphysical language of the *ġhazal* into a direct register of dissent.

In these couplets, Kumar moves beyond the inherited imagery of the *ġhazal* to articulate his poetic message directly, leading the reader from the poetic to the political and, implicitly, to the polemical (*sirf hangāmā khaṛā karnā merā maqsad nahīṅ/merī koshish hai ki ye sūrat badalnī chāhiye*) (Kumar 1975f). Distinguishing his purpose from mere *hangāmā*, which literally means 'rabble-rousing' or 'causing chaos', he announces a deeper objective—the transformation of the unveiled *sūrat*, a term meaning 'face,' but also, 'condition' and 'situation.' Through this shift, Kumar abruptly transforms the *ġhazal*'s symbolic idiom into a self-reflexive utterance anchored in the subjective *merā maqsad*. Yet this introduction of the poetic *self* does not diminish ambiguity; rather, it is sustained through the polysemy of *sūrat*, whose double-meaning bridges the personal with the political, the visible with the social. Read alongside the earlier couplets, this verse redefines the poet's aim: not merely to shake the wall or provoke disturbance, but to alter the very conditions that sustain oppression. In the conventional *ġhazal*, the poet either laments like a nightingale in the garden or remains silent in the *mehfil* (assembly of lovers)—a restrained voice among rivals who share the same desire.

Kumar overturns this poetics of reticence: the latent poet becomes an active one, declaring intent without relinquishing the *ġhazal*'s characteristic ambivalence. This *shiʿr*, thus, recasts Kumar not as a mere agitator but as a visionary of transformation, whose *maqsad* (intent) is nothing less than the poetic reimagination of political change. This is followed by the climactic, universalising couplet of the *ġhazal*, its *maqṭaʿ* or the final couplet. In this *shiʿr*, Kumar moves beyond the individual, possessive *maiṅ/merā* to a collective imperative of *tere* (lit. in your). The imagery of fire or *āg* is evoked in *ġhazal* in many forms, ranging from fire of candle (*shamʿa*) in which a moth (*parvāna*) self-annihilates through

immolation—an allegoric suicide in love—to the fire of the lamp of the morning or *chirāġh-i-sahar*, who wants to be extinguished as the break of dawn marks the moment of beloved's departure (Narang 2020a).

However, in Kumar's couplet, the *āg* or fire has a locale; it is neither a candle nor a lamp but a fire in the chest, a reference to zeal (*mere sīne meṅ nahīṅ to tere sīne meṅ sahī/ho kahīṅ bhī āg, lekin āg jalnī chāhiye*) (Kumar 1975f). In this context, the fire in the chest becomes a fire of zeal—interpretable as the flame of resistance, anger, or desire for change. Kumar's imagery is at once self-sacrificial and strategic: the specific location of the fire is irrelevant—whether in *my chest* (*mere sīne*) or *your chest* (*tere sīne*), or anywhere (*ho kahīṅ bhī*). What matters is the absolute, non-negotiable necessity of its existence: *lekin āg jalnī chāhiye* (lit. but the fire must burn). This imperative transforms the poem from a subjective complaint into a universal principle of resistance. The survival of the fire—of zeal, protest, and conscience—becomes more vital than the survival of any single person, including the poet himself, thus, renewing the *ġhazal*'s trope of self-sacrifice in political terms.

In this way, Kumar's *ġhazal ho gaī hai pīr parvat-sī pighalnī chāhiye* engages the established tropes of the *ġhazal* creatively, transforming them into a call for mobilisation and collective awakening—merging affliction with appeal. While the first three couplets evoke the political through metaphor and concealment, the final two shift toward the *self*, turning introspection into imperative while preserving the *ġhazal*'s essential ambiguity. The *ġhazal*, thus, adheres to the metrical and lyrical discipline of the form even as it reconfigures its imagery, diction, and lexicon. Kumar's *ġhazal* becomes not merely a formal experiment but a vernacular reinvention of the classical mode—where the pain of the lover becomes indistinguishable from the passion of the revolutionary who wants foundational changes. This *ġhazal* is not an isolated example; instead, Kumar's another *ġhazal* titled '*āj saṛkoṅ par likhe haiṅ saiṅkṛoṅ nāre na dekh*' (lit. Do not see the hundreds of slogans written on the roads today), conveys a similar call for mobilisation (Kumar 1975a). The *matlaʿ* of this *ġhazal* differs from *ho gaī hai pīr parvat-sī pighalnī chāhiye* in two crucial ways. First, it directly addresses the subject—while retaining the *ġhazal*'s traditional ambiguity of identity—through the informal second person (*tū/tum/tujhe*), compelling the addressee to confront the political reality surrounding them. Second, this *ġhazal* displays Kumar's lexical strategy with greater clarity: his deliberate interweaving of Hindi and Urdu registers.

In the opening *shiʿr*, Kumar evokes a pervasive sense of hopelessness and pragmatic realism: one must look at the darkness within one's own home (*ghar aṅdherā dekh*), not at the distant stars in the sky (*ākāsh ke tāre na dekh*) (Kumar 1975a). This pragmatic command follows the dismissal of the "hundreds of slogans written on the streets" (*saṛkoṅ par likhe haiṅ saiṅkṛoṅ nāre*), urging the addressee to reject illusion in favour of immediate, lived reality. The refrain *nā dekh* (lit. do not see), thus, becomes a rhetorical and metrical hinge that sustains the poem's central call—to refuse spectacle and confront substance. Notably, Kumar's choice of the Sanskrit-derived *ākāsh* (sky) over the Persian *asmān* (sky) reveals his authorial agency in vernacularizing the *ġhazal* form. This injunction to reject illusions continues in the second *shiʿr*, where Kumar exhorts the addressee to recognise the strength of their own arms (*āj apne bāzūoṅ ko dekh*), rather than relying on the *patvāre* (rudders) to sail across the *dariyā* (river/lake/sea). In the third and fourth *shiʿr*, the poet's hybrid idiom deepens, as he juxtaposes the Sanskritised Hindi "firmness of the earth" (*ṭhos hai dhartī*) with *ḥaqīqat* (reality), insisting that one must acknowledge reality without being paralysed by *kẖauf* (fear) (Kumar 1975a).

Here, the interplay of Sanskritised Hindi and Persianised Urdu—*yaqīnan* (certainly), *ḥaqīqat* (reality), *dhartī* (earth)—enacts Kumar's project of crafting a truly vernacular modernity, a language comprehensible to the people 'in how they speak.' As the *ġhazal* progresses, its tone grows more urgent, shifting from pragmatic clarity to a direct call for

agency. The image of "looking for swords in hands that have been cut off" (*kaṭ chuke jo hāth, un hāthoṅ meṅ talvāre na dekh*) delivers a distressing critique of political impotence—a rejection of reliance on the hollow political leadership—and places the responsibility of action squarely upon the addressee (*jaṅg laṛnī hai tujhe*) (Kumar 1975a). Through these *shiʿr*, Kumar moves from lament to empowerment, from disillusionment to resolve, transforming *ġhazal*'s subject as not a lover who just hopes to see the glimpses of beloved but a political agent. His *ġhazal*, thus, charts a movement from confronting despair to asserting agency: even amid pervasive oppression, the possibility of resistance endures.

Another way in which Kumar's *ġhazal* foregrounds agency is through a delicate balance between hope and pragmatism, the latter reinforced by an insistence on confronting reality. In the subsequent couplets, Kumar urges the addressee to console the heart (*dil ko bahlā le*) and to dream each day (*roz sapne dekh*), yet both injunctions are restrained by the refrain *nā dekh* (*do not see*). Similarly, he defines reality as a blurred vision (*dhuṅdhlakā hai nazar kā*) and a product of sadness (*tū maḥaz māyūs hai*), but anchors this melancholy with the pragmatic command to "look at the windows, not at the walls" (*roznon ko dekh, dīvāroṅ meṅ dīvāre na dekh*) (Kumar 1975a). Rather than treating these verses as warnings against escapism or delusion, Kumar reconfigures them as an ethics of perseverance: a call to sustain hope within hopelessness through practical clarity. Whereas earlier *shiʿr* trace a movement from lament to agency—through disillusionment with reality and an awakening to power—these later couplets achieve equilibrium by counterpoising the sweetness of dreams with the immanence of a reality clouded by walls and illusions.

This dialectic of hope and realism is reinforced formally. Across the *ġhazal*, Kumar crafts an intricate interplay between *qāfiya* and *radīf*, generating both rhythmic unity and semantic contrast. The recurring *qāfiya* '–āre'—appearing in *patvāre* (rudders), *māre* (stricken), *talvāre* (swords), *pyāre* (dear), and *dīvāre* (walls)—binds the *shiʿr* together through a hypnotic sonic pattern, while the refrain *–nā dekh* provides the commanding counterpoint. Together, they define what limits and what frees the subject: the *qāfiya* delineates the conditions of reality, and the *radīf* transforms that constraint into a discipline of vision—a lyrical pedagogy of seeing and refusing to see. This pattern reaches its culmination in the *ġhazal*'s *maqṭaʿ*, or final couplet. The surroundings are strewn with ashes (*rākh, kitnī rākh hai cāroṅ taraf bikhrī huī*) yet the subject is urged to see the *ciṅgāriyāṅ* (sparks), not the *aṅgāre* (burning embers) (Kumar 1975a). Amid a landscape consumed by destruction of fire and remnant of ashes, Kumar directs the gaze toward the latent, not the exhausted: the potential for ignition rather than the spectacle of fire. In this way, the *maqṭaʿ* summarises the *ġhazal*'s central paradox—the coexistence of despair and possibility, of ruin and renewal—transforming the imagery of devastation into an allegory of persistence.

If the first two *ġhazal*-s transform lament into resolve and affliction into appeal, the next two—*tumhāre pāṅv ke nīche koī zamīn nahīṅ* (lit. there is no ground beneath your feet) and *mat kaho ākāsh meṅ kohrā ghanā hai* (lit. do not say that the sky has heavy fog)—extend Kumar's *ġhazal* into open political challenge through irony and satire. This shift from imperative mobilisation to satirical exposure should be read as a formal response to the same Emergency condition: when exhortation risks exhaustion or repression, irony becomes the remaining mode of political speech. Here, Kumar turns from the lyrical invocation of agency to the exposure of its absence, from appeal to arraignment. The shift does not imply a retreat from resistance in the *ġhazal* assessed above; quite the contrary, its deepening: satire becomes a mode of critique precisely when the language of direct protest risks exhaustion or persecution. In this transition, Kumar's *ġhazal*-s perform what Giorgio Agamben might call a "gesture"—a suspension or a gap between 'saying' and 'doing' that reveals the limits of both political speech and rhetoric and action. The irony emerges from the gap, and thus, refuses closure: it neither wholly negates nor reaffirms hope but keeps

it in tension, embodying what Adorno described as the 'aesthetic of negativity,' where art's refusal to reconcile with the dominant paradigm of reality becomes itself an act of dissent. In these *ġhazal*-s, Kumar's vernacular idiom sharpens into weaponised clarity: by merging lyric irony with biting satire, he reclaims the *ġhazal*'s inherited ambiguity as a contemporary politics of exposure—of revealing the void beneath the rhetoric of stability, progress, and democracy. It is precisely this identification with crisis—and its repetition within Indian liberal democracy—that lends Kumar's *ġhazal* its enduring force.

5. No Better than Democracy: Contradiction, Satire, and Polemic as Tools of *Ġhazal*

As much as Kumar used the *ġhazal* to delineate the distance between reality and dreams, between hollow politics and pragmatic vision, he also weaponised it as an instrument of satire—mocking the political stratagems of the Emergency and its "beforelife." In these *ġhazal-s*, irony becomes his new register of resistance: the lyrical restraint of the form collides with biting critique, exposing the absurdities and hypocrisies of power through wit, inversion, and tone. This is most clearly evident in his *ġhazal* titled '*tumhāre pāṅv ke nīche koī zamīn nahīṅ*' (lit. there is no land beneath your feet), highlighting the absurdities through the use of *radīf*—*īn nahīṅ* while the *qāfiya* evolves through words ending with *-īn* in the context of *shiʿr* where the subject is both *self* 'maiṅ' and *other* 'tū/tum.' In the *matlaʿ* or the first couplet, Kumar sets the tone for absurdity, highlighting that though there is no ground beneath your feet, even then, i.e., when suspended in the air, you are unwilling to believe the fact of groundlessness (*phir bhī tumheṅ yaqīn nahīṅ*) (Kumar 1975c).

Kumar's emphasis through '*phir bhī*' (even then) plays the role of deepening the satire, while negation at the end of each *miṣraʿ* playfully shifts the meaning by highlighting the absurdity. This becomes more clearly evident in the second *shiʿr*, where Kumar highlights the difference between *self* and *other* by switching the subject from '*tum*'—a second-person, informal 'you'—to first-person '*maiṅ*.' While the *other* is unwilling to believe that they are hanging in the air with no ground beneath them, Kumar's *maiṅ* declines to call the 'endless darkness' as 'morning' (*be-panāh aṅdheron ko subh kaise kahūṅ*) for he is not a 'blind spectator of these spectacles' (*nazāroṅ kā andhā tamāshābīn nahīṅ*) (Kumar 1975c). From declining to call the darkness as morning and not being a blind spectator to the events, Kumar is highlighting the fundamental flaw in popular thinking: their ability and willingness to believe absurd and contradictory as the normal and exception as permanent. If the 'beforelife' of the Emergency names the slow normalisation of authoritarian habits, its 'afterlife' marks the persistence of those habits beyond formal emergency rule—both of which Kumar's satire anticipates.

So far, Kumar's *ġhazal-s* and *shiʿr* have offered veiled references to contradictions and fractured realities; yet in this *ġhazal*, his critique turns overt. Here, he explicitly indicts the hollow rhetoric of democracy while implicitly situating Indira Gandhi as its emblematic subject. In one *shiʿr*, he delivers a pointed jibe: '*terī zabān hai jhūṭī jamhūriyat kī tarah*' (lit. your tongue is deceitful like democracy), followed by the cutting insult '*tū ik zalīl sī gālī se behtarīn nahīṅ*' (lit. you are no better than an abject curse) (Kumar 1975c). By juxtaposing the language of governance with the idiom of profanity, Kumar subverts the sanctity of political discourse, exposing democracy as an instrument of deception and degradation. This move departs from the classical *ġhazal*'s imagery yet remains bound to its metrical discipline, demonstrating how form itself can be turned against power. The satire intensifies in the next *shiʿr*: '*tumhīṅ se pyār jatāeṅ, tumhīṅ ko khā jāeṅ*' (lit. they profess love for you, [then] devour you), where Kumar portrays political hypocrisy as something which even though profess its love and authority from the public but ultimately devour their rights (Kumar 1975c).

The ironic qualification in the second *miṣraʿ* that 'these ethics, even though political, are not hypocritical' (*adīb yūṅ to siyāsī haiṅ par kamīn nahīṅ*) compounds the satire, mocking the self-justifying morality of the political class complicit in authoritarianism and hypocrisy of undermining the very system that gives them legitimacy. These couplets are not merely contextual allusions to Indira Gandhi but poetic responses to the broader political discourse of sycophancy and self-erasure. The warning—'*tujhe qasam hai, khudī ko bahut halāk na kar/tū is mashīn kā purzā hai, tū mashīn nahīṅ*' (For your sake, do not destroy the *self*; you are a part of the machine, not the machine itself) (Kumar 1975c)—directly engages the post-1971 cult of leadership embodied in slogans like "India is Indira, Indira is India" (Auerbach 1984). The criticism of Indira Gandhi, while veiled insofar as it does not name her, nevertheless opposes her authoritarian tendencies and the cult of personality by detaching the idea of India from the idea of Indira.

Kumar thus turns the *ġhazal*'s lyrical ambivalence into a weapon of satirical polemic, unmasking the machinery of power while remaining bound by the aesthetic discipline of rhythm that the genre demands. This brings us back to the central argument: even if *ġhazal-s* are not inherently political, their antinomian structure—their capacity to hold contradiction without resolution—allows them to become instruments of critique, sometimes explicit, at other times veiled. The *maqṭaʿ* of this *ġhazal* exemplifies this power of formal subversion. It leaves the reader with a reproach: '*zarā sā ṭaur-ṭarīqoṅ meṅ her-fer karo* (lit. change your methods and ways a little),' so that their hands grasp not sleeves (*āstīn*) but collars (*kālar*) (Kumar 1975c). This final *shiʿr* functions simultaneously as a warning and a call to authority. One reading evokes the imagery of political upheaval—of people seizing the collars of fleeing politicians, meeting them eye to eye, rather than grasping their sleeves in petition.

Yet another reading reactivates a classical *ġhazal* motif: the lover's desire to confront the beloved face-to-face, rather than pleading for union (*vasl*). While *āstīn* and *kālar* are not conventional symbols in the *ġhazal*'s lexicon, their very unfamiliarity marks Kumar's innovation—the repurposing of everyday, even bureaucratic, imagery to reanimate the genre's emotional and political charge. Read collectively with the preceding couplets, the *maqṭaʿ* transforms these atypical images into a vernacular allegory of defiance, situating Kumar's satire within the "beforelife" of the Emergency, when irony and insinuation became the only viable forms of political speech. While this *ġhazal* largely draws from Perso-Urdu lexicon, as evident in its *radīf* and *qāfiya* and largely the absence of words from Sanskritised origins, Kumar's other *ġhazal* titled '*mat kaho, ākāsh meṅ kohrā ghanā haiʾ* (lit. do not say, the fog in the sky is dense) presents a form of heavier Hindi hybridisation and political criticism using the genre (Kumar 1975e).

This *ġhazal*—among the most renowned in Kumar's *sāye meṅ dhūp*—directly challenges Indira Gandhi's assertion that any criticism of her government or policies amounted to a "personal attack" (Auerbach 1984). Turning this claim on its head, Kumar opens with the *matlaʿ* that cautions against stating the obvious: "do not say there is dense fog in the sky" (*ākāsh meṅ kohrā ghanā hai*), for doing so "…is someone's personal criticism" (*vyaktigat ālochnā hai*). In this *shiʿr*, as in his other works, Kumar exposes the absurdities of India's political scene—the deepening authoritarianism, the culture of flattery, and the growing imperative of "see-not-tell." Yet here, he heightens the irony through his deliberate use of Sanskritised Hindi—*ākāsh* and *vyaktigat ālochnā*—in place of the Urdu *āsmān* and *zāṭī ṭanqīd*. This linguistic choice is not incidental: it allows him to maintain the *radīf* while situating his critique firmly within the Indian linguistic-political milieu of the Emergency, when Hindi itself had become a contested marker of nationalist authenticity. The effect of this simple, declarative *radīf*—the repetitive '*haiʾ* (lit. is)—is striking. Every *shiʿr* concludes with this unyielding affirmation, transforming observation into assertion. By presenting

his commentary as unshakeable fact rather than subjective lament, Kumar fuses lyrical rhythm with political finality. The *radīf,* thus, reinforces the content: these are not passing opinions but stark, unchangeable truths about the moral and political paralysis of the age.

Equally deliberate is the use of the *qāfiya* '*–nā hai*,' which enables Kumar to employ Sanskritised Hindi terms while preserving the formal symmetry of the *ġhazal*. In two *shiʿr*, including the *maqṭaʿ*, he draws upon words such as *uttejanā hai* (lit. is agitation) and *sambhāvnā hai* (lit. is possibility) to extend his critique. In the fifth *shiʿr*, he adapts a classical *ġhazal* trope—blood boiling in the veins—into a political metaphor: blood has been boiling in the veins for ages/you say that this is a momentary excitement/agitation (*rakt varshoṅ se nasoṅ meṅ khaultā hai/āp kahte haiṅ kṣaṇik uttejanā hai*) (Kumar 1975e). Here, agitation or excitement is not transient but enduring, as ancient as the body itself. Kumar's substitution of Sanskritised Hindi (*rakt*, *varshoṅ*, *kṣaṇik*) for Urdu counterparts (*ḵẖūn*, *ṣadiyoṅ*, *pal bhar*) exemplifies his poetic autonomy: he bends linguistic convention and generic tradition to vernacular innovation, crafting a *ġhazal* that speaks in the idiom of resistance yet retains the rigour of form. The other verses of this *ġhazal* equally present the critique of absurdities of Indian politics with much simpler verbs. For example, in the fourth *shiʿr*, Kumar satirises the performative nature of Indian parliamentary democracy.

Both the ruling party and the opposition, he notes, stand face-to-face in the *sansad* (the Indian parliament), yet the debate concerns nothing more consequential than whether a bridge has been built or not: (*paksh au' pratipaksh sansad meṅ mukhar haiṅ/bāt itnī hai ki koī pul banā hai*) (Kumar 1975e). This *shiʿr* crystallises a twofold irony. First, it mocks the distance between political rhetoric and lived reality: while citizens wade through the mud of everyday deprivation, their representatives quarrel over trivialities, mistaking symbolic construction for substantive progress. Second, by centering the discussion on the question of a 'bridge'—a verifiable, material fact—Kumar exposes the farce of bureaucratic debate that inflates the obvious into spectacle. The irony lies not only in *what* is said but in *how* it is said: the metrical poise of the *ġhazal* mirrors the rehearsed decorum of political speech, even as the content discloses its emptiness. Through this restrained sarcasm, Kumar's verse indicts both government and opposition alike, suggesting that democracy has become an aesthetic of debate rather than an ethics of responsibility.

Kumar's *ġhazal*, therefore, does not offer easy solutions or affirm the existing political reality in any way, and theoretically, is close to Adorno's 'aesthetic of negativity'. In juxtaposing satire and *ġhazal*, Kumar demonstrates that the radical power lies in its formal and thematic negation of the Emergency's authoritarian discourse in both its 'beforelife' and 'afterlife'. In his most scathing polemic—such as the comparison of democratic language to a 'deceitful tongue' and Indira Gandhi implicitly to a 'vile curse' within the strict metrical discipline of the *ġhazal*—Kumar highlights critical dialectic tensions. The lyricism of the form, i.e., the *radīf, nahīṅ* and the *qāfiya -īn*, collides with the profanity of the content, creating a structural dissonance mirroring the absurdities of the political world that he is critiquing. This is not committed art in a propagandistic sense; it is art whose commitment is to its own formal integrity, using that autonomy to create a reflective image of a broken and corrupted society. The *ġhazal*'s traditional ambivalence is, thus, weaponised. It becomes a vessel not for romantic indeterminacy, but for a precise, satirical *refusal*—a formal refusal to be reconciled with a reality of hollow promises, blind spectatorship, and sycophantic cult of personality. In doing so, Kumar's poetry does not state a political message so much as it *enacts* a critical consciousness, preserving the possibility of truth not through affirmation, but through a masterful, negative critique of a world in which truth had been systematically dismantled. This point becomes further evident in Kumar's critique of 'broken promises' of politics.

6. The Boulevard of Broken Promises: *Ġhazal* and Discontent

Dushyant Kumar's *ġhazal-s* extend beyond political satire to articulate a profound lament for the broken promises of the state, channelling the people's despair through the genre's classical tropes of longing and loss. This is powerfully exemplified in his *ġhazal*, *kahāṅ to tay thā chirāġhāṅ har ek ghar ke liye* (lit. how the lamps were promised for every home) (Kumar 1975b). Here, Kumar repurposes the traditional imagery of the lamp (*chirāġh*)—often a symbol of the lover's consuming heart in classical poetry—to signify the State's failed covenant with its people. The *matlaʿ* or opening couplet establishes a devastating dichotomy: the promised plurality of 'lamps for every home' is shattered by the reality that not even 'a single lamp is available for the entire city.' This imagery implicitly plunges into metaphorical darkness, portraying a democracy impoverished by its own hollow rhetoric. The *ġhazal*'s formal structure deepens this critique. The relentless repetition of the *radīf*, '*-ke liye*' (lit. for), persistently evokes the duality of intention and promise, while the succeeding lines detail deprivation and sacrifice. This creates a structural irony where the form itself embodies a broken promise; the anaphoric 'for' builds a litany of failures, contrasting the state's proclaimed purposes with the people's grim reality. Through this method, Kumar does not merely use the *ġhazal* to lament but weaponises its very conventions to highlight the collective experience of betrayal.

Here too, as in the other *ġhazal-s* discussed above, Kumar employs absurdity as a poetic device to sharpen his social critique. In the second and third *shiʿr*, he constructs two striking images of deprivation through ironic inversion. In the first *miṣraʿ* of the second *shiʿr*, he observes that *yahāṅ darak̲htoṅ ke sāe meṅ dhūp lagtī hai* (here, one feels the sun even in the shadows of the trees)—an image that transforms shelter into exposure, protection into discomfort (Kumar 1975b). Likewise, in the next *shiʿr*, he writes: *na ho kamīz to pāoṅ se peṭ ḍhaṅk leṅge* (lit. if there is no shirt, we will cover our stomachs with our legs), an absurd declaration of resilience in the face of destitution. In both cases, Kumar uses irony not to trivialise suffering but to reveal the distorted normality of deprivation. The formal resolution of these paradoxes lies in the *radīf* '*–ke liye*' (for), which anchors each *shiʿr* in a tone of purpose rather than despair. By ending each couplet with this refrain, Kumar transforms absurdity into affirmation, expressing both endurance and commitment within the metrical discipline of the *ġhazal*. For example, the second *shiʿr* resolves with a declaration of migration '*chalo yahāṅ se chaleṅ aur ʿumr bhar ke liye*' (lit. let us depart from here for a lifetime) (Kumar 1975b). Similarly, the third *shiʿr* resolves with a similar paradigm of migration: '*ye log kitne munāsib haiṅ is safar ke liye*' (lit. how suited these people are for this migration) (Kumar 1975b).

This repeated *radīf* redefines the meaning of sacrifice and movement within the *ġhazal* tradition: the journey or *hijr*—conventionally marking the lover's separation from the beloved—now signifies a collective migration born of political and social injustice. Through this re-semanticised *hijr*, Kumar transforms the individual lament of the classical *ġhazal* into a vernacular idiom of shared struggle. By manipulating both *radīf* and *qāfiya*, he converts the lament of broken promises into a double allegory of hope and caution. Hope is articulated in the verse, '*vo mutmaʾin haiṅ ki patthar pighal nahīṅ saktā/maiṅ beqarār hūṅ āvāz meṅ asar ke liye*' (lit. they are convinced that the stone cannot melt; I am restless for my voice to have an effect), where the poet's conviction in the transformative power of voice stands against collective disbelief (Kumar 1975b). Caution, by contrast, finds expression in '*terā niẓām hai, sil de zabān shāʿir kī*' (lit. it is your regime/moment, sew the poet's tongue), an image that captures both the censorship of speech and the poet's awareness of his precarious agency in the limits of writing *ġhazal* (Kumar 1975b).

In both hope and caution, Kumar reworks established *ġhazal* tropes. The faith in melting the stone echoes the lover's unrelenting desire to meet the beloved, melting the heart

of beloved which is hard like a stone, while the injunction to silence recalls the classical *majlis* (assembly) of rivals where the lover dares not utter the beloved's name. Yet these allusions also acquire a new, political valence through the layered ambiguity of key terms. The word *niẓām* can mean 'order,' 'time,' or 'government,' while *bahr* denotes both 'metre' and 'moment.' This polyvalence produces two simultaneous readings: first, the poet's tongue is literally 'sewn' by an authoritarian regime that suppresses dissent; second, it is metaphorically 'sewn' by the conventions of the poetic form—the *bahr* as the constraint of both rhythm and historical circumstance. Kumar, thus, reveals the *ġhazal*'s antinomian potential: whether silenced by authority or by art's own discipline, the poet's speech retains its latent potency of challenging the norms. The need to suppress it, whether politically or metrically, testifies to the *ġhazal*'s enduring power to unsettle, provoke, and resist.

Perhaps bound by the *bahr* of the *ġhazal* and its *radīf*, or by the imagery of his own landscape in central India—or by both—Kumar turns to the motif of the garden in the *maqṭaʿ*, the final *shiʿr* of this *ġhazal*. Here, he reimagines the classical *ġhazal*'s most enduring symbols—the garden and the street—through a local, vernacular lens. Evoking the *gulmohar*, a flame tree ubiquitous in central India with its vivid crimson blossoms, Kumar replaces the Persian rose with a flower rooted in his own geography. The subject who lives with dignity now does so not as the nightingale lamenting in a rose garden but beneath the *gulmohar* in his own courtyard—*jiyeṅ to apne bagīche meṅ gulmohar ke tale*—and, if he must die, he dies in another's street, still under the sign of the same tree—*mareṅ to ġhair kī galiyoṅ meṅ gulmohar ke liye* (lit. if [we] die, then it is in the street of others for *gulmohar*) (Kumar 1975b). In the classical *ġhazal*, the crimson of the rose has long signified blood, passion, and martyrdom (Faruqi and Pritchett 1984). Kumar appropriates this symbolism but relocates it to his own terrain: the redness of the *gulmohar* becomes the redness of blood in his own city streets, fusing aesthetic beauty with political defiance. Just as he vernacularises the *bahr* by writing in a local idiom that blends Hindi and Urdu, he vernacularises the imagery itself—substituting the imported rose with the *gulmohar* of his own milieu. In doing so, Kumar indigenises resistance within the boundaries of convention: the *ġhazal* remains metrically disciplined, but its landscape and its politics become unmistakably Indian, rooted in the soil, shadow, and colour of the everyday.

In its own way, Kumar's *ġhazal-s* allow us to look into the history of India and see the Emergency not merely as a historical event—as Jaffrelot and Anil (2021) call it as India's first dictatorship—but as a recurring condition in Indian political life in the shadows of constitutional liberalism—what Prakash (2019) has called the Emergency's "afterlife (Prakash 2019; Jaffrelot and Anil 2021)." Kumar's poetry both emerges from the shades of a political crisis and anticipates its continuum by critiquing not just Indira Gandhi's regime but a latent potency inherent in democracy. The *ġhazal-s* written during in the early days of the Emergency respond to the climate of fear, censorship, and disillusionment, but their language and imagery equally expose what may be called the Emergency's *beforelife*: the long gestation of authoritarian impulses within India's vulnerable democratic institutions, the erosion of political ethics in both the ruling party and the opposition, and the cultural normalisation of unquestioning obedience. In this sense, Kumar's critique is not limited to an episode but it is deeply structural, giving it an 'afterlife' beyond the events of the Emergency. Through irony, lexical hybridity, and metrical discipline, he reveals how the idioms of devotion, loyalty, and ambivalence that once underpinned romantic *ġhazal-s* could, under new political conditions, be recondition to challenge the political power. In re-configuring *ġhazal* into instruments of dissent, Kumar also shapes the Emergency's *afterlife*: his poetry continues to resonate in subsequent crises of Indian democracy and the rise in strongman tendencies, where his *ġhazal-s* standout as both memory and method—reminders that resistance in language outlives the moment of its oppression.

https://doi.org/10.3390/literature6010004

7. Conclusions: The Afterlife of *Ġhazal*-s

This study, in surveying Dushyant Kumar's *ġhazal-s* from *sāye meṅ dhūp*, has sought to trace how his *ġhazal* contribute to the genre and Hindi–Urdu literary intersection as a language of political and aesthetic resistance. In this way, Kumar's work speaks not only to the Emergency but also to its *beforelife* and *afterlife*—to the longer history of India's democratic anxieties and the persistent negotiations between form and dissent which continue in different forms to this day, giving his *ġhazal* a resonance in our times. His *ġhazal-s* convey more than the political mood; they offer a poetic grammar through which future studies might reconsider how lyric traditions transform under and actively respond to the authoritarian conditions. Kumar's poetry, therefore, clarifies what may appear paradoxical in the Urdu literary tradition. In line with Faruqi (1986) assertion that the genre of *ġhazal* is not inherently political, Kumar's *ġhazal*-s demonstrate how the genre's structural ambiguities—its deliberate indirection, its capacity for multiple meanings, its rhythm of assertion and withdrawal—can themselves become a tool for charting an idiom for the politics of resistance.

The *ġhazal*'s antinomianism, in Kumar's hands, turns into a method of critique: resistance that operates through form, diction, and irony rather than manifest ideology or commitment to any specific literary movement. His work, therefore, challenges the boundaries between aesthetic autonomy and social commitment that have long defined and divided literary criticism in both Hindi and Urdu literary traditions. Occupying the cracks between the boundaries of *chāyāvāda*, *prayogavāda*, and *nayī kavitā*, Kumar's work appears to be an outlier which invents his own mode of resistance through the very cracks of literary classification, tailored for his times. His *ġhazal-s* unsettle both Urdu and Hindi literary orthodoxies by refusing to be fully absorbed by either, epitomised in his commitment to write in vernacular. Unfortunately, Kumar's untimely death in 1975—the year of publication of *sāye meṅ dhūp*—leaves us with only one corpus to investigate a new trajectory in the literature emerging from central India.

This study makes an effort to situate Dushyant Kumar as a literary figure whose poetics demand a reconsideration of how South Asian literary modernity is theorised across languages and forms. While this study has only marginally sketched the theoretical possibilities of reading Kumar through Adorno's *aesthetic of negativity* and Agamben's *gesture*, their frameworks invite further study of Kumar's work, which is yet to be translated in English. Kumar's refusal to reconcile form with ideology recalls Adorno's insistence that art resists by not affirming. Simultaneously, Kumar's oscillation between speech and silence evokes Agamben's notion of 'gesture' as the suspension between action and expression. Future research may develop these resonances more fully, not in the way to impose external theoretical readings upon Dushyant Kumar, but to show how his *ġhazal-s* themselves anticipate and embody such philosophical concerns in vernacular. In this sense, this study has sought not to conclude but to open—a groundwork for reading Dushyant Kumar as both a poet of his political moment and a thinker of poetic resistance whose relevance continues in the afterlife of the Emergency and beyond. Read in today's political climate in India, Kumar's *ġhazal*-s remind us that lyric forms do not merely survive political crisis; they can learn its grammar, outlast its prohibitions, and transmit dissent long after the moment of repression has passed.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not Applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not Applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Notes

1 **Note on Transliteration:** Urdu and Persian words are transliterated according to the conventions used in the *Journal of Urdu Studies* (Brill), which follow a modified IJMES system. Diacritics indicate long vowels (ā, ī, ū), retroflex consonants (ṭ, ḍ, ṇ), and letters of Arabic origin (ṣ, ẓ, ḥ, ʿ, ġ, q, ḳ); nasalization is marked with *ṅ* (nūn ghunnā). This system has been continued for transliterating the *ġhazal* of Dushyant Kumar from his collection, even though the work is of mixed registers, e.g., Sanskritized Hindi and Persianized Urdu, and published in Devanagari script. In keeping the context of *ġhazal*'s Perso-Urdu origins in mind, a modified IJMES system is preferred for transliteration to maintain consistency. Hindi literary terms, such as *chāyāvāda*, *pragativāda*, and *nayī kavitā*, are transliterated using the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST). Proper nouns, e.g., Ghalib, Iqbal, and Kumar, are left unitalicized. All other non-English terms appear in italics at first mention, after which italics are dropped but diacritics retained for consistency.

2 Original: "maiṅsvīkār kartā hūṅ…" Other possible translations of the term 'svīkār' may include 'accept/admit/concede/recognise'; however, the author finds 'acknowledge' to be more precise translation insofar as this preface functions like an *acknowledgement* by the poet of his positionality vis-à-vis other movements and poets, as the text further shows. In this way, the preface—which is usually translated as *bhūmikā* in Hindi books—appears to be more accurate translation of the title, but it cannot be read separately from the acknowledgment written further by the poet.

3 Original: "…ki ġhazalon ko bhūmikā kī zarūrat nahīṅ honī chāhiye; lekin, ek kaifiyat inkī bhāshā ke bāre meṅ zarūrī hai."

4 Original: "…ki shabd *shahar* nahīṅ *shahr* hotā hai, *vazan* nahīṅ *vazn* hotā hai."

5 Original: "…ki maiṅ urdū nahīṅ jāntā, lekin in shabdon kā prayog yahāṅ ajñānatāvaś nahīṅ, jān-būjhkar kiyā gayā hai. yah koī mushkil kām nahīṅ thā ki *shahar* kī jagah *nagar* likhkar is doṣ se mukti pā lūṅ…"

6 Original: "…urdū kā *shahr* hindī meṅ *shahar* likhā aur bolā jātā hai; ṭhīk usī tarah jaise hindī kā *brāhmaṇ* urdū meṅ *birhaman* ho gayā hai aur *ṛtu rut* ho gaī hai."

7 Original: "…merī nīyat aur koshish yahī rahī hai ki in donoṅ bhāshāoṅ ko zyādā se zyādā qarīb lā sakuṅ."

8 Original: "…urdū aur hindī apne-apne siṅhāsan se utarkar jab ām ādmī ke bīch ātī haiṅ to unmeṅ farq kar pānā baṛā mushkil hotā hai."

9 Original: "…ye ġhazaleṅ us bhāshā meṅ likhī gaī haiṅ jise maiṅ bolatā hūṅ."

10 A good example of this would be Faiz's *nazm* dedicated to the Iranian students' uprising in 1953 against the installation of Shah, titled "īrānī ṭalaba ke nām" (lit. In the Name of Iranian Students) where Faiz draws words like 'sakhī,' (friend/partner) 'lahū' (lit. blood), 'chan-chan' (lit. trinkling; grammatically an alliteration) from Sanskritised lexicon. Or, Sahir's *ġhazal* titled '*maiṅ zindagī kā sāth nibhātā chalā gayā*' where he used terms like '*sāth*' (lit. accompanying), '*sog*' (from Sanskrit, *śoka*, lit. grief) to name a few. After Kumar, Hindi and Urdu literature do not cease to draw from each-other, as represented in the works of Ali Sardar Jafri, Kaifi Azmi, and other stalwarts of Hindi and Urdu poetry. The antinomianism of drawing from various religious traditions and mixing lexicons becomes emblematic of resisting the politics of communalism and linguistic purism that re-emerges in post-colonial India and Pakistan.

11 Original: "ki ġhazal kī vidhā bahut purānī, kiṅtu vidhā hai, jis meṅbaṛe-baṛe urdū mahārathiyoṅne kāvya-racanā kī hai. hindī meṅbhī mahākavi nirālā se lekar āj ke gītkāroṅaur naye kaviyoṅtak anek kaviyoṅne is vidhā ko āzmāyā hai."

12 Original: "parantu apnī sāmarthya aur sīmāoṅko jānne ke bāvjūd is vidhā meṅutarte hue mujhe saṅkoch to hai, par utanā nahīṅjitnā honā chāhiye thā. śāyad iskā kāraṇ yah hai ki patr-patrikāoṅmeṅis saṅgrah kī kuch ġhazaleṅpaṛhkar aur sunkar vibhinn vādoṅ, ruciyoṅaur vargoṅkī sṛjanśīl pratibhāoṅne apne patroṅ, mantavyoṅevam ṭippaṇiyoṅse mujhe ek sukhad ātmaviśvās diyā hai. is nāte maiṅ un sabkā atyant ābhārī hūṅ."

13 Original: duhrī taklīf (jo vyaktigat bhī hai aur sāmājik bhī) which literally translates to "a double affliction (which is both personal and social)".

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