

## “AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF ABUL KALAM AZAD’S GHUBAR-E-KHATIR”

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### **Abstract:**

Ghubar-e-Khatir, composed by Abul Kalam Azad during his imprisonment from 1942 to 1945 in Ahmednagar Fort and Bankura Jail, stands as a landmark in Urdu prose. The work comprises twenty-four letters addressed to his close friend Nawab Habibur Rahman Khan Sherwani. While formally epistolary, these writings extend beyond conventional letter form, revealing the intellectual, philosophical, and literary depth of their author. This study explores the stylistic and thematic dimensions of Ghubar-e-Khatir, emphasizing Azad’s distinctive prose, his reflective thought, and his extensive engagement with cultural, historical, and literary traditions. The letters traverse religion, philosophy, literature, music, history, science, and nature, demonstrating the breadth and versatility of Azad’s scholarship. The analysis also highlights the linguistic richness of the text, shaped by Arabic, Persian, and English influences, and illustrates his skillful integration of classical scholarship with modern intellectual inquiry. Key stylistic features including philosophical discourse, self-dialogue, meticulous attention to detail, descriptive narrative, and subtle humor transform these letters into a reflective literary experience rather than mere correspondence. The study argues that Ghubar-e-Khatir occupies a distinctive place in Urdu prose, merging personal reflection, intellectual exploration, and artistic expression into a singular literary achievement.

**Keywords :**Abul Kalam Azad, Ghubar-e-Khatir, Urdu prose, prison literature, literary style, intellectual reflection, epistolary writing, Persian and Arabic influence .

### **INTRODUCTION:**

“Ghubar-e-Khatir” (literally, The Dust of Memories) is an extraordinary work composed in the solitude of imprisonment, reflecting the intellectual depth, scholarly breadth, and refined literary sensibility of Abul Kalam Azad. It was the last book published during his lifetime. Owing to his political struggle and uncompromising opposition to British colonial rule, Azad repeatedly faced state repression: his journals were confiscated, he was imprisoned multiple times, and he endured periods of exile. It was during one such incarceration that his contemplative mind produced this enduring literary monument, which today occupies a distinguished place in Urdu literature.

The volume comprises twenty-four letters written between 1942 and 1945 while Azad was detained in the Ahmednagar Fort and Bankura prisons. These letters were addressed to his close friend Nawab Habibur Rahman Khan Sherwani (Hyder Yar Jung Bahadur). Their intellectual and spiritual association dated back to 1906. Sherwani was widely known for his love of learning, religious insight, and scholarly gatherings. As prison regulations did not permit

correspondence, Azad wrote these letters without being able to send them. After his release, the manuscripts were delivered to the intended recipient and were later published in book form in May 1946 at the request of Hakim Ajmal Khan.

Superficially, *Ghubar-e-Khatir* appears to be a collection of letters; in reality, it presents a comprehensive intellectual and cultural panorama. Within its pages are reflections on religion, philosophy, history, music, literature, science, and various dimensions of human thought. Azad's prose possesses a distinctive intellectual fluidity: the reader is drawn at one moment into discussions of civilization and culture, and at another into the subtleties of poetry and aesthetics. For this reason, the work is not merely a literary compilation but also a cultural document of its age.

Azad's literary aptitude manifested at an early age. By twelve or thirteen, he had begun composing poetry and prose, and his writings appeared in periodicals. While his early works did not exhibit the technical maturity of his later prose, by the time of *Ghubar-e-Khatir* his style had attained a high literary standard—marked by conceptual depth, linguistic elegance, and stylistic individuality.

The letters also reflect multiple dimensions of Indian civilization. References to the shared Hindu–Muslim cultural heritage, historical sites, and social traditions reveal the expansiveness of Azad's intellectual vision. In his view, civilization is not the possession of a single community or religion; rather, it is a collective human legacy shaped by centuries of shared experience.

The formation of human personality, similarly, results from the interplay of diverse influences. One dimension is innate acquired at birth, including inherited dispositions. The other is shaped by environment, culture, and lived experience. As consciousness matures, the impact of civilization and social conditioning becomes more evident. A creative writer, being a sensitive and perceptive member of society, inevitably grounds his work in a coherent intellectual framework or worldview. When he produces a literary text, his ideas, experiences, and convictions become embedded in his stylistic expression.

The range of ideas and experiences varies from individual to individual. While thoughts may sometimes converge across different minds, style cannot be borrowed. Style is the reflection of the author's personality. It is shaped by language, historical context, literary genre, and psychological disposition.

In the early phases of Urdu literature, ornate and rhymed prose (*musajja'* and *murassa'*) was highly valued, characterized by elaborate diction and rhetorical embellishment. Over time, literary taste evolved, and modern prose increasingly favored clarity, fluency, and simplicity. Various literary movements also influenced stylistic development: trends such as *iham-go'i* (semantic ambiguity), Romanticism, the Progressive Writers' Movement, and Modernism reshaped modes of expression. Before undertaking a discussion of the stylistic features of Abul Kalam Azad, it is also important to note that some scholars have debated the generic classification of *Ghubar-e-Khatir*. In their view, the writings collected in this volume raise a critical question: are they to be regarded as letters, essays, or literary sketches (*inshā'iyāt*)? Although formally structured as epistles, their thematic expansiveness and reflective depth often transcend the conventional boundaries of letter writing.

Aal-e-Ahmad Suroor, for instance, places *Ghubar-e-Khatir* within the tradition of essay writing. In this context, Suroor observes:

“The writer wishes to behold the blossoming of the scars upon his heart. *Ghubar-e-Khatir* is not a collection of letters; it is a collection of essays. And, from the standpoint of essay writing, it possesses all the characteristics of that genre.” (1)

In *Ghubar-e-Khatir*, the subjects of the letters vary considerably; consequently, the style of writing shifts in accordance with the theme under discussion. At times, the language is simple and accessible; at others, it reflects a pronounced Persian influence, and in certain passages it assumes a distinctly scholarly tone. Persian poetic sensibility constitutes a defining feature of these letters. Mastery of the Persian language permeates the text throughout. Azad employs Persian vocabulary, idioms, and syntactic constructions with remarkable ease and naturalness. He weaves Persian couplets into his prose so seamlessly that the texture of the expression never feels heavy or labored. Referring to his deep engagement with Persian, Abul Kalam Azad writes:

“Owing to my late father, a love for Persian had become deeply rooted in my temperament. Accordingly, on the one hand, I undertook extensive reading in Persian—particularly in lexicon and literature. On the other hand, I made deliberate efforts to cultivate association and companionship with eloquent native Iranians.” (2)

A profound familiarity with Arabic also imparted a distinctive tonal quality to the style of *Ghubar-e-Khatir*. Abul Kalam Azad received a thoroughly traditional Eastern education. Born into a deeply religious household, his early instruction was dominated by Islamic sciences, Arabic, and Persian. As a result, his intellectual formation and literary sensibility bear a strong imprint of Islamic scholarship and classical Arabic literature. Throughout these letters, one frequently encounters the flavor of Arabic diction and the fragrance of its rhetorical elegance.

What is particularly striking, however, is that despite his grounding in traditional Eastern learning, Azad's intellectual world was remarkably expansive. A close reading of these letters reveals his deep engagement with Western thought and modern disciplines as well. At times, subtle traces of English vocabulary and Western modes of reasoning appear in his prose. During his imprisonment in Ahmednagar Fort, much of his reading consisted of English works; consequently, echoes of Western scholarship resonate within his reflections. For this reason, a measured use of English terms can also be found in the collection. In certain passages, one even senses that an idea may first have taken shape

in English before being recast into Urdu expression. Yet it is noteworthy that he never allows the incorporation of English words to burden or dilute the dignity of his prose; the language continues to flow with composure, clarity, and grace.

All twenty-four letters in the volume open in a uniform manner. Each begins with the address “Sadiq-e-Mukarram” (“My esteemed friend”), an expression that conveys both affection and respect for the addressee. Through these letters, multiple dimensions of Azad’s personality come into view: intellectual alertness, self-respect, dignity, individuality, and a certain reserve in social intimacy. At moments, a subtle sense of superiority may also be discerned—though this appears less as arrogance and more as an expression of scholarly confidence.

Another appealing aspect of these letters is their delicate vein of humor. Azad is generally recognized as a serious and profound thinker; yet within these writings, one occasionally encounters touches of lightness and gentle wit. In some sentences, it feels as though a soft smile peeks out from behind the veil of words. This understated humor enhances the charm of his prose and provides the reader with a pleasant respite amid sustained intellectual discourse, further enriching the stylistic texture of *Ghubar-e-Khatir*.

Abul Kalam Azad in *Ghubar-e-Khatir* does not merely recount the circumstances of imprisonment; rather, he seeks to unfold before the reader the deeper layers of his intellectual and psychological background. For this reason, certain letters assume a distinctly philosophical character. Although the discussions are profound, Azad presents them in such a manner that even a general reader may derive enjoyment and understanding from them. He does not confine complex intellectual questions within dense technical terminology; instead, he articulates them in language that is simple, fluid, and engaging. This balance between scholarly depth and stylistic ease constitutes the essential strength of his prose. Intellectual seriousness remains intact, yet the reader never feels burdened by abstraction.

Clarity and transparency are among the most striking features of his prose style. Ambiguity and unnecessary complexity rarely intrude. When addressing intricate issues, he adopts a manner that preserves the gravity of thought while simultaneously generating aesthetic appeal. Consequently, despite engaging in learned debates, his letters never appear dry; they retain a literary vitality that sustains the reader’s interest.

Another dimension of his personality reflected in these letters has been interpreted by some critics as a form of ego or self-assertiveness. In reality, this sense of superiority is less a manifestation of pride than an expression of intellectual individuality and confidence. The strong willpower and firmness of resolve evident in his early journalistic career continue to characterize his later writings. When he launched the journal *Al-Hilal*, the same courage of expression and ideological steadfastness were clearly visible; this quality persists in the letters of *Ghubar-e-Khatir* as well.

The self-awareness or confidence evident in his work is not mere narcissism but rather a profound consciousness of selfhood. In this respect, a parallel may be drawn with Muhammad Iqbal’s concept of *khudi* (selfhood). For both thinkers, *khudi* signifies self-realization and awareness of one’s intellectual and spiritual potential, not self-admiration. Alluding to this aspect, the critic Malik Ram observes that what appears as ego in Azad’s personality is, in fact, an expression of self-conscious dignity and intellectual poisequalities that endowed his prose with a distinctive and compelling stylistic identity.

“The resonance of Maulana’s subtle and refined sense of self can be clearly heard in every phase of his career from *Al-Hilal* to *Ghubar-e-Khatir*. Yet this is not self-worship; it is self-confidence. And through it, one perceives the measure of his individuality.” (3)

In *Ghubar-e-Khatir*, while scattered gems of profound reflection lie dispersed throughout, one also encounters the luminous presence of spirituality permeating his style of writing. Even within the constraints of imprisonment, Abul Kalam Azad never abandons his distinctive mode of expression. It is precisely this unique stylistic manner that continues to hold the reader under its subtle spell. Regarding his style, Abdul Mughni writes:

“These letters are, in reality, portraits of the mind and temperament of a person upon whom the Bountiful Creator had opened innumerable pathways in every domain. Within these portraits are also the missing links in the evolution of his personality, as well as analyses and interpretations of its present elements.” (4)

In Abul Kalam Azad’s letters, one distinctly senses a pervasive atmosphere of self-dialogue. Reading *Ghubar-e-Khatir*, it often feels as if the author is engaged in a conversation with his own heart and mind. Life in prison naturally thrusts a person into profound solitude; when the clamor of social activity fades, suppressed thoughts begin to surface. This very condition is vividly reflected in Azad’s letters. During his confinement in Ahmednagar Fort, he seems to converse with himself. One thought unfolds into a chain, which then connects to another, and another. Consequently, at times, the style of a letter departs from formal correspondence and assumes the character of an internal dialogue. The reader perceives that the author, while addressing a friend, is simultaneously questioning and answering his own inner self.

This self-dialogue runs throughout the book sometimes as a gentle undercurrent, sometimes more prominently but it never burdens the prose. The fluency of Azad’s style, coupled with its intellectual charm, continuously draws the reader along. One idea naturally gives way to the next, creating the sense that the reader is accompanying the author on a journey through his mind, with each window of thought gradually opening before them. It is precisely this quality that distinguishes these letters from ordinary correspondence. Here, the letter ceases to be merely a vehicle of information; instead, it transforms into a living intellectual conversation, in which solitude, personal experience, and philosophical depth are simultaneously revealed.

“Many times, while deeply absorbed in writing my thoughts, a charming idea would unexpectedly strike the tip of my pen, or the context of a passage would suddenly bring a delightful verse to mind. Unconsciously, in that absorbed state, my shoulders or head would twitch, or a soft ‘ha’ would escape my lips... Looking back, I realize that a whole troupe of playful companions had settled beside me, frolicking without restraint. Suddenly they noticed that this stone had begun to move, and in their surprise, they scattered away. No wonder, I often think to myself, a stone may lie on the couch, but occasionally it turns into a human being!” (5)

In Abul Kalam Azad’s prose, attention to detail reaches a remarkable level, and *Ghubar-e-Khatir* provides a vivid illustration of this quality. Reading these letters, one immediately senses the precision and depth of his observation. Topics often considered mundane or insignificant are transformed under his gaze; even seemingly trivial matters acquire meaning, beauty, and significance. Every subject he touches becomes, through his pen, a captivating tableau. His narrative possesses a pictorial quality. When he describes a scene, the reader feels as if it is unfolding before their eyes. His depictions combine imagination with factual observation. Even the simplest routines of prison life are presented with such elegance that they transcend mere reporting and become literary experiences.

During his confinement in Ahmednagar Fort, descriptions of birds and flowers become a distinctive feature of these letters. He recounts the chirping of sparrows, tales of nightingales and crows, the changing hues of seasons, and various scenes from nature. When describing flowers, he conjures the image of an entire garden before the reader. He writes not only about their beauty but also details their growth, structure, color, and charm. Azad enumerates the seasonal flowers of the fort’s garden with meticulous care. Morning Glories, the vibrant Zinnia, and the Hollyhock playfully dubbed the “wine glass”—appear in his letters. Similarly, Petunia, Aster, Cornflower, Sweet Pea, Poppy, Phlox, Cosmos, Pinks (*Dianthus*), Salvia, and Pansy are all described with equal vividness.

He does not treat flowers merely as botanical objects but as symbols of nature’s artistic mastery. To him, nature is a painter who has filled the petals and butterfly wings with color using a single brush. In these passages, beauty intertwines with philosophical reflection. The fleeting bloom of these colorful buds serves as a metaphor for the ephemeral nature of life—a reminder that spring itself is transient. At one point, he reflects on life’s impermanence and the beauty of nature in a particularly moving passage, showing that for Azad, every natural scene is not only visually delightful but also rich in intellectual and philosophical significance. Through his detailed observations, the reader experiences the harmony of aesthetic appreciation and contemplative thought.

“It was half-past three in the morning. When I picked up the pen to write, I realized that the ink was running out. At the same time, the thought occurred: why not add a little water? Suddenly my eyes fell upon the cup of tea. I poured a bit of the tea into the cup, dipped the tip of the pen into it, and began to scribble... And now behold—I am inscribing on the cold, blank page not with light, but with the sharp, hot essence of tea.” (6)

*Ghubar-e-Khatir* emerges not merely as a collection of letters but as a profound reflection of Abul Kalam Azad’s intellectual, literary, and spiritual sensibilities. Written under the constraints of imprisonment, the work demonstrates his mastery over language, his nuanced engagement with Persian, Arabic, and English, and his ability to merge philosophical thought with literary elegance. Through self-dialogue, detailed observation, and subtle humor, Azad transforms personal correspondence into a rich tapestry of cultural, historical, and aesthetic reflection.

The letters reveal the depth of his scholarship, the expansiveness of his worldview, and his distinctive stylistic identity, balancing clarity with intellectual sophistication. They also exemplify how a creative mind navigates solitude, translating personal experience into enduring literary art. Ultimately, *Ghubar-e-Khatir* holds a unique position in Urdu literature, standing as a testament to the interplay between individual thought, cultural consciousness, and artistic expression.

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