

Ghazal Poetry Between Home and Exile

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ABSTRACT

A ghazal may be understood as a poetic expression of both the pain of loss or separation and the beauty of love in spite of that pain. The form is ancient, originating in sixth century Arabic poetry.

The structural form of the ghazal is similar in stringency to that of the Petrarchan sonnet. In its style and content it is a genre which has proved capable of an extraordinary variety of expression around its central themes of love and separation.

The study tries to shed light on the influence of this traditional poetic form on modern American poetry and examines some examples of ghazal as presented by three different poets.

Section one.i: presents a general introduction to ghazal poetry: its meaning, form, style, themes, origins, in addition to its regeneration in modern American poetry.

ii: Focuses on the Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali whose ghazal's poems were considered the first serious attempts in modern American poetry.

Section two: Focus on the two native American poets: Adrienne Rich and W. S. Merwin who wrote some ghazal poems after being influenced by its traditional form in order to tackle the differences between the original ghazal poetry and the American version.

The Conclusion: sums- up the findings of the study .

I.i. Introduction:

Urdu poetry is a rich eastern poetic tradition that has different forms. Its origin is Persian, however it has become nowadays an important part of Pakistani and North-Indian culture.

Ghazal poetry is a principal form of Urdu poetry. It is an important lyric form in Persian, Arabic and Turkish poetry. It provides the basis for popular love songs though it has been adapted for religious, political and other general subjects (Baldick : 105).

Ghazal poetry spread into south Asia in the twelfth century under the influence of the new Islamic Sultanate courts and Sufi mystics. It was also echoed widely in Europe during the early nineteenth century especially in Germany which witnessed the first imitations of Persian Ghazal by Goethe and other German poets.

Ghazal poetry, as an idea more than a poetic form, was introduced into American poetry since 1969 when the Pakistani-American poet Aziz Ahmed invited several well known poets to work on a pamphlet translating some poems of the Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib. It was subtitled "Ghazals of Ghalib" (Pollock: 34). The book received certain stature in the American literary community; then several translations appeared of Indian-American poetry. Many American poets, like Adrienne Rich, also tried to write their own Ghazal poems, but those attempts were only distorted copies of the original form. The ghazals suggest the difficulties that arise when poets seek to translate their political commitments into their handling of verse form.

Given American literary culture's general hostility to metrical technique, the ghazal presented an unlikely form to attract interest. Established at least one full century before the sonnet, the ghazal's structure might be called "archaic, elaborate, and unyielding" (Caplan: 115). Andrew McCord's translation of Ghalib's "Ghazal" demonstrates some of the form's many prescriptions. The poem begins:

Should you not look after me another day?
Why did you go alone? I leave in only another day.
If your gravestone is not erased first my head will be.
Genuflecting at your door, in any case, it's me another day.
Yesterday you came and now you say, "Shall I go today?"
Okay. It's not forever, but it was for, surely, another day.

(Nelson:649)

This passage illustrates that the ghazal's end-stopped couplets share a strict one rhyme. Its first couplet uses only one end word or end phrase (in this case, "day"). Every subsequent couplet's final line repeats at its end that word or phrase, called the *radif*. In addition, the ghazal features an internal rhyme placed immediately before the *radif* called the *qafia*, these two concepts indicate the Arabic roots of this poetic form. In these lines the word "me" rhymes with "only", "me" and "surely". Finally, the writer mentions his or her name in the final couplet. The poem concludes:

Only a fool asks me," Ghalib" why are you alive?"

My fate is too long for the day I will not be another day.

This poetic form was not recognized as a viable form in English literature until the year 1990 at the hands of the Kashmiri-American poet Agha-Shahid Ali (1949-2001). The form of a ghazal poem is similar to a Petrarchan sonnet except that it has alternative rhyming couplets and a refrain. It usually has five or more couplets which may have nothing to do with each others, except for the formal unity derived from a strict rhyme and rhythmic metre (ibid:27). *Radif* and *Qaafiyaa* are the main formal conventions of Ghazal poetry: *Radif* is a one-word or few words refrain which is repeated at the second line of each couplet of a Ghazal poem preceded by a rhyme which is known as the *Qaafiyaa* (Hawley:106)

Ghazals often reveal feelings of pain, sorrow out of separation and the beauty of the "mahboba" despite that pain. The speaker in a Ghazal poem is usually a deserted lover who suffers from an unattainable love or unfaithful beloved.

Many Ghazal poems are sometimes mystical in the sense that the beloved becomes a metaphorical image of God; Divine love becomes a model for all the other forms of love that are found in Ghazal poetry, evoking emotions of melancholy and longing.

Takhallus is one of the prominent conventions of Ghazal poetry, wherein the name of the poet is mentioned somewhere at the end of the poem.

I.ii. Agha- Shahid Ali (1949-2001):Ghazals of Exile

Agha Shahid Ali was a Kashmiri-American poet who was born in New Delhi and grew-up as Muslim. His poetic collections include: *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages*, *A Nostalgist's Map* and *Rooms are Never Finished*. His poetry appeared in different anthologies of English poetry. The formalization of the ghazal may well prove to be Shahid's most important scholarly contribution to the canon of English poetry. His own summation of the project was this. Shahid translated and edited hundred works of Urdu-Ghazal poets and helped to popularize seriously this poetic form into English poetry. He also participated in many creative writing programs .

Shahid started writing poetry at the age of ten. He translated the poetry of the Urdu-poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz at an early age (Huang: 31). His relationship with ghazal poetry grew stronger since his teens when he met a well-known ghazal singer and fell in love with "I loved to listen to her, I loved to be with her, I couldn't bear to be away from her. You can imagine what it was like. Here I was in my mid-teens--just 16--and I couldn't bear to be away from her"(Ghosh: 31). Much of Shahid's poetry expresses his pathetic

attitude and a continuous dream of his home. In his poem "*Postcard from Kashmir*"(1987), he says:

Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,
My home a neat four by six inches.
I always loved neatness. Now I hold
The half-inch Himalayas in my hand.

(Lehman & Brehm: 825)

Shahid celebrated the idea of Indian union to put an end to Kashmir's conflict; however he supported his citizens' struggle to gain freedom, expressing his love for Kashmir and its people. Agha Shahid Ali died peacefully in his bed out of brain cancer and was buried in Masschusetts.

Much of his poetry moves around the loss of Kashmir as a homeland. It also evokes the themes of exile as well as loss of family, bringing together poetic history and agility of language in a way that gave him recognition as one of the most significant Asian-American voices.

In his poetic collection *The Half Inch Himalayas*, Ali prefaces with an epigraph from Virginia Woolf that ends "I die in exile" (ibid:35) which reveals the fact that Ali was a man who lived bodily in the American land ,but his mind and imagination where left in Kashmir, his motherland.

I close my eyes. It doesn't leave me,
The cold moon of Kashmir which breaks
Into my house. (ibid). .

Shahid's work evokes the Urdu tradition grasped through English language. Though he keeps the tension of pain out of loss alive while employing the form of Ghazal poetry, Shahid tries to overcome some of its formal features and offer new discoveries

within the English language in order to make a bridge between two remote cultures.

The poetry of Shahid epitomizes the historical period of postcolonial writers who suffered literal relocation through self-exile (Hawley: 235). His mind wavered between an emotional attachment to the left behind home and a desire to make homology to a supposed new home. He recollects several traditional customs, ceremonies as well as images of his childhood and boyhood. These memories kept imposing themselves on his inner thinking that he attempted to reconstruct them in his verses using the English language so that he could make a bond between two different worlds.

In 1997, Shahid published his Ghazal poem "Ghazal I" through which the reader easily senses the speaker's agony and pain while he is repeating the word "exile" many times:

In Jerusalem a dead phone's dialed by exiles

You learn your strange fate: you were exiled by exiles

You open the heart to list unborn galaxies

.....

.....

Don't shut that folder when Earth is filled by exiles
(ibid:65)

The repetition of the word "exile" suggests the agony of the speaker in a way that puts him into a mood of loss and disintegration. The speaker then says:

By the Hudson lies Kashmir, brought Palestine

.....

Tell me who's tonight the physician of sick pearls?

Only you as you sit, Desert Child, by exile. (ibid).

The poet imagines that exiles spread throughout the earth to un-known galaxies. He composes a community of exiles in these lines preserving the true original form of a Ghazal poem wherein the convention of *Takallus* is noticed at the ending lines: "Will you Beloved stranger, ever witness Shahid?/ two destinies at last reconciled by exiles?!"(Gwynn & Linder:365).

This poem is a lamentation over the endless nature of exile. Earth turns into a wide exile from Palastine to India, Kashmir and America. By the time Shahid published his volume "The Country Without a Post Office", he reached the summit of his poetic career:

Kashmir is burning
By that dazzling light
We see men removing statues from temples.
We beg them" who will protect us if you leave?"
They don't answer.....(ibid)

The poet, in these lines evokes images of upheaval over the destruction of his motherland, as if everything is turning upside down.

Agha Shahid Ali , could successfully, make the East meet with the West. He revitalized the Ghazal form in a way that brought two different worlds together. This poetic form which migrated from Arabia to Persia then to Europe, found its wide audience in America and it was Shahid who helped conveying it, using his wit and elegance to make a serious start for American Ghazal poetry that he deserved to be known as the greatest singer of Ghazal poems (ibid).

II. Native American Ghazals:

i. Adrienne Rich:

In an attempt of imitation, Adrienne Rich(b.1929) wrote a number of ghazal poems and she became the first American poet who practiced writing in the realm of ghazal poetry. In the introduction to her collected poems, Rich says: "my ghazals are personal and public, American and twentieth-century; but they owe much to the presence of Ghalib in my mind: a poet who owned no property and borrowed his books, writing in an age of political and cultural break-up" (Gwynn&Linder:167) She was born in Baltimore (1929),and graduated from Radcliff in 1951. Rich published several volumes of poems and won the national book award in 1974. She became well-known since W.H. Auden's selection of her first volume to the Yale series of young poets.(Booth....et,al:1306). Rich inspired into the modern age a school of "Feminist Literary Criticism"".(Gwynn & Linder:163) She has committed herself to the understanding of the relationship between gender and culture and creating positive, public images of women. She has passed through the phases of self-analysis, individual assertion, and accomplishment to the rejection of patriarchal values, feminist activism, and finally to building a woman-centered community. In contrast to male poets, Rich is particularly concerned with the effects of gender polarity on women because women have traditionally been excluded from larger social processes.

In her poetry, Rich aims at reconciling the personal and lyric with the political and social realms because she thinks that personal relationships are governed by social and political forces(ibid). The poetry of Rich has an autobiographical notion, encapsulating personal experiences, despite the fact that it bears at many times social or political subject-matters:

The clouds and the stars didn't wage this war

The brooks gave no information

If the mountain spewed stones of fire into the river
It was not taking sides
The raindrop faintly swaying under the leaf
Had no political opinions (Ramazani, et.al :1115)

Adrienne Rich tried to employ ghazal poetry to highlight some political issues of her time and nation. Two affinities drew Rich to the ghazal. Firstly, it offered the qualities that her poetry already embraced. Rich developed a disjunctive, elliptical poetics, renouncing what she called her early work's "perfection of order," in which "control, technical mastery and intellectual clarity were the real goals. Secondly, the ghazal's origin outside the "West" also recommended the form to Rich. Though she described her ghazals as "American and twentieth century," she saw the form as possessing a "structure" significantly different from any "traditional Western order," a counterlogic to Western rationalism. She aimed at bringing together Orientals with western needs; however many critics agree that she couldn't attain fully "cultural reconciliation and cross racial identification". (Caplan: 115) . The poetry of black people remained a too "distinctively black" art form for Rich to appreciate without defeating the strategy her ghazals developed:

dead mosquito, flattened against a door; his image could
survive our comings and our goings

LeRoi! Eldridge! listen to us
where you want to be at home.
we are ghosts condemned to haunt the cities
Every mistake that can be made,
we are prepared to make
we who were free to weep for Othello and laugh at
Caliban.

I have learned to smell a conservateur a mile away:
they carry illustrated catalogues of all that there is
to lose.(ibid: 116)

These lines are addressed to the cultural and artistic contradiction which the black American poet Amiri Baraka(b.1934) evokes in his poetry. Rich laments the depression and alienation of the blacks and all the other racial groups inside the American society, sympathizing with their feelings of no belonging and their search of a true home inside their homeland:

The white children turn black on the negative
The summer clouds blacken inside the camera skull
.....

Someone has always been desperate, now it's our turn
(Ramazani,et..al:1123)

Rich could not totally adhere to the conventional poetic structure of the traditional ghazal. This is evident if one examines some lines of Shahid who describes the attempts of American poets on ghazal poetry as" an insult to the true tradition of his culture and believes that the American poets are ignorant to the true nature of ghazal poetry" (Hawley: 38). Ali says:

I'll raise my glass before wine is defiled by exiles
Was after the last sky--this the fashion of fire
If my enemy's alone and his arms are empty,
Give him my heart silk-wrapped like a child by exiles
Will you beloved stranger, ever witness Shahid
Two destinies, at last reconciled by exiles(ibid)

The interest of Adrienne Rich in ghazal poetry mainly resulted from her deep respect to the poet Ghalib whom she describes as a poet self-educated and profoundly learned;

nevertheless she could not totally adhere to the conventional poetic structure of the traditional ghazal.

It is undeniable that Rich, despite her follies, was an avant-garde in making an equivalence between the verse-form of ghazal and contemporary American issues such as Vietnam war and the sociopolitical movements of her time, giving ghazal poetry a new identity of American character and culture.

II.ii. W. S. Merwin:

W. S. Merwin (b.1927) is one of the noted native American poets who started publishing serious true-to-form examples of Ghazal poetry after nearly a century of false starts known as "bustard Ghazals" experimented by some American poets .

Merwin was born in New York city on 1927. He was the son of a Presbyterian minister. His childhood and boyhood were dominated by inherited violence and poverty which were highly reflected later on in his poetry (Fraizer: 14).

After graduating from Princeton University, Merwin spent an additional year there studying Romance language, a fact that eventually enabled him to become a well-known translator of Latin, French and Spanish poetry. His best achievement in that field was the translation of "*Sir Gawain and the Green Knights*"

Merwin wrote hymns since childhood, and wrote poetry when he was a young man, beside becoming a tutor to the sons of wealthy families among whom was the son of Robert Graves.(ibid) His second marriage gave him chance to be introduced to the literary circles and find a work as a translator.

Merwin published his first collection *A Mask For Janus* in 1952 which was highly admired by W. H. Auden .It revealed his influence by Graves and the classics of medieval poetry. After receiving the M.A degree, Merwin joined a literary circle which

surrounded Robert Lowell and redirected his poetic output more towards American introspective and personal subjects (Fraizer:20).

Between the years 1967-1970, Merwin published his two most influential poetic collections *The Lice* and *The Carrier of Ladders* in which he employs classical legends as a means to explore personal and poetical themes. (Lehman & Brehm:835). The poems of these collections share a tone of bitterness lamenting the passage of time and man's being intensively wrapped in the chains of life:

Something where you get it they wrap it up in a
Clock and you take it home with you and since you
Want to see it it takes the rest of your life to
Unwrap it trying harder and harder to be quick. (ibid)

In 1967, Merwin moved to Hawaii to study Zen Buddhism and there he met Paula Schwartz, his third wife, and married her in Buddhist ceremony. In 2010, Merwin was appointed the library of Congress's seventeenth poet Laureate Consultant in poetry.

The poet, now lives in Hawaii at a home of a tropical forest environment which illustrates the connection between Merwin and nature.

The poetry of Merwin is lyrical, elliptical and mysterious. It is an eloquent speech of the poet's inner self. It registers his inner fears of the "uncontrolled destruction of the natural world" (Gwynn&Linder:137):

The ones that were left went away to live if it would let them
They went as far as they could
The lucky ones with their shadows (Lehman & Brehm:337)

Merwin always emphasizes his sympathy with life, language and literature of native people as well as his interest more in Eastern tradition rather than the Western one. In his poem "The Cause

Way", Merwin plainly confines himself to the main traditional rules of Ghazal poetry like *Radif* and *Qaafiya*:

This is the bridge where at dusk they hear
Voices
Far out in the meres and marshes or they
Say they hear voices (ibid)

The poem is composed of fourteen couplets wherein each couplet is an independent unit by itself:

The bridge shakes and no one else is Crossing at this
hour
Somewhere along here is where they hear voices
The sounds pronounce an older utterance
Out of the shadows
Sometimes stifled sometimes carried from clear voices

Merwin is probably referring to the bridge between the generations or to the bond of thinking, language and behavioral understanding which brings the ancestors and the grandsons together but with much difficulty. Merwin depicts a shadowy scene where the voices are ghostly rather than human, referring to the bridge between the east and the west worlds that is never passed without fear and worry. The poem reveals Merwin's interest in the past tales of the Goths who were leaving their last kingdom at Scythia.

They could feel the bridge shaking under
Their voices
.....
.....
There seemed no end to the horses carts

People and all their voices (Fraizer:46)

The poem, like all of Merwin's verses, has no punctuation marks revealing the fact that Merwin seeks freedom of all types of stricts even the punctuation marks. He asserts that "punctuation is predominantly a mark of allegiance to the protocols of prose and of the printed word" (ibid). The omission of punctuation gives liveliness and vitality to the spoken words of the poem.

Merwin frees himself of the traditional form of *Takallus* when he says:

Some may have spoken in my own name in
an earlier language
when last they drew breath in the kingdom
of their voices (Hawley:83)

In these lines, the poet only says "my own name" without direct reference to his name.

Merwin, perhaps, experimented writing ghazal poetry to expand his knowledge of the oriental environment and to go beyond the cultural boundaries and commitments.

Conclusion

Agha Shahid Ali started publishing ghazal poems after he settled in America, which proves that he aimed at inflecting the various sufferings of the exile in a traditional poetic form which belongs to his motherland, dramatizing his literary and cultural loyalties. It also was probably that the love relationship with an Indian ghazal singer which engendered his passion for the ghazal as a verse form.

Shahid's ghazals have an argumentative tone that is rarely found in the ghazals of the native American poets. The speaker in his ghazals is a lover of a remote nation and the addressee is

either a man or a woman, a beloved or a partner of the exile. There is a chance that the addressee is Shahid himself while living in desolation.

Ghazal poems sharpen the differences between them and the American versions that reflect the reality of the disordered and interrelated American community.

Adrianne Rich entered the realm of ghazal poetry under the influence of the urdu poet Ghalib. She tried to find peace for her rebellious character in the tenderness of the ghazals however the bitterness of her time and nation dominated the general atmosphere of her ghazal poems. Merwin, on the other hand, seems to refuse the assumption that human beings are different.

The ghazal poems of the native American poets do not really ascend to the level of resemblance, revealing the fact that the gap between the eastern and western cultures has not been filled yet and the bridge is still cracked.

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