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# The Ghazals in English: The Scholarly Efforts for Rejuvenating a Dying Form

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**ABSTRACT:** When Agha Shahid Ali subtitled his anthology of formal ghazals, “Real Ghazals in English” he was trying to point out that the constraints of rhyme and refrain were what made a ghazal real.

But what of unreal ghazals? Even Shahid admitted, “I do like many aspects of the so-called ghazals” that his American comrades were writing in free verse. He just didn’t they were really ghazals.

The first ghazal I truly loved was Michael Collier’s ‘Home’. Here is the first couplet:

When I was young I couldn’t wait to leave home  
and then I went away to make the world my home.

Collier skips the rhyme, and only uses the refrain. The poem is often quite clever. I love this couplet:

The agoraphobe and claustrophobe respectively  
cannot bear to leave or stay inside their home.

The poem moves around, and the idea of home structures everything. The final couplet breaks my heart every time.

Never let me forget: colliers mine coal. Michael’s an angel.  
In heaven as on earth the coal of grief warms the soul’s home.

Skipping the rhyme and only having the refrain is actually fairly common among American writers of ghazals. Roger Sedarat, and Iranian-American wrote an entire book of ghazals called Ghazal Games. Not surprisingly, many of the poems in the book stray from the form. In fact, his innovative ‘Ghazal Game #7: Tic Tac Toe’ plays with the refrain in the same way that James Merrill plays with endwords in his famous sestina ‘Tomorrows’. For ‘Ghazal Game #7’, the refrain is always three “o”s. Here are a few of the couplets:

On The Simpsons, a nuclear fish swims  
In Springfield with his eyes like this: OOO.

My first book of poetry took ten years  
To write. How much did I make? \$1,000.

Is it? Could it be? Yes! A reply from  
Poetry. Maybe this time... Nooo!

And then of course, if the poem has no refrain, then it is truly a “free verse” ghazal. Spencer Reece (who made the cover of the New York Times for being a suit salesman to win a major poetry prize) has a sequence in seven parts called ‘Florida Ghazals’. Here is a selection of couplets from the first section:

Down here, the sun clings to the earth and there is no darkness.  
Down here, the silence of the sea and the silence of the swamp seep into our  
muscles.

Gay waiters examine their haircuts in the mirrors.  
Perhaps tonight their pursuit of love will end in some permanence?

Juan escapes from our prison; he duct-tapes Playboy magazines to his rib cage.



With his glossy carapace, he vaults over the razor strips of the chainlink fence.

Reece weaves many of the same characters through the different sections of the ghazal. The final poem (I've attached a link to the full version at the end, or you could buy his wonderful first book *The Clerk's Tale*—though we Americans say “clerk” to rhyme with “work,” not “stark”) is quite wonderful. It is breezy and gentle and fluid, and yet quite moving. It's a bit like the effect of watching a moving like Magnolia with an ensemble cast that cycles through distinct but overlapping stories.

The ur-free-verse-ghazals in English are by Adrienne Rich. Asked to translate Ghalib's ghazals, Rich's initial free verse translations and later experiments with the form are the poems that fixed most Americans' idea of the ghazal for many decades (until Shahid arrived on the scene). Here are a few couplets from Rich's sequence 'Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib'.

In Central Park we talked of our own cowardice.  
How many times a day, in this city, are those word spoken?

The tears of the universe aren't all stars, Danton;  
Some are satellites of brushed aluminum and stainless steel.

He, who was temporary, has joined eternity;  
He has deserted us, gone over to the other side.

The disjointed nature of the ghazal suited the sort of poetic and political struggle that Rich (and much of the United States) was experiencing in the 1960's. Fragmentation is often a necessary form for people trying to think themselves out of ideologies and strictures that have seem totalizing. Certainly, the Jena Romantics embraced the fragment at the beginning of the 1800's because it let them think outside the logical frameworks of the Enlightenment. The ghazal is perfect for the kind of thinking that happens in flashes of illumination, rather than in the working through of systems.

**KEYWORDS:** Ghazals, English, rejuvenating, dying, form, scholarly

## I. INTRODUCTION

Originally an Arabic verse form dealing with loss and romantic love, medieval Persian poets embraced the ghazal, eventually making it their own. Consisting of syntactically and grammatically complete couplets, the form also has an intricate rhyme scheme. Each couplet ends on the same word or phrase (the radif), and is preceded by the couplet's rhyming word (the qafia, which appears twice in the first couplet). The last couplet includes a proper name, often of the poet's. In the Persian tradition, each couplet was of the same meter and length, and the subject matter included both erotic longing and religious belief or mysticism. English-language poets who have composed in the form include Adrienne Rich, John Hollander, and Agha Shahid Ali; see Ali's "Tonight" and Patricia Smith's "Hip-Hop Ghazal."

The ghazal is a form of amatory poem or ode,[1] originating in Arabic poetry. 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 ghazal form is ancient, tracing its origins to 7th-century Arabic poetry. The ghazal spread into South Asia in the 12th century due to the influence of Sufi mystics and the courts of the new Islamic Sultanate, and is now most prominently a form of poetry of many languages of the Indian subcontinent and Turkey. A ghazal commonly consists of five to fifteen couplets, which are independent, but are linked – abstractly, in their theme; and more strictly in their poetic form. The structural requirements of the ghazal are similar in stringency to those of the Petrarchan sonnet. In style and content, due to its highly allusive nature, the ghazal has proved capable of an extraordinary variety of expression around its central themes of love and separation.[1,2]

Can usually be interpreted for a higher being or for a mortal beloved. Love is always viewed as something that will complete a human being, and if attained will lift him or her into the ranks of the wise, or will bring satisfaction to the soul of the poet. Traditional ghazal law may or may not have an explicit element of sexual desire in it, and the love may be spiritual. The love may be directed to either a man or a woman.

The ghazal is always written from the point of view of the unrequited lover whose beloved is portrayed as unattainable. Most often, either the beloved has not returned the poet's love or returns it without sincerity or else the societal circumstances do not allow it. The lover is aware and resigned to this fate but continues loving nonetheless; the lyrical impetus of the poem derives from this tension. Representations of the lover's powerlessness to resist his feelings often include lyrically exaggerated violence. The beloved's power to captivate the speaker may be represented in extended

metaphors about the "arrows of his eyes", or by referring to the beloved as an assassin or a killer. Take, for example, the following couplets from Amir Khusro's Persian ghazal *Nemidanam che manzel būd shab*:

*namidanam chi manzil būd shab jayi ke man  
būdām;  
be har sū raqs eh besmel būd shab jayi ke  
man būdām.  
pari paīkar negar eh sarv qaad e lalaa  
rokhsar;  
sarapa afat-e del būd shab jayi ke man  
būdām.*

I wonder what was the place where I was last night,  
All around me were half-slaughtered victims of love, tossing  
about in agony.  
There was a nymph-like beloved with cypress-like form and  
tulip-like face,  
Ruthlessly playing havoc with the hearts of the lovers.

The ghazal has historically been one of the most popular poetic forms across the Middle East and South Asia. Even into the modern era the ghazal has retained its extreme popularity among South Asian royalty and nobility, among whom its education and patronisation has traditionally found shelter, especially with several Indian rulers including several Indian Emperors being profound composers of ghazals.[28] In the 19th century ghazals gained popularity in Germany with Goethe's translations, as well as with Spanish ghazal writers such as Federico García Lorca. Despite often being written in strong Urdu and rendered with classical Indian Ragas along with complex terminology most usually accessible to the upper classes, in South Asia ghazals are nonetheless popular among all ages.[29] They are most popular in Turkey and South Asia, and readings or musical renditions of ghazals — such as at mehfilis and mushairas — are well attended in these countries, even by the laity. Ghazals are popular in South Asian film music. The ragas to which ghazals are sung are usually chosen to be in consonance with their lyrical content.[3,4]

Understanding the complex lyrics of traditional ghazals required education typically available only to the upper classes. The traditional classical rāgas in which the lyrics were rendered were also difficult to understand. The ghazal has undergone some simplification in recent years, in terms of words and phrasings, which helps it to reach a larger audience around the world. Modern shayars (poets) are also moving towards a less strict adherence to form and rules, using simpler language and words (sometimes even incorporating words from other languages, such as English - see Parveen Shakir), and moving away from a strictly male narrator. Most of the ghazals are now sung in styles that are not limited to khayāl, thumri, rāga, tāla and other classical and light classical genres. However, those forms of the ghazal are looked down on by purists of the Indian classical tradition. In Pakistan, Noor Jehan, Iqbal Bano, Abida Parveen, Farida Khanum, Ghulam Ali, Ahmed Rushdi, Ustad Amanat Ali Khan, Parvez Mehdi and Mehdi Hassan are known for ghazal renditions. Indian Singers like Jagjit Singh (who first used a guitar in ghazals), Ahmed and Mohammed Hussain, Hariharan, Adithya Srinivasan, Pankaj Udhas, Umbayee and many others have been able to give a new shape to the ghazal by incorporating elements of Western music[5,6]

## II. DISCUSSION

After nearly a century of "false starts", the early experiments of James Clarence Mangan, James Elroy Flecker, Adrienne Rich, Phyllis Webb, etc., many of whom did not adhere wholly or in part to the traditional principles of the form, experiments dubbed as "the bastard Ghazal",<sup>[33]</sup> the ghazal finally began to be recognized as a viable closed form in poetry of the English language some time in the early to mid-1990s. It came about largely as a result of serious, true-to-form examples being published by noted American poets John Hollander, W. S. Merwin and Elise Paschen as well as by Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali, who had been teaching and spreading word of the Ghazal at American universities over the previous two decades. Jim Harrison created his own free-form Ghazal true to his poetic vision in *Outlyer and Ghazals* (1971).<sup>[34]</sup>

In 1996, Ali compiled and edited the world's first anthology of English-language ghazals, published by Wesleyan University Press in 2000, as *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*. (Fewer than one in ten of the ghazals collected in *Real Ghazals in English* observe the constraints of the form.)

A ghazal is composed of couplets, five or more. The couplets may have nothing to do with one another except for the formal unity derived from a strict rhyme and rhythm pattern.

A ghazal in English observes the traditional restrictions of the form:

Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell tonight?  
Whom else from rapture's road will you expel tonight?



Those "Fabrics of Cashmere—" "to make Me beautiful—"  
"Trinket"— to gem— "Me to adorn— How— tell"— tonight?

I beg for haven: Prisons, let open your gates—  
A refugee from Belief seeks a cell tonight.

God's vintage loneliness has turned to vinegar—  
All the archangels— their wings frozen— fell tonight.

Lord, cried out the idols, Don't let us be broken  
Only we can convert the infidel tonight.[7,8]

Mughal ceilings, let your mirrored convexities  
multiply me at once under your spell tonight.

He's freed some fire from ice in pity for Heaven.  
He's left open— for God— the doors of Hell tonight.

In the heart's veined temple, all statues have been smashed  
No priest in saffron's left to toll its knell tonight.

God, limit these punishments, there's still Judgment Day—  
I'm a mere sinner, I'm no infidel tonight.

Executioners near the woman at the window.  
Damn you, Elijah, I'll bless Jezebel tonight.

The hunt is over, and I hear the Call to Prayer  
fade into that of the wounded gazelle tonight.

My rivals for your love— you've invited them all?  
This is mere insult, this is no farewell tonight.

And I, Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee—  
God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight.

— Agha Shahid Ali

At the dawn of English education in India the popularity of certain genres led to the adaptation, transformation and assimilation of these forms in the Indian languages. However, in this East-West encounter, not only were the European forms appropriated by the Indian writers, one of the Eastern forms, viz. the ghazal, was taken up by writers in English. This paper traces the origin of the ghazal as a distinct form, its development in the poetry of Mir (c 1723-82) and Ghalib (1797-1869) before discussing how this genre was adapted and experimented with, by some writers in English. In this process we try to address some issues like translation, adaptation and transformation and also what factors affect the composition and institution of a canon.[9,10]

name which deserves special mention in the world of the ghazal is that of Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1797-1869). Ghalib belonged to a noble family of Turks. His grandfather is said to have migrated to India to join the army of Sha Alam II. Ghalib's father served the Nawab of Oudh, the Nizam of Hyderabad and the Rajah of Alwar. He died in a battle and the young Ghalib was looked after by his uncle Mirza Nasarullah Khan. Ghalib is said to have had his education at Agra but he came and settled in Delhi as a young man and soon became a part of the aristocratic society of the Mughal capital. His financial problems forced him to go to Calcutta in 1826 and it is in Calcutta that Ghalib witnessed a glaring contrast between the old Mughal capital and the new city of the British. He stayed there long enough to admire the British ways of life and the changes brought in by the British rule. But scholars have noted that he was completely unaffected by English literature. As Sisir Kumar Das has pointed out, "he did not take any interest in English literature; nor did he feel any impact of the British civilization as a poet. He wrote about charming women, elegant buildings, luscious mangoes and fine wines, but not about the intellectual fermentation there.[11]



### III. RESULTS

Likewise in the case of the ghazal, the form had a fundamental role to play when adapted by a different culture. The ghazals of Ghalib inspired writers from different parts of the world who tried their hands at ghazal writing. Writers like Adrienne Rich, Judith Wright, Jim Harrison, John Thompson, D.G. Jones, Phyllis Webb, Douglas Barbour, Max Plater, and others experimented with ghazal writing. According to Rahman, the English ghazal writers can be divided into two distinct groups: one group consists of those who adhere to the form of the couplet, where the couplets are often independent of one another; the other group consists of poets who do not use the couplet but deploy the other aspects of the form, such as the rhyme scheme, and also try to approximate to the original thematic models[12,13]

Rich and the other American writers could perhaps identify themselves with the situation in which Ghalib had composed his verses and how the ghazal had facilitated the expression of his moods and thoughts. It was a time of cultural and political breakup and Ghalib found the ghazal form to be the most suitable in so far as the couplet structure easily afforded a switch of moods without in any way disturbing the appeal of the whole. Similar was the case with Rich. Rich recalls her growing-up years as overtly dominated by the intellectual presence and demands of her father, while covertly marked by the submerged tensions and silences arising from the conflicts between the religious and cultural heritage of her father's Jewish background and her mother's southern Protestantism. Her relationship with her father was one of strong identification and desire for approval, yet it was adversarial in many ways. Under his tutelage Rich first began to write poetry, conforming to his standards well past her early successes and publications.[14]

### IV. IMPLICATIONS

In fact, the notion of the English ghazal or the anti ghazal being accommodated within the boundaries of the canonical English literature is worth examining. The canonical may exist only in a specific point in history – it implies an idea of fixity, and a related idea of selection, both of which are prompted by a historical exigency. The canon is always threatened and subverted by the dynamics of genres. For example, an epic written by Virgil has the generic markers of an epic by Homer, recorded and utilized in the light of Virgil's (and his readers') expectations. Thus even though a genre becomes intelligible by conforming to the 'horizon of expectation' of its readers, the extension of this horizon by individual texts is a sign of the genre's vitality its ability to participate in the process of shaping emotion, experience, perception into literature. Even if a genre like the epic, or tragedy or the novel is enshrined in a canon, the proof of the genre's life is its dynamism in response to history. This dynamism may involve its reconstitution by peripheral genres – it may also involve the canonized genres' interaction with the periphery, and its consequent change. Thus arises the question whether this newly realigned genre is still admissible in the canon, whether the genre is now excluded from the canon or whether the canon breaks itself down to accommodate a newly emerged genre. Similar is the case of the ghazal in English. Ghazal as a genre had no place in the English literary canon prior to the cultural contact with the East. Thus, the English ghazal may be regarded as a peripheral genre, so far as the English literary canon is concerned.[15,16]

### V. CONCLUSIONS

The Urdu ghazals of Mir and Ghalib undoubtedly had this capacity and this is reflected in the way interest in the ghazals was revived by writers in the West. What is yet to be seen is whether this peripheral genre is able to enter the canon of English literature and how. In this sense, to decide on the peripheral and the central, we will have to apply the test of time. The literary value of a text or genre can be judged after many years. However, more than that, any idea of 'canon' and 'periphery' is necessarily based on limited judgment and an attempt to universalize and institutionalize that limited judgment. That is to say, what is worth canonizing to us may not seem worth canonizing to somebody else. What constitutes the canon, then, is not the superiority of any judgment but the ability to exercise power, coercive or otherwise to make one's judgment acceptable. In the case of the English ghazal, similar forces will be at work to decide the fate of this newly emerged genre in the English literary canon.[17]

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