

STUDENT PAPER

Conversing to/with Shame: Translation and Gender in the Urdu Ghazal

by Nuzhat Abbas
University of Wisconsin–Madison

Shattered Mirrors, Broken Bits

Ghazal

*Ye nāzūk sī mirē andar kī laṛkī
'Ajab jaḥbē 'ajab tēvar kī laṛkī*

*Yūñhī zakhmī nahīñ haiñ hāt^h mērē
Tarāshī mainñ nē ik patt^har kī laṛkī*

*K^haṛī hai fikr kē Āzar-kadē mēñ
Burīda-dast p^hir Āzar kī laṛkī*

*Anā k^hō'ī tō kuṛ^h kar mar ga'ī
Baṛī ḥassās t^hī andar kī laṛkī*

*Sazāvar-e hunar muj^h kō na t^hharā
Ye fan mērā na mainñ Āzar kī laṛkī*

*Bik^har kar shīsha shīsha rēza rēza
Simat kar p^hūl sē paikar kī laṛkī*

*Ḥavēlī kē makīñ tō čāhtē t^hē
Keh g^har hī mēñ rahē ye g^har kī laṛkī*

This fragile girl inside of me
Of strange aspect, girl of strange countenance.

Not for nothing are my hands wounded
I carved a girl of stone.

She stands in the idolater's house of thought
With wounded hands, again, Aazar's girl.¹

Losing her self, she died of grief²
So sensitive was she, the girl inside.³

Do not make me liable for the excellence of this
art
This art is not mine, nor am I Aazar's girl.

Scattering into shattered mirrors, broken bits
Gathering into the face of a flower, this girl.

The masters of the *haveli* wanted simply this⁴
She stay within the house, this household's girl.
—Ishrat Afreen⁵

¹Aazar (*āzar*), the Prophet Abraham's father, was supposedly an idol sculptor and persecuted for his sculptures.

²"*kuḥ kar mar gā'i*" can also mean dying of envy, not just of grief. This plays also on the multiple meanings in the second line of the couplet.

³*ḥassās* also translates to shrewdness, or "having sensibility." The line could be made much less sentimental and very interesting by also seeing it as "Losing herself she died of envy. So shrewd was she, the girl inside," though that would erase the way the *ghazal* works within very conventional terminology while subverting it.

⁴*ḥavēlī* (a word I find difficult to translate) is the old, large, feudal household. The word, in Urdu, signifies not just the dwelling but also the inhabitants. Pakistan remains largely rural and despite Z.A. Bhutto's land reforms in the 1970s, feudal landlords, *zamīndārs* still form the basis of the power structure, exercising control in ways that directly challenge the nation-state while still gaining authority from their cooperation with it.

⁵Ishrat Afreen, a contemporary Pakistani poet, has published only one volume of poems. After her marriage she moved to India for a while and, to my knowledge, has not published since. I have been unable to obtain a copy of her book and have translated my selections from the poems published in the bilingual edition *We Sinful Women*, ed. and tr. Rukhsana Ahmed, (London: Women's Press, 1990). All translations cited in this paper are my own.

TALKING to or with women? The woman poet writes, repeating a generic formula—love in longing. But who, and where, is the beloved? Where are the women in this text? In this genre? Here, in this poem, we find no polished mirrors to reflect the ever-shifting, ever transforming and transformative glory of the beloved. There are only “shattered mirrors, broken bits.” Only endless refractions from multiple sources which form the face, the appearance, of a flower which could be “this girl.” The “I” and “this girl” slip with and through each other in a dance, a dizzying *mise-en-abyme* of sorts—is “she” dead or alive, sculpting or sculpted, male or female, Azar’s daughter or not, inside or out? Or both? The self is, and is not, and has no longing of her own nor her own art, though fashion a self she does, loses it, is transformed, is split endlessly, girls within girls, girls made by girls, girls who claim no father/sculpting teacher, girls (who may not be girls) who nonetheless are claimed as such by fathers. Is her/their place the *but-kada* (the idolater’s house—the word is also slang for whorehouse, a place for the fathers to visit, to patronize)? Or is it the *haveli* (the patriarchal, feudal household)? And is there any room for “her” singular desire here? Desire, in this *ghazal*, appears to reside in the “true” masters of the ancestral house, and is constituted by their longing to enclose “this household’s girl.” “This girl” turns (revolutionary in a Sufi sense) couplet to couplet, and in no particular teleological order, from carved stone to wounded sculptor, dying and reborn, from shattered mirrors to an abstract organic form.⁶ Is “she” brought back to a body? Is there, in the

⁶The classical Urdu *ghazal* often uses Sufi metaphors. The stone, which can be the heart (“*qalb*”—root of “*inqilāb*,” revolution) must be polished by attentiveness and discipline into a mirror into which truth (God? the Beloved?) can be reflected, moment by moment. According to Ibn ‘Arabī, the great Andalusian mystic, the “*insān-e kāmil*” or Perfect Man’s heart is spacious enough to contain all the myriad manifestations of the Absolute: “The mystic’s heart takes cognizance of the constant transformation (*taqallub*) of the Absolute by the heart’s own transformation into various forms” (as quoted in Toshihiko Izutsu, *Creation and the Timeless Order of Things* [Ashland: White Cloud Press, 1994], p. 165). But such inner transformation is also nothing other than the ontological transformation of the Absolute. Ghālib, the great nineteenth-century *ghazal* poet, also secularizes this concept to work the mirror of the heart into the mirror of meaning. Ghālib’s poetry, like Sufi thought, however, appears to work on both levels simultaneously, saying “yes, yes” to both as it were, refusing to resolve the paradox. Refusing to resolve the paradox can carry a dire price, as in the execution of the mystic al-Ḥallāj who claimed “I am God.”

first place, a body to return to? A one, a singular, to build a “*havēli*” around? A “woman” to place? Or only shattering mirrors, shifting forms?

*

I first came across these “*ghazals*” in a bilingual anthology *We Sinful Women*, subtitled “Contemporary Urdu Feminist Poetry,” edited by Rukhsana Ahmed and published in Britain in 1990. This translation of contemporary Urdu women’s poetry came “out” at a time when, in a Pakistan still suffering the after-effects of the “Islamicist” regime of General Zia-ul-Haq, the institution of laws such as the “Hudood Ordinances” were violently re-marking and circumscribing the movements of bodies thus produced as properly female. Rape was being resignified as fornication, the boundaries of public and private were being cited more violently through the enforcing of codes of veiling and its effects—“*purdah*,” the curtain, or “*hijāb*,” inside and outside, and all transgressions by those coded “women” across these lines were being punished by lashings, sexual violence, and imprisonment. Or even through the threat or promise of such things.

Poems, under such circumstances, were nonetheless written, perhaps, precisely because of such circumstances, they were produced—some were banned, some got translated, slipping over and across even as they performed and marked in place their national, gendered, and linguistic boundaries—“Pakistan,” “India,” “Urdu,” “Woman.” Like women, poetry does not stay put. Collected under the term “feminist poetry” such poems both mark and escape such a grouping. This translation into English (which I might add is not the main concern of my paper) nevertheless stands as an important site, marking as it does the way in which the gathering under one roof of many diverse women writers of Urdu poetry now informs the way in which the original poems will henceforth not be read alone, without the company of other women. A *ghazal* in this book also becomes the book, a talking to and with women. The bilingual poems, side by side, invite a reading which becomes double, in two tongues, each undermining the authority of the other. But are the two ever originary? Complete in and of themselves? The anthology poses the problem of language and translation. But for the purposes of this paper I shall have to work on just a corner of the problem—beginning (just?) with the question of a genre and what happens when it is translated, within what is apparently the same language, the same tradition, to a different mode. To a different end? What happens, now, when a woman writes a *ghazal*?

A woman, talking to women?

Reading the anthology, under the titles “*ghazal*,” no name to the poem, just the old generic marker, I find some signed by Ishrat Aafreen. A name: ‘*Ishrat*, which translates (in Urdu) to pleasure, enjoyment, delight ... also pleasant conversation. And the word, the surname, the father’s name, *Āfrīn*, recalls applause, the “*vāh vāh*” gathering at a recital (no clapping here, only an open, vowel-based, and aspirated sound). *Ghazal*, also a proper name but also, simply a talking to or with women, and here, this ‘*Ishrat Āfrīn*, also a name, feminine, but also a conversation, feminine, pleasure filled, ending with applause, the breath-filled opening which always incites another word, another performance.

Some things remain here: a few poems in Urdu written under the sign of a genre, a name, a word—Arabic—untranslatable (and yet traveling from language to language)—*ghazal*—which has gender as its central problem, and a history of bodies sexed “male” as its significant authorship, the English word “feminist” which offers to shelter these new poems, and a name “*Ishrat Āfrīn*,” marked “female,” which signs them. The problem here, on multiple levels, is that of translation, transferring, going across, transformation. Of a genre, or a gendering, being translated at its edge. That necessity that makes the original survive, with a difference. What difference does it make that a woman writes this old genre? What questions does this raise about the gendering of the genre? Where is “woman” in all this, and what is her place? Can it be filled? Should it ever be?

Gendering the Modern

We could pause at the threshold of “woman,” take a detour, glance backwards, perhaps, or look below to the other side of the question “woman,” if we see her as the effect of “man.” What, and where is “man” in the history of this genre we call the “Urdu *ghazal*”? Slippery edges everywhere we look. *Urdu*,⁷ this camp-ground, this site of play, produced, the stories

⁷Urdū, a word of Turkish origin (the ancestral origins of the Mughals), comes from *Ordu* which means military camp. The language apparently gathered

tell us, by the marriage of Father Persian and Mother India. This language which will not stay put. This “fruit” of Muslim India. A language which becomes named and defined at the decline of its founding civilization, that of Mughal India, rendered feminine, penetrable, by the advent of the more properly masculine British.⁸ And at such a time, after 1857, The Mutiny or The War of Independence, depending on which side you see it from, with the marvelous literary city of Delhi sacked and in ruins, the great Mughal poets Ghālib and Mīr, dislocated, grieving, or dead, we, not surprisingly, find the survivors, those able to translate and be translated, writing the first critical texts to both define the Urdu and argue for a new kind of poetry and a new, properly masculinized Urdu based on recently acquired British models.

“Urdu poets,” declared the newly emerging critic and poet, Muḥammad Ḥusain Āzād, in a famous speech delivered at a gathering sponsored by the colonial organization “Anjuman-e Panjāb” in May 1874, had “reproduced in Urdu a photograph (*fotoḡrāf*) of all the meters, and interesting and colorful ideas, and types of literary composition found in

around such sites as a mixture of indigenous Braj Bhasha and the Persian, Arabic and Turkish of the Muslim conquerors.

⁸ While it is beyond the scope of this paper to take up the embattled question of what constitutes Urdu, and distinguishes it from Hindi from which it is historically divided by a script and a subsequent (often violently repressive) history of nationalist differentiation, I feel the de-territorialized status of Urdu as a minority language in India and as a national language in Pakistan spoken by only a fraction of the (mainly) immigrant or Muhājir population, keeps open a wound, or a painful and useful question at the heart of Muslim/Pakistani identity. David Lelyveld’s article “*Zubān-e Urdū-e Mu‘allā* and the Idol of Linguistic Origins” in *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, No. 9, (Madison: Center for South Asia, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1994, pp. 107–17), provides a valuable critique of the uses of genetic linguistics in much of nationalism inspired South Asian work on Urdu-Hindi, and argues that literary aspiration to “Urdū-e Mu‘allā” was always something worked towards and acquired. Another way of reading this might be to point out that the tendency to persianize the Urdu *ghazal* by poets like Ghālib and Mīr, was also something that happened under the onslaught of the new and powerful “foreign” language—English—which was exerting a different kind of pressure on the language and the culture of the (imprisoned) Mughal court. Urdu, I might argue, was never really a “mother tongue,” never “natural,” always part of a moving camp. The “naturalizing” of Urdu, or “*nēčralizing*” as the nineteenth century literary reformer Ḥālī would put it (in Urdu), happens under the pressure of English and the advent of prose.

Persian.” While giving Urdu the resources for great subtlety and refined thought, such a practice had also led to confusing, tangled verbiage in which meaning was reduced to a firefly—“now it lights up, now it vanishes.”⁹ Urdu poetry (primarily the form) is likened, in Āzād’s manifesto, to the modern reproduction, the photograph, a copy, with Persian as the original.¹⁰ This copy, feminized, “decadent” in the words of Colonel Holroyd whose remarks followed Āzād’s at that famous event, needed re-energization to make it suitable for the new age.¹¹ To make it “*naiḥarāl*” as Āzād’s contemporary, the poet Ḥālī would argue. The task for the new poets of the colonial age was to make the Urdu language, sullied by too much languishing in language games and tired themes, capable of expressing meaning directly, forcefully, to serve the needs of a scientific age.

If the zenith of Urdu occurred, oddly enough, in the cloistered court of the last Mughal Emperor Bahādur Shāh “Zafar,” himself a poet and a great patron, suffering the humiliation of British control and holding only the facade of power under virtual house-arrest, Āzād’s call to freedom was urging an escape from such a feminine cloistering.¹² In his call, we could track a move from the space of an embattled minority ruling class suffering under a new European invader, to the seeming larger space of an Indian nation within the British Empire. But Āzād’s mission of

⁹Āzād, *Nazm-e Āzād*, as quoted in Frances Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 33.

¹⁰ The prominent modern Urdu critic Shamsur Rahman Faruqi argues at length for the link between a de-territorialized Persian poetry written in “Sabak-e Hindī” or “The Indian Style” and the Subcontinental Urdu *ghazal*. “Sabak-e Hindī” was, until recently, a discredited style in the Persian canon of poetry. The Persian (father) is thus territorialized as Indian, and utterly differentiated from Iranian Persian poetry which is defined as incapable of understanding the love of word-play and the complexity of the Indian *ghazal* in both Urdu and Persian. Cf. Faruqi, “Expression of the Indo-muslim Mind in the Urdu Ghazal,” in *Studies in the Urdu Ghazal and Prose Fiction*, ed. Muhammad Umar Memon (Madison: South Asian Studies Publication #5, University of Wisconsin, 1979), pp. 1–21. Unlike Āzād, who blames the Persian influence for the emasculation of Urdu, Faruqi claims (and celebrates) that it is the influence of Hindu-style female personas that feminizes the speaker of the Urdu *ghazal* and renders gender so indeterminate.

¹¹Quoted in Pritchett, p. 35.

¹²“Āzād,” meaning “free” is his chosen *takhalluṣ* or pen-name.

modernization remains fraught at its root with a curious contradiction. If the old Urdu literature was nothing but a copy, however brilliant and seductive, of the older, now useless, Persian identified order, the translation he demands of the new Urdu also rests on becoming a copy of a different order.

As a result of Āzād's speech, a regular poetry gathering was initiated (a *mushā'ira*) but instead of the usual formal pattern line (*miṣra'-e tarāḥ*) all participating poets were to be given a subject (*mazmūn*). Translation, again, but from a different end. Is this new literature not a copy? A bevy of irate poets reverse Āzād's argument and claim this new language is "outwardly Urdu and inwardly English."¹³ Everywhere, we find a desperate looking for cores, for centers. Urdu, to its mournful lovers, is always a failure, always a copy, never truly herself/himself. Always, an anxiety over gender at the root. Urdu—not man enough, always a copy, a reproduction, impure, the *ghazal* as its only ground, but beginning, only, on the verge of the modern, to mark its edges with prose, to hold in place, to fix and name, to prune away excess. Urdu must be saved from the advent of English, like Delhi could not be, but too, it must be changed, rendered translatable, "saved," in effect for more national purposes, for a "future."

However, such a "saving" progresses by curious means. The past must be historicized. Urdu must be named as such and its literary history of the *ghazal* must be re-membered in order to be changed. Āzād's seminal work *Āb-e Hayāt*, published in 1880, is marked by a curious delight in the classical *ghazal*, especially that of Delhi poets, while nonetheless expressing an unease over the lower edges of the genre as formulated in the form of *rēkhtī*, in which the speaker overtly assumed the persona of a woman, often reciting the verses clad in women's attire, while speaking in the women's idiom of the *zenana*. Āzād's disapproval clearly hinges on a perception of literature as a cause for moral upliftment or turpitude: "Leaving aside the question of style and dress," he writes on the *rēkhtī*, "its invention should be considered one cause of the effeminacy, lack of courage, and cowardice that grew up among the common people." In Āzād's view, a properly masculinized genre of literature can turn a defeated people into "new men." But curiously enough, it becomes the

¹³See Pritchett, p. 36. The responses also speak of Urdu being denuded of ornament, like a beautiful woman stripped naked. Āzād, in his speech of 1874, had also referred to the unopened boxes of English robes of honor more suited to the new times. See *ibid.*, p. 34.

ghazals of the Delhi poets with their Sufi leanings and ambiguously gendered beloveds who become the marker of great poetry, albeit in need of necessary transformation to meet the needs of the new era.

To Ḥālī, Āzād's fellow reformer, such poetic conventions refer to specific origins in Persian poetry which genders both lover and beloved as male, whereas "hindi" (or "braj bhāshā") poetry causes the poet to write in the guise of a woman longing for a man, regardless of the poet's actual gendering, and Arabic poetry involves a male speaker writing about a female beloved. Through such broad (and utterly untenable) generalizations, Ḥālī thus concludes that all such traditions demonstrate the "extreme unreality of Eastern poetry" which proves itself in need of serious "*islāḥ*" or correction.¹⁴ While the *ghazal*, on account of its great popularity cannot be dismissed, its form needs to be made more flexible and its "love" content needs to allow for other kinds of more socially sanctioned loves such as that of marital, filial, or even national relations.

What remains curious in both Ḥālī and Āzād's account is the valorization of the rule that demands that the gender of the beloved remain ambiguous through careful utilization of the neutrality (within Urdu) of the singular third person pronoun and even its male gendering in the plural. Both of them reserve their strongest criticism for the *ghazal* poets (especially those of Delhi's rival city, Lucknow) who, *shamelessly*, cite the charms of their obviously female beloveds in their poetry and show no decorum, no subtlety. What is it about this gendered/genred rule of the *ghazal* that grants an opening for the new order of masculinity that both Āzād and Ḥālī imagine even as they seek to purge Urdu poetry of its sexually decadent imagery and associations?

Ḥālī offers an ingenious argument that specifying the gender of the beloved as female under his new prescriptions for a sexually respectable beloved, would be shameful because it would mean exposing the beloved's charms in public.¹⁵ The indeterminate gender is made to function as a veil or "purdah." This veil or "purdah" thus frees the beloved to become a signifier of greater things such as national love or divine love. The interdiction against the erotic specificity of the body, even while calling upon a major convention of the classical *ghazal*, also works against the classical emphasis on a shifting back and forth between the phenomenal (*majāzī*) and the mystical real (*ḥaqīqī*) realms, a rapid dialectic, which

¹⁴See *ibid.*, p. 177.

¹⁵See *ibid.*, p. 178.

in Sufi terms, is meant to transform both realms, while retaining them. In Ḥālī's scheme, the beloved is meant to function only as stable mirror, the erotic body is meant to stay in its properly assigned place to allow only the lover access to transformative experience. Furthermore, in Ḥālī's new poetics, the writer is called upon to abandon the capriciousness of disconnected couplets in favor of linear thematic two-line verses joined together to a specific, preferably narrative end.

Veil or opening, the question of the indeterminate gender of the beloved serves as a hinge in this moment of profound translation. What is perhaps carried on in the *ghazal* is the emphasis on the lover's interminable absence, the impossibility of capturing the desired one in language, the *ghazal's* insistence on its own failure at representation—such a failure being itself what marks the speaker as a lover. Thus even while this “reformed *ghazal*” cites a new boundary, there remains something of the old contamination in what is necessary to retain it in order to keep the name “*ghazal*.” This contamination, unassimilable, seeps both ways, luring poets into the charms of a “decadent form,” infiltrating the pieties of the new and modern *ghazals* of moral upliftment and nation building. The question of “*purdah*” and veiling remains the unassimilable problem of Islam and modernity. Who hides behind the veil? Male or female? An entry way that beckons while receding as it is written. Modernity requires a certain mode of masculinity. The *ghazal*, lagging behind, but being carried forward by the reformers, bears with itself a troubling refusal to come clear. What is behind the veil?

*

Shamsur Rahman Faruqi, in an essay extolling the innate “Indianness” of the Urdu and Persian in the Subcontinent, does however, offer an important corrective to any simplistic notion of gendering in the tradition:

Though Iranian in form, the Urdu *ghazal* was Indian in spirit; though its protagonist spoke in a masculine voice (even women poets did so) the attitudes and responses were “feminine.” It is true that courtesans played an important part in eighteenth and nineteenth century urban North Indian society, and that pederasty as well was quite common. But the deeper truth is that the “woman” who sits amidst rival lovers and the “man” who pines for her are in fact sexually reversed rôles for a masculine lover and a feminine beloved. A boy-beloved can of course be explained

even more convincingly in this context.¹⁶

The mark of gender is thus not just grammar but style. The beloved is active, cruel, capricious, moving, always out of reach. The lover, however sexed, is “woman,” open to longing, the one who waits, who is never ever whole or complete, who remains in torment. The argument calls on a different translation, one from the Hindu tradition of poems in the female mode where the all too human Radha pines for her capricious Lord Krishna. In a colonial atmosphere already marking Hindu as feminine and Muslims as having the possibilities (with benevolent European and Christian guidance) to ascend to a proper masculinity, Ḥālī and Āzād attempt to prune and shape away the confusing gender play of the *ghazal*. Love must be purified of its improperly multiple manifestations to only announce the metaphysical world. The lover and beloved, sober, fastidious, both need to occupy a masculinity cleansed of associations with “shame,” with the feminine.

In imagining the world of the *ghazal* as a proper *ḥavēlī* in which men could speak clearly to men and all “women” were veiled, Ḥālī and Āzād appear to have forgotten that the contamination of the *ghazal* really lay elsewhere, that the ecstasy it promises one is docile but also unamenable to the utilitarian uses they wished to put it to. That really, the “drag” enacted by the much despised sub-genre of *rēkhtī* has leaked into the genre as a whole, and real “men,” alarmingly, seem nowhere to be found.

Girls and the Shame of Womanhood

The question one could then ask of Aafreen’s *ghazal*, one in which the female is marked as *laṛkī* (girl) and not *‘aurat* (woman) is perhaps one similar to that which Faruqi asks of the classical *ghazal*. How is the speaker gendered? Or is it an always already female position, this time, sliding between lover and beloved, poet and subject? Or is the subject the poem itself, carved, like a girl, with wounded hands, by one with no paternal authorization: “This art is not mine nor am I Aazar’s girl” who elsewhere, in the form of the “girl,” “Stands in the idolater’s house of thought/Again, with wounded hands, Aazar’s girl.” Girlhood which is not yet free of fatherhood, of father’s desires. Which can say yes to a father

¹⁶“Expression,” p. 18.

and yes to no father/artist/teacher. A *larķī*, not yet *‘aurat*—not yet shameful, no genitalia lurking yet within her name, so closely kin to *larķā* or boy, often the desired one for the classical poets. Gender, I might suggest, slips between boy and woman for the traditional poets. But here, we have the girl, both like, yet unlike the boy, she hovers on the cusp of gendering, of shaming, at the edge of the *ghazal*, of talking to or with shame, or with women. Aafreen’s *ghazal* situates a girl at the edge, both inside and outside, opening and closing.

If anything, this is extending the possibilities of the gender slippage of the old masters. The genre, like a *havēlī*, announces a price for membership—enclosure. But in the granting of entry, a *ghazal* is recited, performed, re-marked, opening into itself an undreamed possibility, possibly a monstrous birth. Shame, in the plural, is summoned, for an address. The space kept aside, for “woman,” an inside, remains unfilled, or if vacant, to be filled only for a moment, by whoever can or will or is compelled to stay in that position of longing—that position both exalted, and shameful.

What is particularly interesting is also that instead of woman, entire, whole, we have a game of mirrors, shifting girls, who cannot be placed. The question I wish to consider is the implications of this “splitting” of a gender so there is not one, not only two, not just the pair, but more. Girls who actively carve, who bear the trace of the masculine, who bear a different wound, lodged in their hands; and girls who occupy the inside, the interior, the utter feminine; girls who assume, even when representation breaks down, a holographic form. Translation, translating, breeding monsters? Translation, so often marked feminine, here worked by one marked as woman, engendering an excess of femininity in a genre already saturated. If the classical poets, in their elaborate plays with masculinity and grammatical gender, in their sophisticated recitals, wrote and rewrote masculinity till it came apart, Aafreen, passing through the modern, the contradictory retention of the *ghazal* in the Urdu literary tradition, opens possibilities in the genre, pressing upon its very reliance on gender and on women.

Ghazal

Bhūk kī karvāhaṭ sē sard kasilē hōṅṅ
Khūn ugaltē sūkḥē čaṭkhē pilē hōṅṅ
Tūṭī čūrī ḥandī larķī bāghī ‘umr

Sabz badan p^hrā'ī ānk^hēn nilē hōñṭ

*Sūnā āngan tanhā 'aurat lambī 'umr
Khālī ānk^hēn b^higā āñcal gilē hōñṭ*

*Kaččē lafzōn kā ye nilā zehr
Čhū jā'ē tō mūrak^h tū b^hī č^hilē hōñṭ*

*Zehr hī māngēn amrat ras kō mun^h na lagā'ēn
Baghī ziddī vahshī aur haṭilē hōñṭ*

*Aisī banjar bātēn aisē karvē bōl
Aisē sundar kōmal surkh rasilē hōñṭ*

*Itnā bōlōgī tō kyā sōčēngē lōg
Rasm yahān kī ye hai laṭkī sī lē hōñṭ*

Lips, cold and cruel with the bitterness of
hunger
Lips, secreting blood, parched, yellow, and
cracked

Broken bangles, cold girl, rebellious age
Green body, stony eyes, blue lips

Desolate courtyard,¹⁷ woman alone, long
years
Empty eyes, soaked veil,¹⁸ wet lips

This blue poison from such unripened words
If touched, ignorant one, you too must peel
your lips

Begging only poison, refusing to touch mouth
to nectar
Rebellious, perverse, untamed, and stubborn
lips

¹⁷The Urdu word *āngan* refers to the interior courtyard occupied by women.

¹⁸*āñcal* refers to the edge of a *dupaṭṭā*, or soft material used to cover women's head and breasts. The *āñcal* is what usually covers the head, what is used to wipe the eyes.

Such barren tales, such bitter talk
Such beautiful, tender, red, and luscious lips

If you talk so much, what will people think?
The custom here is this: Girl, sew up your
lips.¹⁹

—Ishrat Aafreen

In both of Aafreen's *ghazals*, the *maqta'*, the final couplet, the one usually carrying the signature, *takhalluṣ*, of the poet, is signed with a law, coming from elsewhere—"The masters of the house wanted simply this/She stay within the house, this household's girl" or "If you talk so much, what will people think? The custom here is this: Girl, sew up your lips." The signature, the mark of the singular, the particular, of its authority in its absence, is here scattered in the generality of "girl"—without proper name, what the speaker does not, yet cannot not want to be. Obeying the law, the rule cited, in the "end," occasions an excess. Sewing, a practice, produces movement, new patterns. Enclosures, in the other instance, lead to more enclosures, more interiorities. And both movements of sealing, enable escapes. The *maqta'*, the end, which is also the sunset, also becomes the dawn, the *maṭla'*, the beginning of the *ghazal*.

Both laws are supposed to produce the "woman," yet each defers (and differentiates) that production. The *'aurat* figured in the third couplet, is yet not proper. As the figure of the aging woman, alone, with an empty womb (the metaphor of the desolate courtyard), she carries the double shame of being unpaired. The specter of that "othered" woman is cited as the possibility of the negations, repeated in each of the couplets—the saying "no" which arrests girl at girlhood, and prevents the "*nēčaraḷ*" (as Ḥālī would have it) ascent to womanhood, marriage and childbirth. Writing, sewing, "bitter words" nonetheless make those stubborn negations a kind of "yes." The poison which touched too soon, will painfully peel the skin off lips, is also an offer of life, of writing, of a way outside, the space of "woman" still there, magnetic and seductive, but to be

¹⁹This line is particularly difficult to translate. The Urdu could be an injunction: Shut your mouth! Or that girl (in the general) should sew up lips; the emphasis on the sewing. The lips in that instance are also generalized, and not particular.

circled, just as the old poets were known to circle the “*but-kada*,” the idol-house or whorehouse which could also be the secret of the Ka’ba or House of one God.

The female poet moves, still circling, writing, still outside. With “Lips, secreting blood” she enacts a kind of menstrual writing, of “barren tales” but also of the body displaced, lips traveling, not staying put, not staying closed. Lips are also veils, what hides the (w)hole, what must be sealed, to cover, to hide. But making veils, sewing lips, staging interiors, here also become ways of talking by women who are not quite women to/with women not quite there. □