

LOUIS WERNER

## A Gift of Ghazals\*

WHEN Agha Shahid Ali starts to write a poem, he chooses between two entirely different approaches. At times, he selects a pattern-breaking individualism that roams among prose-like lines, elliptical epigrams and quotations; at others, he cleaves hard to tradition by taking up archaic and technically demanding forms such as the villanelle, sestina, canzone and the like. Then, as if to repudiate all such polarities, he may also plunge into a *ghazal*, an Eastern poetic structure whose “formal disunity” he first heard from his Urdu-speaking mother in his native Kashmir.

“For me,” says Ali, “*ghazals* are first and foremost about my feelings, whether from the distant past or from yesterday, that I need to put into a form with special meaning to me. I want to contain those feelings in a singular way, where I can revisit them again and again. *Ghazals* were the first poems I ever heard, and the form itself returns so much to me.”

The late poet James Merrill once compared Ali’s poetic works to “Mughal palace ceilings, whose countless mirrored convexities at once reduce, multiply, scatter, and enchant.” W.S. Merwin has found in them “our own lost but inalienable homeland.” To John Ashberry, Ali is simply “one of America’s finest younger poets.” Ali earned the accolades of these three Pulitzer Prize winners before even bringing out what he considers his best *ghazals*, a collection of which he hopes to publish under the title *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*.

Although the form is an old and extremely disciplined one, Ali says, *ghazals* “do not demand long elaborations and consistency of thought. In that respect they match the inclinations of the young. But to be good

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requires years and years of distillation. I am only now getting to that point.”

Ali's first two collections, published in Calcutta in the early 1970's, are testimonials to what is for him an ambivalent modernism. A poem from that time called “Dear Editor,” written when he was in his early 20's, contains ironic verses that are still useful for understanding a poet who straddles different worlds: “I am a dealer in words / that mix cultures / and leave me rootless: / This is an excellent trade” and “I swear / Dear Editor / I have my hopes / Hopes which assume shapes in / Alien territories.”

In this time he often foregrounded treasured childhood memories of his mother's recitations, which in these early poems became inexorably entwined with the ongoing strife in Kashmir: “*Ghazal*, that death-sustaining widow, / sobs in dingy archives, hooked to you. / She wears her grief, a moon-soaked white, / corners the sky in disbelief.”

In the poem “Learning Urdu,” he speaks of his mother tongue as if it were itself a contested land, pressured between the cultures of India and Pakistan: “Across the line of blood my friends dissolved / Into bitter stanzas of some dead poet. / I couldn't sympathize / I only wanted the bitter couplets explained.”

In 1975, he came to the United States to complete his doctorate at Pennsylvania State University. He still regards the move with characteristic ambiguity, one that both acknowledges opportunity and recognizes the cost of leaving behind both his language and his landscape. *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, his first American collection, published in the prestigious Wesleyan University Press New Poets series, begins with the bittersweetly nostalgic “Postcard from Kashmir”:

Kashmir shrinks in my mailbox,  
My home a neat four by six inches.

I always loved neatness. Now I hold  
the half-inch Himalayas in my hand.

This is home. And this the closest  
I'll ever be to home....

Now on the faculty of the University of Utah, Ali considers himself a Kashmiri-American and an English-language poet. “Someone of two nearly equal loyalties,” he wrote about the two languages, English and Urdu, “must lend them, almost give them, to each other, and hope that

sooner or later the loan will be forgiven and they will become each other's."

He reconciled this split personality most determinedly in his 1995 translations of the late Urdu-language poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911–84), published under the title *The Rebel's Silhouette* by the University of Massachusetts Press. Faiz was a family friend and a landmark literary figure whose work Ali felt obligated to make known in America, and because he delved into Faiz's *ghazals* and other poems, Ali feels that "the loan is not only forgiven, but now forgotten."

But by his own estimation, Ali's translations of Faiz's *ghazals* are unsatisfying. He chides himself for taking too many liberties with structure in order to clarify meaning, sacrificing a *ghazal's* signature reticence, ellipsis, and abbreviated metaphor to fill gaps of meaning with words. When he realized this, he set himself the task of finding the *ghazal's* proper English language formulae, not by translating from the Urdu masters, but by writing original poems, in English.

Even though its roots are in the Arabian Peninsula and it is arguably the oldest poetic form still in use today, nowhere does the modern *ghazal* excite more pride than among Urdu-speakers across the Indian subcontinent. Its most common subject, love and longing, was first invoked by the pre-Islamic Arab poets, who created the *ghazal*—the word means "flirtation"—as a stand-alone poem by spinning off the amatory opening lines, or *nasib*, from the more elaborate Arabic *qasidah*, or ode. The *ghazal's* rhyme, meter, and structure were later codified by the Persian masters Hafiz, Jami and Sana'i.

In Urdu, *ghazals* reached their literary heights in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Mughal court, having been first established and nurtured in the court of the Qutb Shahi sultans in Hyderabad. Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1797–1864 [*sic.*]), widely acknowledged as the greatest of all *ghazal* poets, was translated into English only recently and with some success by Adrienne Rich, who went on to pioneering experiments with the form on her own. *Ghazal*-like poems appeared along with Middle Eastern-styled quatrains, odes and elegies in Goethe's 1819 *West-Östlicher Diwan* (*West-Eastern Divan*), which tried to capture the spirit of the Persian poets. *Ghazals* were taken up a century later in Spanish by Federico García Lorca, in a form he called *gacela*—though his poems actually showed little similarity to the conventional form except in the

theme of love, and even in that he took a surrealist direction that leaned away from traditional forms.

Today, Agha Shahid Ali is virtually a one-man champion of what he calls the “true *ghazal*.” Through writing, teaching and collecting the English-language *ghazal*, he is aiming to put it on the same popular footing as that other Asian poetic form that has jumped the East-West divide, the haiku. And just as others had to do for the haiku, Ali now has to fight for the *ghazals* structural integrity—its rules and regulations, so to speak—as it passes into English. To do this he must undo impressions built in the 1960’s and 1970’s, when the form first came to attention in English and when, in general, rules of form were being thrown to the wind.

“That was unfortunate, because the *ghazal* is nothing if not about rules,” notes Ali. “Western poets were then aiming wildly at the exotic, so they wrote the poems they would have written anyway and just called them *ghazals*.”

According to Urdu convention, a *ghazal* should [be] written in couplets, and it must maintain a meter. It has both an end-line refrain word (*radif*), which occurs without variation in both lines of the first couplet and on the second line of all following couplets, and a mid-line rhyme (*qafiya*) which immediately precedes the refrain. Each couplet contains its own atomized meaning, with many varied sentiments. It is often voiced in the first person. The last couplet, called a *makhta*, names the poet directly in the second or third person, often using his pen name, or *takhallus*. Because of this structure, *ghazals* can speak to universal truths in a veiled voice and end with a personal calling card.

Thus the *ghazal* is at once unified by rhyme and refrain yet disjointed both by its stand-alone, seemingly randomly ordered couplets and by its shift in voice. Ali compares the self-sufficiency of the couplets to “stones in a necklace that continue to shine in vivid isolation.” The rhyme and refrain words are still points around which the couplets spin. When it works well, the poem creates “a profound and complex cultural unity, built on association and memory and expectation,” Ali says.

Yale University critic Sara Suleri Goodyear calls the *ghazal*’s refrain word “an astonishment,” startling the listener as it returns home again at the end of each couplet from a new and unexpected direction, completing the sentences and thoughts often in wildly different ways. Ali detects desire as well as surprise in the *radif*, saying that a *ghazal* creates “a constant sense of longing” for the reappearance of its refrain.

Take these examples from his own couplets, noting both the refrain and the rhyme that precedes it.

Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell tonight  
before you agonize him in farewell tonight?

Pale hands that once loved me beside the Shalimar:  
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.

...

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

Most translations of classical Urdu *ghazals* have failed because the simultaneous demands of meter, rhyme and meaning are simply overwhelming, and translators are forced to abandon at least one of the first two goals in order to achieve the third. In English, however, the otherwise often stilted language of the Victorians turned out to lend itself well to the *ghazal*. Translations of Persian *ghazals* in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries by Sir William Jones and E.G. Browne managed to maintain the essential conventions. More recently, the contemporary poet Andrew McCord has translated Ghalib with an even finer ear.

Beyond translation, it is Ali who has led the development of English *ghazals* in a form faithful in both spirit and letter to the Urdu model. He adheres to the rules of line length as well as meter, rhyme and refrain, and to the thematic conventions of the first and last couplets. Most important, he captures the *ghazal's* essential emotion, the slippery ground, as he sees it, between love and melancholy, "an occasion for genuine grief."

The strictness of these conventions, he says, make[s] him feel "gratefully shackled." Poet John Hollander, in a *ghazal* about *ghazals*, has called the form "inaccessible, vibrant, sublime at the end" and its couplets "two frail arms of delicate form." Ali has referred to *ghazals* as "Kashmiri paisleys tied into the golden hair of Arabic."

Because the expression of genius within tight boundaries can become a theatrical enterprise, *ghazal* poets were historically a social lot. They gathered often to recite before their fellows in competitive symposia called *musha'arahs*, which reached their peak in the Mughal court, although they are still held today wherever Urdu poets are active. In these sophisticated and ceremonial occasions, the poets in attendance were given a *misra' –i tara[h]*, a half-line in the meter and rhyme in which each then had to compose his *ghazal*. In order, from the lesser poets to the masters, each participant recited his work for the appreciation of his peers and the audience. A lighted candle was placed before the poet whose turn it was to recite.

“The Last Candle of Delhi,” by Farhatullah Beg, is a semi-historical account of a royal *musha'arah* attended by 59 poets, including the masters Ustad Zauq, Mirza Ghalib and Momin Khan, and their student followers. Zauq was court poet of the last Mughal Emperor, Bahadur Shah II, who himself wrote fine *ghazals* and under whose auspices the *musha'arah* convened. Farhatullah’s account was based on an actual 1845 *musha'arah* recorded by Karim-ud-Din Maghfoor, who collected the *ghazals* recited that night in a volume called a *guldastah* (“bouquet”).

Early in Bahadur’s reign, *musha'arahs* were held twice monthly at the Red Fort in the Diwan-e-‘Am, or Public Hall. They lasted from 9:00 in the evening until dawn—a time known as “the aristocratic hour.” Invitations specified the *tarah*, or meter-and-rhyme pattern, for each evening’s *ghazals*.

“At the word of the heralds,” the account begins, “all present settled down on folded knees and lowered their heads. The Emperor’s page took out Bahadur’s *ghazal* from a silk cloth, kissed it, touched it to his eyes and began reciting in a resonant melodious voice. The audience was too entranced to applaud. They swayed in rapture of delight at every couplet. Occasionally phrases like *Subhan Allah! Subhan Allah!* [“Glory to God!”] escaped underbreath from their lips. Otherwise the room remained silent, spellbound and completely lost in itself.”

More worldly moments occurred as well: Although one recitation was gem-like, it was considered out of place, for it was recited in Persian, and this *musha'arah* was a celebration of Urdu. A *ghazal* by Indian Army Captain Alexander Heatherly, born of an English father and Indian mother and attending that night’s performance in uniform, was roundly applauded. A failure by an otherwise senior poet is doubly mocked, first by the thunderous silence of masters, and then by the inane cheering of sycophants.

The account goes on to follow the highs and lows of both magisterial and pedestrian versifying in *ghazals*, and all of it—from grudge matches and artistic slights to the flare-ups of past feuds, tactical alliances between rivals and catty asides—speak to the passionate vitality of the form. It is the master Ustad Zauq who ends the *musha'arah* as dawn breaks: His recitation of a wistful elegy—pointedly *not* a *ghazal*—serves to bring the evening to a close and with it, unbeknownst to him, an era.

To introduce the *ghazal* to a wide audience in English, Ali has relied not so much on his own work as on an [*sic*] another kind of bouquet, an intercultural collaboration, *Ravishing Dis-Unities: Real Ghazals in English*, published last fall by University Press of New England. It is a collection of *ghazals* written in English by 105 poets, as well as two *ghazals* by Ghalib and Faiz in translation. Although it contains none by Ali, each poem observes Ali's code of the *ghazals* basic rules in English. The writers are a diverse lot, including South Asians, the occasional Irishman and Englishman, some of Ali's best students, and US masters such as William Matthews, John Hollander and John Edgar Wideman. In his introduction, Ali has created a *ghazal*-writing primer for first-timers. Poet Christopher Merrill calls the collection "a marvelous gift to the literary world," and speculates that "nothing will ever be quite the same in our poetry."

The weightiness of Ali's original poetry is a long way from the brevity of sentiment required of *ghazals*. His 1997 collection, *The Country Without a Post Office*, opens apocalyptically with the first verse of Sura 54 of the Qur'an: "The hour draws nigh and the moon is rent asunder"; the second epigraph is from Tacitus: "They make a desolation and call it peace."

The post office in the title poem—"that archive for letters with doomed / addresses, each house buried or empty. / Empty? Because so many fled, ran away, / and became refugees there, in the plains,"—is an example of the personal experience with strife that brings him into communion with so many other places of suppressed nationhood: "A woman combs—at noon—the ruins for her daughter. / Chechnya is gone. What roses will you bring— / Plucked from shawls at dusk—to wreathe the slaughter?"

The Kashmiri shawl becomes a metaphorical touchstone for Ali, and he self-consciously imagines himself as a weaver aiming for a tight warp in words as delicate as pashmina. "When the ibex rubs itself against the

rocks, who collects / its fallen fleece from the slopes? / O Weaver whose seams perfectly vanished, who weighs the / hairs on the jeweler's balance?" Poems taken as textiles have a long history in the Middle East and Asia; Ibn Khaldun was not the first to compare poets to weavers.

Of the three *ghazals* in this collection, one acts as a beacon, calling the *ghazal* back to Arabia and Arabic, the land and language of its birth:

The only language of loss left in the world is Arabic—  
These words were said to me in a language not Arabic.

Ancestors, you've left me a plot in the family graveyard—  
Why must I look, in your eyes, for prayers in Arabic?

Majnoon, his clothes ripped, still weeps for his Laila.  
O, this is the madness of the desert, his crazy Arabic.

Who listens to Ishmael? Even now he cries out:  
Abraham, throw away your knives, recite a psalm in Arabic.

...

They ask me to tell them what Shahid means—  
Listen: It means "The Beloved" in Persian, "witness" in Arabic. □