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The Formality of Form: Reading Ghazal as a Contact Zone

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Abstract: *The near impossibility of translating or reproducing the ghazal within the context of American-English modern poetry has resulted in several prefixes and adjectives that claim an innovative break from the form of the traditional ghazal. While Aijaz Ahmad's project of translating Ghalib into English operated on the principle that true translations of the ghazal could only be made possible by sacrificing its formal sturdiness, Agha Shahid Ali, writing almost thirty years later, criticised these attempts as failed imitations of the form that disqualified them as ghazals. While Ahmad and Ali both act as carriers of the form of the ghazal from one culture to another, the contact zone between these cultures could not be spatially or temporally located. Instead, in this article, I read the ghazal itself as a contact zone — as the site of translation, negotiation, and adaptation between distinct cultures, languages, and contexts — that has created the possibility for fresh expressions within the traditional strictures of the poetic form while also keeping alive the playfulness that the form of the ghazal inspires in its practitioners.*

Keywords: Ghazal; Contact Zone; Translation; Ghalib; Aijaz Ahmad; Agha Shahid Ali

Introduction

In a conversation on the legacy of the Urdu ghazal, Shamsur Rahman Faruqi narrates an interesting incident about the arrival of a new kind of ghazal in Delhi. Vali Dakani, the poet credited with bringing the Urdu ghazal to Delhi, was an unwelcome traveller; his poems even more so. His new and simplified Urdu *shai'ri,* the art of composing ghazal couplets, was seen as a challenged to the complex Persian poetry patronised by the Mughal court in its capital city. However, owing to his innovative approach and use of the colloquial idiom prevalent in the Deccan – which flourished under the influence of Urdu

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alongside other regional languages – Vali's *divan*, the collection of his ghazals, became immensely popular in no time. The next generation of poets to arrive in Delhi such as Mir Taqi Mir and Qaem Chandpuri, faced, what Harold Bloom has theorised as 'the anxiety of influence'; they were jealous of Vali's fame. Playing the role of his detractors, they spread the rumour that there was nothing new in Vali's verses; that he had stolen much from the Persian masters; he had simply translated much of what they had said into Urdu and was reaping the rewards for his borrowed genius. Furthermore, the credit for using the local motifs and themes, as well as the use of the vernacular to compose his verses, they said, was suggested to him by Shah Gulshan, the established Persian poet in Delhi of the time (*Ghazal Ahd Ba Ahd* 2015, 16:20). All this business of slander in the name of authenticity was taken up in order to maintain the supremacy of 'Dehlivat', or the North Indian literary sphere with its centre in Delhi, over the mofussil status of 'Dakaniyat', the literary sphere from southern India. The rumour didn't do much harm to Vali's reputation. Instead it bolstered his fame. Vali came to be known as a master of Urdu verses; his verses were also recognised to have the affinity to the larger corpus of Persian poetry. Persian, being the language of the court, was also the language of culture besides being the medium of literary composition. Vali's *divan* would go on to establish the foundations of the Urdu ghazal in Delhi, making the Mughal capital an important centre for the composition of ghazals in the centuries to come.

I begin with this anecdote in order to make a few opening statements about the ghazal and its specific context. First, the ghazal has had a long history of migration from one culture to another which extends over the period of fifteen centuries. It has gone through a number of contact zones and has been modified and re-modified, along linguistic, idiomatic, contextual, thematic and formulaic parameters through these cultural encounters. Second, the form of the ghazal attributes a distinct identity both to the poet and their poetry by placing them in a larger tradition where the *sha'ir*, the poet who composes *shi'rs*, couplets based on a set metrical formula, participates in the vocation of *shai'ri*, i.e. the act of composing individual couplets that share certain formulaic characteristics and can be grouped together into a ghazal, thereby forming a composite poetic unit. Third, to take the example of 'Dehliyat' verses 'Dakaniyat': the entanglements between the 'higher' and the 'lower' culture, even as they foreground a hierarchy, have shown a remarkable flexibility towards each other in the context of the ghazal's migrations. Its larger history has shown that one culture can be easily translated, and trans-created into the other without the loss of the 'real' essence inherent within that culture. Thus, even though Persian was the language of the cosmopolitan elite in eighteenth century Delhi, the vernacular could still mimic it, and in fact, challenge it to an extent where the cosmopolitan tendencies could be witnessed within the vernacular. Such entanglements could position the vernacular, in Vali's case *Rekhta*, as a language of importance simply by its claim to be a language suitable

for ghazal compositions. Fourth, and final: the relationship between the original and the translated is often characterised by an arbitrariness that underlines the essential failure of any translation project. This is owing to the excess of meaning within the original which cannot be carried forth into the translation while simultaneously imbuing the translation with its own individual meaning and existence free from the original. Several translations of the ghazal into languages other than the ones in which they were originally composed have faced this limitation. The translation of Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib's ghazals, originally composed in nineteenth century Delhi, have suffered the most for it.

It is precisely this sentiment that is voiced by Frances Pritchett about the untranslatable layers of meaning in Ghalib's poetry. "As Ghalib reminds us," she writes, "the poem always slips, like the imaginary Anqa bird, through even the finest nets of awareness" (Pritchett 1994, n.p.). With these concluding words to her study of the Urdu ghazal, Pritchett marks out the primary difficulty in reading, translating, or rewriting the ghazal in a different language and cultural context. The spirit, or the form of the ghazal which may seem solid and unrelenting in the literary domain of Urdu cannot quite be held in the same state when carried over to another linguistic domain, for instance, in English. How, then, can one read, understand, translate, or compose a ghazal in English?

The American poets writing in the 1960s, such as Adrienne Rich, W.S. Mervin, and David Ray, amongst several others who involved themselves in the process of translating the ghazal as a poetic form in their own idiom also recognised this impasse. The near impossibility of translating or reproducing the ghazal in English resulted in a number of suffixes and adjectives that were added to the poetic form in order to qualify it as belonging to the larger ghazal tradition as it existed in the East while simultaneously claiming for itself an innovative break within the context of American-English modern poetry. While Aijaz Ahmad held that true translations of the ghazal could only be made possible by sacrificing its formal sturdiness, Agha Shahid Ali criticised these attempts as failed imitations of the form which disqualified them as ghazals to begin with. It must be noted that both Ahmad and Ali participate in the attempt to translate the ghazal from its Urdu legacy into the English. In this, they both act as carriers of the form from one culture to another. The contact zone between these cultures is located neither in India of late eighteenth century when Ghalib was writing, nor in America of late twentieth century where his ghazals were being translated into English, or on the brink of the new millennium when new ghazal in English were being composed. Instead of a geographically fixed location, where translation may act as a process of (unequal) exchange between two cultures, I read the ghazal itself as a site of translation, of negotiation, and adaptation between two distinctly different cultures, languages and contexts.

In this chapter I frame the debate surrounding the translation of Urdu ghazal in English through two nodal points in their post-modern English translation, their subsequent interpretation and adaptation of the form – namely the volume of ghazals in translation edited by Aijaz Ahmad under the title of *Ghazals of Ghalib* (1969) and the volume of original English ghazals compiled and edited by Agha Shahid Ali titled *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English* (2000). In reading the ghazal as the contact zone I argue that Ahmad's initiative reproduces the ghazal in America, albeit through several compromises in its formulaic structure. This serves as the first formulation of the ghazal as a contact zone. This initial freedom from form engenders, and sustains, a rhizomatic proliferation of the form which, through experimentation, generates several radical forms of the ghazal such as the blue ghazals, the breath ghazals, the bastard ghazals, amongst other such experimental forms of poetic expression. This moment, I argue, must be read as one of rebellion, but it simultaneously, is also an acknowledgement of falling short, or creating in difference; of attempting an ideal, failing, but creating something new in the process. Subsequently, Agha Shahid Ali's criticism of the American ghazal for its un-ghazal like character redeploys the ghazal once again as a contact zone, which uses the earlier adaptations of the form to critique and then create the category of the "real ghazals" in English.

The translation of the ghazal, in both cases, engenders a conversation between the familiar and the foreign. Theorised as a contact zone, the ghazal reveals a legacy of defying expectations and opening up multiple possibilities of poetic expression as well as of interpretation and further translations. It also highlights the untranslatable that remains and is often ignored in the process of translation and the various ways in which the translators have tried to grapple with it. This essay, then, is an attempt at understanding the' newness 'that is made possible by this unique moment of translation opened by the interaction of two cultures separated by time, space, and cultural contexts.

Ghazal through Different Contact Zones

Anisur Rahman, in the preface of *Hazaaron Khwahishein Aisi: The Wonderful World of Urdu Ghazals*, tells us that the word 'Ghazal' originates from the Arabic which means "'talking to the lady love'" (Rahman 2019, n.p.). Ghazal developed out of the *mu'allaqaat* tradition, or the hanging poems which, it is believed, were written in golden letters and hung from the walls of *Kabba*, thereby also attributing to them the title of "The Golden Odes". More specifically the precursor to the ghazal can be traced in *nasib* poetry of the mid-sixth century Arabia. They were composed in light and musical metres which has been described as the erotic prelude to the hanging odes. In its westward spread from the Arabian peninsula, the Ghazal found fertile soil in medieval Spain as well as in the west African countries where it was written in Arabic, Hebrew as well as in Hausa and Fulfulde. The poets writing the ghazals stuck to the contingencies

of the form dictated by the traditional Arabic meters and forms (Rahman 2019, n.p.).

In its eastward spread, the Ghazal form was taken warmly by the Persian poets who experimented and innovated with it in terms of both form and content even as they did not "entirely disengage from the formal patterns of the Arabic ghazal" (Rahman 2019, n.p.). The Persian poets gave a distinct turn to the form of the ghazal by "refurbishing the *matla*, the first sher of the ghazal, and evolving a pattern of refrains (*radeef*) as the last unit of expression in the second line of each sher" (Rahman 2019, n.p.). They also introduced the tradition of using the *takhallus*, the poet's signature in the *maqta*, the last sher of the ghazal (Lewis 2006, 125). The ghazal received an enthusiastic reception in India. While some trace the beginning of the genre to the thirteenth century poet Amir Khusro, the Urdu ghazal can be traced to the writings of Quli Qutub Shah and Vali Dakani, whose initiative left a lasting mark on the Persian dominated literary culture of Delhi. It is the same literary culture, in its exploration of the possibilities of the vernacular *Rekhta* alongside the elitism of Persian compositions, that will go on to produce the most popular ghazal s*hai'rs* of the nineteenth century such as Mir Taqi Mir, Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib and Khwaja Mir Dard.

The ghazal, patronised by the Mughal court as well as by the nizams of Lucknow and the nawabi culture at large amongst other royal patrons of the arts, found a firm hold on the imagination of the eighteenth and nineteenth century poets composing in the courts of Delhi and Lucknow amongst other prominent cultural centres, who made use of its independent couplets to compose verses of highly metaphysical nature. The spiritual-romantic duality of their compositions was heavily influenced by the Bhakti-Sufi tradition that had revolutionised the general thought and philosophy of that era. The ghazal became a potent vehicle to mobilise this philosophy through structured rhythm and rhyme. However, this was not the only reason for writing the ghazal. The poet, by using the rigorous form of the ghazal and by attaching their own signature (*takhallus*) to it, could attain wider fame through the networks of recognition and patronship that considered the ghazal to be an elevated form of poetry. It is owing to such surpassing fame that Mir Taqi Mir, having lived out his life in Delhi, could relocate to Lucknow – another centre of Urdu literary culture – at a late stage in his life and claim patronage from the rulers there. Similarly, when Ghalib made his journey to Calcutta in hopes to get his pension extended by the Governor general of India, he was invited to participate in a number of *Mushairas* in the courts and the houses of noblemen he passed along the way.

The ghazal still enjoys popularity in the Indian subcontinent. The first genre of poetry a young poet is introduced to at an early stage in their development is usually the ghazal. One imbues it through the popular ghazals that have been encoded into melodious songs by the master musicians and singers such as Begum Akhtar, Ghulam Ali, Mehdi Hasan, and Jagjit Singh.

The ghazal is also one of the most accessed literary genres on the literary websites such as rekhta.org. The *mushairas,* where *shai'rs* publicly recite their freshly composed ghazals, often accompanied by jubilous applause and *wah-wahs,* are just as largely attended in person and are watched and rewatched over digital platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Instagram.

The ghazal has, for certain reasons, not found such a grip on the western audience. While the form has been crucial for poets like Garcia Lorca who have used it to create a sense of belonging to a lost, or broken, shared heritage to the east, it has, by and large, been seen as an exotic import from the East. The early fascination with the Orient during the era of colonisation resulted in one of the first instances where the ghazal, as an exotic genre, was received and experimented upon in Germany through the translations of Persian ghazals. Friedrich Schlegal was the first to use the ghazal form in German, but the form was properly introduced into the German literary circle through Joseph Hammer-Purgstall's translation of Hafiz's *divan* in 1812, which further inspired Goethe to take up the form and compose in it in his *West-östlicher Diwan* (1819). In his poem "Imitation" (1814) Goethe attempts to reproduce the rhyme scheme of the ghazal and uses it to address Hafiz,

> So the eternal flame doth wind and dart
> From there to rouse anew a German heart. […]
> Unless to some new form its thought be led
> Making an end of form outworn and dead. (Goethe 26-27)

It can be observed here that the oriental form of the ghazal, as Goethe writes, presented the opportunity to "rouse anew a German heart" and thereby re-enthuse it with the romantic spirit. Goethe's romanticism reignited towards the end of his life; the *West-östlicher Diwan* remains as the manifesto to this late development. Although Goethe appreciates the skill involved in the strictly balanced and rhymed cadence of the ghazal, he also seems to be suspicious of the new forms the ghazal might take owing to its strict formality which may compromise the thought of the poet.

More than a century later Ihsanoglu, in the forward to the edited volume *Ghazal as World Literature II: From a Literary Genre to a Great Tradition: The Ottoman Gazel in Context*, expresses another related concern about the scholarship regarding the ghazals. In order to arrive at a proper method for the evaluation of the ghazal, one would need the knowledges of the various language in which ghazals have been historically composed and to further take stock of the sheer amount of material that exists under these languages (2016, XIII). Both of these tasks are immense and seemingly insurmountable. Therefore, in order to read the ghazal within a cosmopolitan framework, it becomes necessary to consider it not in its entirely but through its various iterations that have developed through cultural exchanges within different contact zones. Hashmi, in her consideration of the 'Ghazal Cosmopolitan' cites the adaptability of the ghazal form in different cultural contexts through the "availability of a rich lexicon as well as a network of idioms and metaphors yielded by a literary heritage that is

built on cultural exchange" (Hashmi 2017, n.p.). She further points out that such privilege has often resided with languages such as Arabic, Persian, Spanish, German, English and also to some extent Urdu that have enjoyed an imperial status (Hashmi 2017, n.p.).

Considered in these terms two things appear in clear light: first that the ghazal originated in Arabian peninsula but does not remain limited to that geographical or cultural domain. Through its adaptation into idiomatic and thematic specificities as varied as the Persian, Urdu and even Spanish and German, an attempt was made to frame the form as a suitable vehicle for poetry specific to the conditions of their time and place. While this gives the ghazal a cosmopolitan flavour, it also limits it to the objective of reproduction through adaptation, but not translation. The Ghazal and its translations have had a distinct history separate from its adaptations and has often been a site of contestation especially in terms of the formal aspects of the ghazal.

Second, translation, in its most commonly understood meaning, stands for the act of "carrying over" from one culture to the other. However, this transference never occurs as an equal and just exchange. Translatability and the choice of texts to be translated, and the language they are translated from and are subsequently translated to, all of these factors, and more, are contingent upon the political hierarchies that exist between these cultures. Additionally, translation must take place within "contact zones" where two or more cultures "meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (Pratt 1991, 34). By identifying *transculturation* as a phenomenon of the contact zone, Pratt argues that "while subordinate peoples do not usually control what emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine, to varying extents, what gets absorbed into their own and what it gets used for" (1991, 36). Although the larger history of the ghazal, and its various adaptation in Persia and India agree with this theorisation of the contact zone, it is in the context of its arrival, along with its subsequent translation and adaptation, in America where this theory must be further explored. While the category of a "contact zone" still remains useful in attempting an analysis of the ghazal in America, the position of the subordinate and their agency in choosing or discarding from the form to be translated, or adapted, needs to be refigured in this specific context. In the next section I will detail the two defining moments of the ghazal in the United States of America and the reactions it generated in its movement from translation towards adaptation through the debate around its form and the formality of form.

Form and Formality: Ghazal as a Contact Zone

In 1969, marking the centennial anniversary of Ghalib's death, Aijaz Ahmad initiated and subsequently published, a translation project under the title of

Ghazals of Ghalib. His attempt in doing so was to present "Ghalib to American readers" through a book of "translations-versions, adaptations, imitations, or whatever else one calls them – which is, above all, a book of poetry" (1969, xviii). Ahmed, in the role of editor of this volume, chose the select ghazals of Ghalib from his Urdu Divan, *Deevan-i-Ghalib* edited by Imtiyaz Ali Arshi (1958). He provided the literal translation of the ghazals to be used as a foundation for the translations to follow by the American poets. Ahmad maintained that it was "absolutely essential that the finished versions be done by persons who are primarily poets and not necessarily scholars of Urdu" (1969, xviii). In doing so Ahmad took on the charge to sift through, select, and present the material to be translated to the American poets. The process of selection extended, beyond the ghazals, to the individual *shi'rs* that Ahmad deemed fit for the translations. In this he followed the usual practice of the poet, the editor, or the ghazal singer who may pick their favourite, or most relevant *shi'rs* of a ghazal for display. The hierarchy inherent in the translation process between Urdu and English seems to be absent, or at least minimised, in this instance. This is largely owing to Ahmad's involvement as a local agent who facilitates the translation on his own terms. However, the translations of Ghalib's ghazals by the American poets present a different angle on the translation process. For instance, David Ray translates Ghalib's ghazal that contains ten *shi'rs* into a three line poem:

> I have had enough of flying.
> It is the dust in the streets now
> I'd like to descend to (116).

While the composition itself is beautiful, and conveys pathos which, as Ali will later argue, is essential to a ghazal, there is little else that can qualify it as a translation. Not only does it defy all formulaic requirements of the ghazal, it is near impossible to find any correlatives between the original ghazal and the three line poem Ray leaves us with. The exchange between the Urdu poem and its English counterpart is shrouded in the mysterious connection that resides in the poet's head. Translation, in this case, can hardly qualify as a term for this poetic reproduction. However, Ahmad includes other translations of the same poem which offer a composite picture of the original ghazal along with his own explanatory notes of the poem.

Ahmad exercised his editorial control over who gets to translate the ghazals and in what manner it must be achieved as well. By favouring poets over academics and experts on Urdu literature, as well as the language and culture Ghalib drew upon for his Urdu ghazals, he lays out a different method for the translations whereby the poets could choose their own method as long as they stayed "true only to the spirit of Ghalib's poetry" (1969, xxvi). As a result, the translations vary from each other in great detail, form, and approach to the original ghazals. Since more than one poet attempted to translate the same ghazals, the translations produced by the poets of the same ghazal also vary in the great measure. Considered in this light, it would make sense then

that Ahmad defines translation as approximation, such that the various approximation of a single poem should provide "an intense impression of Ghalib's mind and moral universe" (1969, xvi). However, it is inevitable that the translations as approximation, done especially in the free sense in which the poets take it, should not read into the translations an authorial intention of the poets too. The translations maintain neither the form of the ghazal nor a fidelity to the content of Ghalib's thought. Ultimately when we read the ghazals of Ghalib in the *Ghazals of Ghalib,* we find ourselves reading more of the poet-translators than Ghalib in them. To what extent can we then still call them ghazals of Ghalib, or even ghazals?

In order to answer this question we must ask another, and a more basic, question: what are the parameters of the form of the ghazal, and what are the perils of ignoring its structure? As several poets, translators and commentators have pointed out, the very basic formula of a ghazal relies on the metered and rhymed quality of the verse with two distinct qualities to its couplets – the *radif* and the *qafia*. A ghazal is composed of a number of *shi'rs*, or individual couplets, which can range from five to fifteen, or even more in a single poem. However, exceptions exist – such as Ghalib's famous ghazal: "*Na tha kuch toh khuda tha*" which contains only three, but very powerful, couplets. The *shai'r* selects a certain meter for the ghazal along with a phrase which must rhyme in both the verses of the first two couplets and then follow the rhyme scheme in every alternating verse of the subsequent couplets. Essentially the gazal appears with the rhyme scheme which looks like aa, ba, ca, da, ea, and so on. The rhyming *qafia* and the repeating *radif* attribute a playful quality to the ghazal which the poet makes use of in the oral recitations in the poetic gatherings called the *mushairas.* Thus, the form of the ghazal not only makes the genre identifiable by its strict demarcations, it also maintains a playfulness by making the poets invent new ways of expressing their ideas through a means of creating suspense and subsequent revelation.

The internal structure of the *shi'rs* shares some similarities to the western idea of the couplet, however it also varies from the other in a significant way. While the couplets in a poem are connected by singular theme, the couplets in a ghazal can be independent in their exploration of a variety of themes within the same poem. Thus where one *shi'r* refers to the theme of love, another can be on politics, another on warfare, and another on a mystical illness, or a revelation. The internal structure of the *shi'r* is defined by the interplay of the two verses engaged in a logical relationship with each other. The first line presents the *da'vaa,* an argument, or a premise, which is then responded to as the *jawab-i-da'vaa*, answer to the argument, in the following verse (Pritchett 1993, 133). The ghazal is also highly codified in terms of its content. Faruqi points out that two separate entities constitute the ghazal – *mazmun* and *mani*. While *mazmun* stands for the general theme that a *shi'r* can be about, *mani* refers to "the inner, deeper, or wider signification of the poem" (2001, 3). The interplay of these three elements, in the hands of a skilled *shai'r*, can produce

the *rabt*, coherence and *ravani,* flow/fluidity in the ghazal, which to the audience will make the moment of listening to, or reading of, the ghazal a memorable experience.

Agha Shahid Ali, In his edited volume of ghazals titled *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English,* makes a similar argument regarding the "breathless excitement [that] the original form generates", which, he laments, is an "essential ingredient missing in the unrhymed ghazal" (2000, 8). The tradition of the *mushairas* has lived on in the subcontinent, and along with it, the formal games have also evolved over time. A modern *mushaira* still plays with the form of the ghazal to create suspense by fixing a scheme for each ghazal, which must be followed throughout the poem. The *shai'r* and his audience engage in a special relationship where they both become the reciter of the ghazal. The *shai'r* reads out a *misra,* the first verse of a couplet, the audience repeats it, the poet re-reads it, and then delivers the second verse which "amplifies, surprises, explodes" in the audience. The next couplets builds on the tension of the first, and so on (Ali 2000, 8). This continuation of compounded amplification ultimately reaches its climax in the last verse of the ghazal which is often demarcated by the use of the *shair*'s *takhallus,* nom de plume. Once again, a master craftsman of the ghazal verse, uses the *takhallus* as a word that, besides working as the signature of the poet, works to supply several meanings to the penultimate couplet of the ghazal. It is difficult to imagine this quality in an unrhymed ghazal.

Ahmad, in support of the unrhymed ghazals, argues that the use of formal devices in the translations of the ghazal, such as the "rhymed couplets or closely scannable prosodic structures", did not suit the context of contemporary American poetry. As opposed to nineteenth century Urdu poetry, they would be "restrictive rather than enlarging or intensifying devices" (1969, xix). Ahmad goes on to elaborate that the ghazal derives its unity not from its formal features but from "inner rhymes, allusions, verbal associations, wit, and imagistic relations," which can work together to "take over the functions performed by the formal end rhymes in the original Urdu" (1969, xix). By emphasising the underlying unity of a ghazal as separate from its formal features, Ahmad brings into conversation another important facet in the reception of the ghazal in the west. Pritchett in her remarkable essay on the criticism levelled against the form for a lack of unity within its couplets, writes that it would be "untrue to the real nature of the genre, to say that "the ghazal", in principle, has unity" (1993, 130). She further argues that the unity one does find in most ghazals is of a "rather vulnerable, and after-the-fact order" (1993, 131). The ghazal itself, in this case, should be seen as a "showcase" that displays the most elegant *shi'rs* the poet has chosen to put together using a set rhyme scheme and other essential formal patterning. There is no question regarding the thematic unity in the various *shi'rs* of a ghazal for a poet or the traditional audience of a ghazal. This need for a cohesive thematic unity arises specifically for a western audience who, in order to regard the form as a vehicle for poetic merit, must move from

verse to connected verse where the meaning is constantly transferred to the penultimate verse which concludes the poem. This expectation is further amplified in free verse poetry which, by doing away with formal requirements such as end-rhymes and stanzaic structuring, emphasise upon the conciseness and intent of the poem.

On the other hand, the core essence of a ghazal, as Ali quotes Ahmad Ali, still remains in its ability to convey "'melancholic and amorous'" sentiments (4). The unity of the form, therefore, must be sought in other directions than the execution of a theme from one couplet to another. Ali takes this argument further to emphasise the essential quality of the ghazal to speak to different themes and ends. He blames the arbitrariness of the unrhymed ghazal for its failure to enter the mainstream in American context. The ghazal in America, he argues, has been taken up only as "'exotic' dabblings" which also gives its practitioner the "authority of a foreign and rich culture" which can be used to "question the authority of their own culture's rigid proscriptions" (2000, 12). Ali's criticism here is located at a specific moment of the translation of the ghazal I have mentioned earlier, that of Aijaz's Ahmad's edited volume of Ghalib's ghazals translated into English by eminent poets of the sixties, such as Adrienne Rich, and W.S. Merwin, amongst others. Although Ali finds merit in their translations and accepts that it is rather difficult to maintain the rhyme scheme and other formal structures in the translated versions, he finds fault in the creative endeavours that these translations generate.

His argument essentially foregrounds the form, which could not be sustained in the process of translation, as the authentic model, which, being formally unsound in its translated state, generates unsound forms of the ghazal when other compose in it. Ali's argument, therefore, underlines an essential quality of the ghazal, i.e. its very formal structure, which is ignored, or disbanded, in the new ghazals that were written in America. These ghazals were, by no means, restricted by the requirements of conveying meaning of Ghalib's ghazals through the translation process. Thus, these poets had the opportunity to participate in the cultural cohesion that the proper use of the form could have engendered. However, owing to the precedents set by the 'flawed' translations, the original ghazals that were consequently composed in English saw it fit to forego the formal features and strict structures of the ghazal. Instead, they adapted a free verse design for their ghazals which, to Ali's eyes, were unsound and not fit to be regarded as ghazals to begin with. Ali contrasts the free verse ghazal as "a momentary exotic departure for a poet" with the "actual form" that does away with the expectation of a thematic unity within the poem. He concludes by noting that the form seduces one into buying the authority of each couplet as thematically autonomous.

When poets go crazy with the idea of composing thematically independent couplets in a free-verse poem, they manage to forget what holds the couplets together – a classical exactness, a precision so stringent that it,

when brilliant, surpasses the precision of the sonnet and the grandeur of the sestina (I do mean that) and dazzles the most untutored of audiences. The ghazal's disconnectedness must not be mistaken for fragmentariness; that actually underscores a profound cultural connectedness. The ghazal is not an occasion for angst; it is an occasion for genuine grief (2000, 13). Thus, by invoking the "actual form" Ali sets a contrast between what he calls the *real* ghazal, and, by what its exclusivity creates – the *unreal* ghazal. In the next section I will explore this oppositional reading of the ghazal through a textual analysis of the form.

The Un/Real Ghazal

While Ahmad performs the roles of a reader, a co-translator and the editor of ghazals in English, Shahid Ali does all of this besides being an original composer of the ghazal while simultaneously encouraging others to write "real ghazals" in English. The categorisation of the "real ghazal" centres around the poetic compositions that incorporate the *radif* and *qafia*, alongside the set rhyming patterns and metrical structuring of the verses arranged in the form of couplets which, in almost all cases, number between five to twelve and often also end with an innovative use of the *takhallus* (183-184). The "unreal ghazal", on the other hand, becomes a category that contains all the other iterations of the ghazal that do not adhere to the stringent requirements set out by Ali in his "Basic points about the Ghazal" (2000, 183-184). To further illustrate the difference between the "real" and the "unreal" ghazal, we may look at the *matla* and *maqta* of Ghalib's famous ghazal as it appears in the original alongside its translation by three poets in Ahmad's volume:

> sab kahāñ kuchh lāla-o-gul meñ numāyāñ ho ga.iiñ
> ḳhaak meñ kyā sūrateñ hoñgī ki pinhāñ ho ga.iiñ
> yuuñ hī gar rotā rahā 'ġhālib' to ai ahl-e-jahāñ
> dekhnā in bastiyoñ ko tum ki vīrāñ ho ga.iiñ

In this example, "*ho ga.iiñ*" serves as the *radif* of the ghazal, while the rhyming "*numāyāñ*", "*pinhāñ*" and "*vīrāñ*" perform the function of the *qafia.* Ahmad, in his explanation of the ghazal, details all the *shi'rs* and informs the reader that the verses are structured on roughly 14 feet per verse, with "fairly hard stresses" (1969, 74). Building upon this structure, it is easy to imagine how the ghazal can lend to musical compositions and public recitations. It also must be noted that Ahmad includes both these *she'rs* in his selection of the ghazal.

Three poets: Merwin, Rich, and Stafford translate this ghazal into English. I quote their corresponding verses to the extract from Ghalib's ghazal from their translations:

> Almost none
> of the beautiful faces
> come back to be glimpsed for an instant in some flower (Merwin 1969, 77)

> Not all, only a few, return as the rose or the tulip;
> What faces there must be still veiled by the dust!
>
> If Ghalib must go on shedding these tears, you who inhabit the world
> will see these cities blotted into the wilderness (Rich 1969, 78).
>
> Only the survivors come forth in the rose, the tulip.
> What faces have gone down under the dust!
>
> If the poet mourns this well, you dwellers in the world,
> You will find your cities drifting back into the wild (Stafford 1969, 79).

All three poets have done away with the formal structure of the ghazal. Thus its recitability in the traditional sense is already lost in translation. However, except for Merwin, the others maintain the dimension of the couplet with roughly 14 feet to the couplet while doing away with the rhyme. Merwin, moreover, chooses to omit the last verse in his translation. Thus none of the poems offer a complete picture of the poem. However, read together they approach a kind of constitutive completion while still leaving a lot that underlies the ghazal still untranslated. Is this great untranslated also untranslatable?

Noting Apter's theorisation of untranslatability in the domain of World Literature, Large suggests a need to maintain the usefulness of untranslatability while simultaneously not giving in to the impossibility of translation (2019, 61). In other words, the notion of untranslatability challenges the translator to adopt various tactics and strategies which can result in innovative interpretations of the original text. The same can be said of the ghazal too. Agha Shahid Ali's attempt to translate Ghalib offers the readers of the Urdu ghazal an opportunity to experience the form without having to sacrifice the tenor or formality of the genre. In his translation of the same ghazal, he chooses to translate seven out of ten *shi'rs,* all of which measure exactly 6 feet to each couplet. The rhyme scheme remains constant throughout the ghazal:

> Just a few return from dust, disguised as roses.
> What hopes the earth forever covers, what faces?
> World, should Ghalib keep weeping you will see a flood
> Drown your terraced cities, your marble palaces (Ali 2009, 349).

A lot of what remains untranslated and untranslatable in the hands of Rich, Merlin and Strafford finds space in Ali's translation of the ghazal. However, his translation does not follow the structure of the ghazal strictly. The *radif* and the *qafia* are missing here as well. Ali accounts for this fact by adding "(*after Ghalib*)" to the poem, thereby signifying a departure from the norm (2009, 349). The departure also signifies that Ali's translation of the ghazal belongs into the category of "unreal ghazals". With regard to another ghazal "In Arabic", he

confesses that in its earlier version he had done away with the rhyming *qafia* and had settled for only the repeating *radif*. The *matla* and the *maqta* of his ghazal read thus:

> The only language of loss left in the world is Arabic.
> These words were said to me in a language not Arabic.
> They ask me to tell them what Shahid means-
> Listen: It means "The Belovéd" in Persian, "witness" in Arabic.

However, in the revised version, he drops some of the couplets, adds some and revises others into what he called a "more honest attempt":

> A language of loss? I have some business in Arabic.
> Love letters: calligraphy pitiless in Arabic.
> Listen, listen: They ask me to tell them what Shahid means:
> It means "The Belovéd" in Persian, "witness" in Arabic (Ali 2000, 9-10).

One can clearly see that the musicality and tenor of the ghazal improves vastly in its second iteration when compared to the first. Furthermore, the pithiness of the verses in the second attempt lend to the pathos and longing of the ghazal which echoes long after it has been read or recited. Thus, the shift from the "unreal" to the "real" ghazal can be traced as an evolution in Ali's compositions as well. However, Ali's insistence on maintaining the "authentic" form of the ghazal should not simply be seen as a call to contain the experiments done upon it by the poets. While he agrees that many of the translations struck him "not just as efforts but real accomplishments" (2000, 11), he stresses that by following the form the poets could find themselves "tantalizingly liberated," and surprise themselves in the process of composing upon various themes as they move from one couplet to another (2000, 12). The stringency of form then can give birth to "a new range of expression" (Zaidi 2008, 64).

Indeed Ali's effort has been to begin with the rejection of the poems that went under the title of the ghazal and starting afresh to select, edit, and compile the poems he sees fit for the form of the ghazal. The "unreal ghazal", then, has a prior existence to the "real ghazal" in the American context. In this sense, the "unreal ghazal" can also be seen as the first expression of the form as a contact zone in the American context where the poets could play with its possibilities, choosing certain feature which they could retain while discarding others that did not fit their purpose and use. Here, the ghazal allowed its poets the possibility of "autoethnography, transculturation, critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, parody, denunciation, imaginary dialogue, vernacular expression" which Pratt calls "some of the literate arts of the contact zone" (1991, 37). Thus, while the "real ghazal" has space enough for only one form of poetic structure, the "unreal ghazal" becomes an umbrella term that shelters several forms at once, that could be used for several ends, under its hood. As

Anisur Rehman enumerates them, there are several such examples such as, "'tercet ghazal' by Robert Bly, 'bastard ghazal' by John Thompson, 'blue ghazal' by Adrienne Rich, 'breath ghazal' by Douglas Barbour and 'anti-ghazal' by Phyllis Webb" (2019, n.p.).

It is important to note here that the descriptives prefacing these ghazals, such as tercet, bastard, blue, breath, and anti, all refer to a self reflexive recognition of departure from the traditional format of the ghazal. Simultaneously they also lay a claim to the ghazal tradition by taking it as their point of departure. Thus, the question of authenticity, it appears, is preempted by the poets who participate in the tradition. Although Ali frames their disregard of the form as a consequence of misunderstanding the rules completely, or simply not paying attention to the *importance* of rules in ghazal composition, his call to authenticity also invokes authority and control over the evolution of the form. To quote Pratt, the ghazal can only benefit from acknowledging the "ways to move *into and out* of rhetorics of authenticity; ground rules for communication across lines of difference and hierarchy that go beyond politeness but maintain mutual respect; a systematic approach to the all important concept of *cultural mediation*" (1991, 40). In essence, the translation of the ghazal, operating as the contact zone, produced several interpretations of the form that diverged away from its original structure. This multiplicity of forms, then, inspired the composition of original ghazals which also did not follow the original pattern. Consequently, Ali's call to fall back to the "real ghazal" is also a product of the contact zone necessitating a return to "the real thing." The "real ghazal" in English, therefore, is also another interpretation of the ghazal operating as a contact zone.

Thus, between the "real" and the "unreal" categorisations of the ghazals, we see "miscomprehension, incomprehension, dead letters, unread master pieces, absolute heterogeneity of meaning" that constitute "some of the perils of writing in the contact zone" (Pratt 1991, 37). While Ahmad's attempt has been to do away with the strictness of form in order to convey Ghalib's thought through constitutive translations of several poets, Ali's attempt has been to reestablish the primacy of form as an important element which makes the ghazal recognisable in the first place. Similarly, while Ahmad's volume features poems in the name of Ghalib, which convey less of Ghalib and more of the translators, Ali's volume features ghazals that follow the style and formal requirements of the ghazals, but do not always succeed in conveying the pathos, grief and longing that Ali himself associates with the form except in few notable instances. Furthermore, the strictness of the form does not allow the natural flow of poetry which can be seen as one of the reasons why the ghazal form still languishes as an exotic and peripheral form for original composition for poets writing in English. However, this does not take away from the argument that, considering both the cases, the translation of the ghazal in the American context has yielded to us a multiplicity of approaches that each diverge from

the original in significant ways and at the same time also make their own unique mark in the English poetic tradition. "Along with rage, incomprehension, and pain," the ghazal has also produced "exhilarating moments of wonder and revelation, mutual understanding, and new wisdom," that constitute "the joys of the contact zone" (Pratt 1991, 39).

Conclusion: Ghazal in Other Domains

In her afterword to Ali's *Ravishing DisUnities,* Sara Suleri Goodyear writes that there is "no home in which [a] form can locate its authenticity, that it indeed must travel and recreate its boundaries however fragile they may be" (2000, 180-181). The history of the ghazal, and its movement through various cultures and across several international borders, has privileged this narrative of transformation through translation. Authenticity of the form has often been invoked to make an argument for exclusion of certain styles to the advantage of others. At the same time, disregard for form has also been portrayed as a challenge against authoritarianism. Both these arguments have been analyses through the course of this essay alongside Ali's radical suggestion that adherence to form can also lead to possibilities offered by a cultural context that cannot be explored otherwise. Disregard for rules in a game has the tendency to ruin the game; the ghazal too structures and regards itself quite like a game. The players – the poets and the audience both – gain most pleasure out of it if they understand these rules and adhere to it. The form, therefore, spills out of its utilitarian motive of conveying meaning in the most precise and concise pattern possible; only then can it take on the mantle of entertainment, play and music which become crucial to its unique character.

There is no limit to the themes that can be incorporated within the form of the ghazal. From the themes of love and devotion, to revolution, to complaints, to existential angst, to even science fiction themes have been explored within the stringency of its form. Furthermore, the ghazal has also been recognised as the subject for stand alone volumes of poetry in English; several ghazals have also gone on to win prestigious awards. All of these examples serve as indication towards the wider recognition, interpretation and use of the form in ever changing contexts. The possibilities within the contact zones for the ghazal, as well as the possibilities offered by the ghazal as a contact zone, are rapidly multiplying as it is taken up for compositions in languages where it did not find a place earlier.

Another stage for the exploration of the ghazal can be in the domain of slam poetry, where poetry can finally break out of confines of the written word and the lettered pages, which are meant to be read in isolation, to the street corners, bars, cafes and venues where the spoken word has become the call of the day; where the young poets meet to share their views of the world. This would then present another contact zone where the format of a *mushaira* is translated into a new context, freed of its patronage of courtly, literary, 'high-brow' etiquette. Here, the ghazal can find fertile soil as a form of expression

that plays equally upon repetition, rendition and the utter beauty of the moment where the poem becomes a personal confession, not only for the poet, but also the listener who sees in it the vicissitudes of their own personal affairs.

Another question remains: what gets lost in the translation of the ghazal as a poetic form between two cultures? Perhaps, this is not yet the ripe moment to reach for the answer. If one of the core characteristics of the ghazal is to create a universe of interaction amongst its *shi'rs* then one will have to allow this universe to expand till it can make that self referential quality sustainable. This is, possibly, a task that can take several decades, even centuries to near completion. The scale, if we consider the history of the ghazal in the east, is that of a millennia and more. However, with several channels for writing and publishing poetry and openness of this very connected world, the contact zones will expand; new ghazals and newer forms of its expression will emerge in the world.

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