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An Introduction to the Ghazal¹

The ghazal is an established and extremely popular verse-form in Urdu, primarily composed for performance rather than for the page. Like many other classical forms of Urdu poetry, the ghazal's origin lies in Arabic literature. It was a distinct part of the *qasida*, a long oral panegyric poem with narrative elements in classical Arabic from the pre-Islamic period, but it gradually began to be composed independently of the *qasida*. With the Arab conquest of Persia and incursions into India, Arabic forms of poetry were exported and, although the long *qasida* with a hundred couplets or more never gained a strong foothold outside Arab soil, the ghazal as a separate entity quickly became fashionable. The length of the ghazal varies from about five couplets to around twenty, although few go beyond thirteen and seven is about average. Once mastered, this brevity means that the poet can compress a great deal in just a few lines of verse. The ghazal's potentially wider range of subject matter is another advantage, although love has generally been the most important theme.

The ghazal is a traditional type of short lyric poem that can be set to music and this has undoubtedly contributed to its popularity. It can be recited, chanted and sung, with or without a musical accompaniment. Ghazals are recited in *mushairas* or “gatherings of poets” where there is an instant and vocal response from the audience.

This has meant that poets deliver their work in bite-sized couplets, pausing between stanzas and often repeating their lines for better audience assimilation. Great ghazal composers like Nasir Kazmi have enjoyed the adulation reserved in the West for pop stars, thanks not only to the *mushaira* performances—and a public *mushaira* can attract over a thousand listeners—but also to their work being sung by the greatest singers of the Indian subcontinent. Ghazals are often to be heard on radio and television; and, as performance poems and songs, they can and do reach many non-literate listeners. Frequently ghazals have been incorporated into Urdu and Hindi cinema, and even theatre, thus reaching all classes of people. Popular Indian and Pakistani cinema has a strong romantic streak and the ghazal is well suited to this medium.

The word “ghazal” has two literal meanings: “talking to women” and “the cry of a stricken deer.” Both are very appropriate in conveying the nature of poems that usually express love for the beloved—both sacred and profane. While the ghazal can cover any topic, love has always been its pre-eminent subject. Often there are sentiments such as anguish or melancholy and the mood in a ghazal can shift from couplet to couplet.

Like the sonnet, the ghazal has strict requirements of structure, content and imagery, all of which present a special challenge for the translator. It has an ornamental style, for instance, that does not translate easily for the twenty-first century reader in English. The ghazal uses a single uniform metre in every line—and often a very complex metrical pattern is used, as well as a rhyming scheme of AA, BA, CA, DA, and so on. This could not be duplicated in English translation without the poem sounding very contrived—even comic—although I consider that translations into some other Indic languages may well be very much more successful in this

regard. In most Indian languages, as in Urdu, there is an abundance of natural rhymes and so rhyme can extend with great ease over several syllables. They share also the same easy facility for internal rhyming. Little wonder then that the ghazal, so popular in Urdu and Farsi, has also become an important genre of poetry in many North Indian languages like Punjabi, Gujarati, Marathi and Hindi. In my own mother tongue, Bengali, I have been delighted to encounter the experimentation with the ghazal form by “the Rebel Poet” Kazi Nazrul Islam.

Maintaining one rhyme consistently and with fluency throughout a poem is difficult when composing in English, and this is doubly so when translating. Perhaps for this reason, many translators in English have changed the ghazal’s couplets to quatrains, but I consider that couplets are such an essential part of the ghazal that they should be kept as such.

An interesting feature of the ghazal, one that contributes to its success as a performance piece in the *mushaira*, is the ability of each individual couplet to be a complete and autonomous entity, frequently differing from the adjoining couplets in theme and mood. Initially this can make the ghazal appear disjointed when read in English, but there is an overall unity in the shape of the poem, the metre and the patterning of language and images. In Basir Sultan Kazmi’s “Pledge,” for instance, the first couplet and then every alternate line has a similar phrase to end it. Themes can also recur in the same ghazal. The second couplet of “Tomorrow’s Trees” introduces the concept of a journey and in the last couplet this has become “life’s journey.”

Another interesting feature of the ghazal is the “signature line” in the final couplet. In most cases, though not all, the poet introduces his or her own name, or more usually penname, either in the last or the penultimate line. It is a convention that

I have retained in my translations even though it may take the English reader some getting used to. The signature line has the effect of drawing in the poem from the universal to the individual, and from distance in time and space to the here and now. It is a distinctive feature that can contribute to the enjoyment of the ghazal.

Each couplet of a ghazal is an aphorism, often Gnostic. This is especially so in the case of the final couplet, which is often the opportunity for some philosophical musing. This is one of the characteristics of the ghazal that has made individual couplets eminently quotable. Thus Basir Sultan Kazmi's "Tomorrow's Trees" ends: "those who tread with greatest caution are the ones who stumble." Such quotable lines may be found also within the body of the ghazal.

Ghazals abound in such traditional symbols and images as: the teasing—even cruel—beloved, the moon, the firefly, the rose, the thorn, the garden, the desert, the caravan, the caged nightingale, the gallows, the candle, the moth, and so on. Many symbols have Sufi connotations that give the ghazals a mystical interpretation in which the beloved may be God, the *saqi* or "cup-bearer" may be a spiritual guide, while the lover who drinks wine may be the spiritual aspirant who receives divine wisdom. In a *mushaira*, the audience will be familiar with such conventions and will appreciate the depth and richness that they can impart.

¹ This is extracted from the introduction to Debjani Chatterjee, ed., *Generations of Ghazals: Ghazals by Nasir Kazmi and Basir Sultan Kazmi* (Bradford: Redbeck Press, 2003).