GHAZAL

The ghazal is a form of lyrical poetry. It is originally exotic to South Asia, as is indicated by the very sounds of the name itself when properly pronounced as ġazal, with its very un-Indian initial rolled ‘g’. But like many exotics which have long been transplanted into a new environment, over the centuries of its life in South Asia the ghazal was successfully adapted and developed, first in Persian, then in Urdu, now also in other South Asian languages. The continuing popularity of this adaptable form is testimony to its enduring significance as one of the major poetic and musical forms of modern Indo-Pakistani culture.

Origins and Earlier Development

While it has close analogies in Arabic poetry, the ghazal is of Persian origin. Formally a short lyric composed in a single metre with a single rhyme throughout, in its style and content it is a genre which has proved capable of an extraordinary variety of expression around its central theme of love. The ghazal is thus itself one of the most striking examples of those successful cultural artefacts, consisting of a seemingly infinitely adaptable combination of essentially simple elements, which are so characteristic of the Persianate civilization of the eastern Islamic world. Immensely popular over many centuries and across a huge geographical area, the ghazal was cultivated over the whole of this world, at least from quite early in the second millennium CE. Besides the vast numbers of ghazals composed in Persian itself, the genre was later also intensively cultivated in the other literatures which were heavily shaped by Persian, notably those composed in Ottoman Turkish and in Urdu.
In the early mediaeval period the most prestigious form of courtly Persian poetry was the *qasida*, a lengthy formal ode taken over from Arabic. The ghazal thus seems first to have been seriously cultivated not in the courts of the sultans but at the centres of the Sufis, and one of the first and greatest collections (*divan*) of mystical ghazals was that composed by Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273) of Konya. The ghazal soon came also to be cultivated by court poets who evolved an ingeniously ambiguous combination of human romance with mystical love for the divine. The greatest master of the ghazal in this, its classic form was Hafiz (d. 1399) of Shiraz.

The form was also cultivated in India during the period of the Delhi Sultanate, most notably by Amir Khusrau (d. 1325) of Delhi, nowadays celebrated as a national icon retrospectively credited with a huge variety of cultural achievements, but whose classical reputation as the ‘parrot of India’ (*tuti-ye hind*) rested on his Persian ghazals, which are typically more direct than those of Hafiz. Under lavish Mughal patronage, India later became the most important centre for the cultivation of the courtly Persian ghazal by both émigré and native-born poets. The fashion was now for the baroque expression of the ‘Indian style’ (*sabk-e hindi*) with its marked rhetorical and conceptual elaboration of the ghazal, which reached its apogee in India with Sa’ib (d. 1677) of Tabriz and Bedil (d. 1721) of Patna.

Although the *divan* of Hafiz continues to be sold in Pakistan with Urdu glosses as a fortune-telling oracle, local knowledge of vast heritage of the Indo-Persian ghazal has been lost with the disappearance of Persian from South Asia. The ghazal is nowadays associated in India and Pakistan primarily with Urdu, although this connection is itself a relatively recent one. Urdu ghazals were written in the seventeenth century in the Muslim courts of the Deccan, typically in an attractively simple style which included some elements of indigenous Indian romantic poetry. But
it was the elaborate rhetoric of the courtly Persian ghazal which was transplanted into the mainstream Urdu poetic tradition which was thereby enabled rapidly to emerge in fully-fledged form in the eighteenth century courts of Delhi and Lucknow in the work of such masters as Mir Taqi Mir (d. 1810). It is Ghalib (d. 1869) who is now regarded as the greatest of all classical Urdu poets, although he professed to set greater store by his more abundant compositions in Persian. Since the classical Urdu ghazal is the key reference point for all later developments in South Asia, its typical formal and rhetorical features need now to be outlined.

**Formal Features**

The ghazal is defined as a poetic genre by its formal features, for whose description there is a traditional set of technical terms of mostly Arabic origin, quite distinct from the traditional vocabulary of Indian poetics. These features may be illustrated by reference to the short early nineteenth-century ghazal by the Urdu poet Atish (d. 1847) which is transcribed and translated below.

Like all ghazals, it consists of a series of rhymed verses (šīr), each symmetrically divided into two half-verses (misra\'). This ghazal has five verses, usually reckoned the minimum number needed to make up a complete ghazal, with about a dozen being the normal maximum. (The verses of the ghazal are quite often described in English as ‘couplets’, but the implied analogy with English poetry is somewhat misleading.)

The formal structure (tarah, zamin) of a ghazal is defined by its metre (bahr) and its rhyme, which are both maintained consistently throughout the poem. Thus each half-verse is written in the same metrical pattern of alternating short (S) and long (L) syllables. There are about half a dozen Persian-derived ghazal metres in standard
The metre used here is called *mujtas*, where each half-verse has the metrical pattern SLSL SSLL SLSL LL, denoted in the traditional mnemonic system of meaningless syllables (*afaa‘iil*) as *mafaa‘ilun fa‘ilaatun mafaa‘ilun fi‘lun*.

Each full verse is end-stopped, with the ending marked by a highly defined rhyme, in this case the polysyllabic -u karte, which would be divided by the traditional rhetoric into the *qafiya* or ‘rhyme proper’ –u and the *radif* or ‘end-rhyme’ karte. The prominence of the rhyme is underlined by its repetition at the end of both halves of the opening verse (*matla‘*). The ending of the poem is marked by the inclusion in the final verse (*maqta‘*) of the poet’s pen-name (*takhallus*), a Persian word adopted as signature.

*yih arzu thi tujhe gul ke rubaru karte*

*ham aur bulbul-e betab guftagu karte.*

*payambar na muyassar hua to khub hua*

*zaban-e ghair se kya sharh-e arzu karte.*

*meri tarah se mah-o mihr bhi hain avara*

*kisi habib ki yih bhi hain justaju karte.*

*jo dekhte tere zanjir-e zulf ka alam*

*asir hone ki azad arzu karte.*

*na puch alam-e bargashta-tali ‘i Atish*

*barasti ag jo baran ki arzu karte.*

(‘My desire was to set you opposite the rose

so I might discuss you with the pining nightingale.

It was good that no messenger was available:

how could another’s tongue have set out my desire?

Like me, the sun and moon are wandering:
they too are searching for someone that they love.

Those who see what the chain of your long hair is like
freely desire their own imprisonment.

Do not ask about my ill-starred condition, Atish:
it is a raining fire which desires the rain.’

Rhetoric and Performance of the Classical Ghazal

The classical ghazal in Urdu is a highly wrought art form collectively defined by its language, which is highly Persianized in register with frequent use of the izafats –e ‘of’ and –o ‘and’, and the complex imagery and rhetoric previously evolved over many centuries in Persian. All these elements go together with a tension between the formal strictness of the ghazal as a poem with monometre and monorhyme and the discontinuity of the individual verses. Famously described by Sir William Jones as ‘Orient pearls at random strung’, these are normally united only in their ability to draw separately upon an immense store of well established imagery whose elements interlock with one another, and which in the style favoured by the classical Urdu masters are given a top spin of rhetorical polish.9

In this ghazal, the state of the poet as ardent lover in distress is successively likened to a variety of traditional images in verses given point by the ingenuity with which the conceits are handled. The opening verse with its double rhyme illustrates the typical juxtaposition of the rose (gul) with its lover the nightingale (bulbul), here paralleled by the poet and the beloved, whom the rules of the ghazal dictate should generally be portrayed in quite abstract terms, and who should be referred to in Urdu.
in the masculine gender by mechanical preservation of the ambiguity inherent in the lack of grammatical gender in Persian.

The next verse plays with the familiar conceit of the morning breeze in the garden which acts as the poet’s messenger, while the following one represents a familiar aggrandizement of the poetic persona through comparison of his state with those of the heavenly bodies. The fourth verse moves to the celebration of one of the principal features of the beloved’s beauty, those long tresses which may be described as overpowering with their scent, as enfolding in their coils like serpents, or with this image of their imprisoning lovers in their chains. In the final couplet, the literal meaning ‘fire’ of poet’s pen-name Atish is exploited to yield an image which combines two of the natural elements in an evocation of the lover’s state of yearning for the fulfilment of his unrequited passion.

This, then, is a characteristic example of a highly aristocratic art form, which was intimately associated with the Urdu culture which flourished in the late Mughal period, where ghazal verses were an integral part of the education and the conversation of the nawabi class. More formally, the ghazal was an important performance art in several different settings, reflecting the ambiguities typical of the ghazal’s expression. The voice of the serious male poet was heard in the competitive poetic symposium (musha’ira), which favoured recitation either as rhythmic speech (taht ul lafz) or in the chanting style called tarannum. Musical performance by professionals was also important. Ghazals of a mystical inspiration were suited to the rhythmic performance at Sufi shrines called qawwali, while romantic feelings of a more human type were evoked in all-male audiences at the salon performances (mahfil, mujra) by professional courtesans (tawa’if). The memory of all these and
the more elaborate settings of performance at royal courts has itself come to form a part of the romantic mystique of the ghazal.14

**The Modern Ghazal**

While this remembered association with the old Urdu culture has continued to underpin its subsequent appeal, the ghazal has also proved capable of remarkable adjustments to the major cultural shifts characteristic of the colonial period and of contemporary India and Pakistan and their overseas diasporas.

Following the substantial destruction of the old aristocratic order after the suppression of the uprising of 1857, the ghazal became increasingly associated with the new middle class. The values of this class, which were substantially influenced by those typical of the late nineteenth-century European bourgeoisie, dictated the modification of many features of the classical ghazal, whose elaborate rhetoric came to be seen as false and artificial, and whose seductive openness to extra-marital infatuation in all its varieties came to be regarded as somehow shameful. During the colonial period, it was the Urdu poet Hali (d. 1914) who provided the most sustained critique along these lines, and it was the poet-philosopher Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938) who provided the most memorable demonstration of the serious possibilities of the ghazal. Although now challenged by the *nazm*, the thematic poem strongly influenced by nineteenth-century English models which became the chief vehicle for the expression in Urdu of the ideals of nationalism for the expression of serious ideas, the ghazal too adaptable to conveying the message of nationalist poets.15

The remarkable resilience of the Urdu ghazal was nevertheless mainly demonstrated by its continuing dominant position as a medium for the expression of
that private romantic sensibility which is everywhere so closely identified with the values of the middle class. A short early poem by the Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz (d. 1984),\textsuperscript{16} by far the most popular Urdu poet of the later twentieth century, gives a good idea of the modern ghazal, which is traditional in form, Persianized in language, and delicately modern in feeling. The metre is the common \textit{muzari'}, scanning LLS LLS LSL \textit{(maf′ulu faa′ilaatu mafa′iilu faa′ilu)}, with the rhyme \textit{–ar ke}.

\begin{verbatim}
  donon jahan teri muhabbat men har ke
    voh ja raha hai koi shab-e gham guzar ke.
  viran hai maikada khum-o saghar udas hain
    tum kya gae ki ruth gae din bahar ke.
  ik fursat-e gunah mili voh bhi char din
    dekke hain ham ne hausale parvardagar ke.
  dunya ne teri yad se begana kar diya
    tujh se bhi dilfareb hain gham rozgar ke.
  bhule se muskara to diye the voh aj Faiz
    mat puch valvale dil-e nakardakar ke.
\end{verbatim}

\textquote{With both worlds forfeited through loving you there goes someone after a night spent in pain. The tavern is in ruins, the wine-jar and the goblet are sad: what a walk-out you staged to make the springtime sulk! I got one opportunity for sin, but only for a few days: I have seen the Provider’s plans for me. The world has alienated me from memories of you, Even you are outcharmed by the world’s suffering. It was by mistake that she smiled today, Faiz,}
Do not ask about the feelings of this clumsy heart.’

The first and last verses use their paired halves to explore the chaste passion of the helpless lover, while the intervening verses each evoke different parts of the genre’s vastly suggestive history. The second verse draws on the drinking imagery, always a prominent theme in the ghazal, to suggest the work of the classical Persian and Urdu masters, while the provocative address to the Deity in the third recalls the Nietzschean persona favoured by Iqbal, and the tension expressed in the fourth verse between private romance and painful public involvement is a twentieth-century theme very characteristic of Faiz, who was personally committed to the Left. So, rather than intellectually exploiting the conceits of the traditional imagery in the classical manner, this ghazal exploits the associations of that imagery in a style which is at once readily comprehensible and immensely evocative.

The successful stylistic transition of the poetic ghazal from an aristocratic to a bourgeois environment has been paralleled by its adaptation as performance art diffused on a previously unprecedented scale by the new media of the twentieth century, rather than by texts published in a script which has itself become largely unfamiliar in India. The classical style of ghazal singing, as practised by the courtesans, was brought to a wider public through the radio and recordings in the work of such artistes as the ‘Queen of Ghazal’ Begum Akhtar (d. 1974). The inherent suitability for musical setting of the ghazal’s tightly regular formal structure was also exploited in a more simplified form to the needs of the movie industry as the *filmi* ghazal, with its pared down lyrics sung by playback artists to composed orchestral backing, while new kinds of semi-classical ghazal performance on cassette and compact disc have developed a large cross-national public of their own, which is also receptive to modern recordings of the different style of ghazal performance in
qawwali. To stimulate and to respond to this large market, new kinds of singer have emerged, notably including both male singers and husband-and-wife duos.\textsuperscript{17}

While the ghazal has necessarily been discussed to this point in terms of Urdu, the twentieth century expansion of the genre also saw a further blurring of boundaries as it was taken up by poets in other South Asian languages. Earlier experiments were conducted by linguistic pioneers intent on raising their languages to the prestigious standard of Urdu by the painstaking production of vernacular divans.\textsuperscript{18} Subsequent decades have seen the copious production of ghazals in several languages.\textsuperscript{19}

While these often fall short of the standards successfully maintained by the finer Urdu poets, their typical cross-over into other genres like the popular song (git) is itself witness to the ways in which the ghazal has adjusted to the composite culture of modern India. A modern Panjabi ghazal\textsuperscript{20} may be cited to show the transmutation of the genre. The monorhyme, including double rhyme in the opening verse, and the poet's signature in the last verse are maintained, but the monometre is a four-beat Panjabi metre in place of a prescribed Perso-Urdu bahr:

\begin{verbatim}
  ik dukh ae ik dukh jae
  jad de us nal nain larae.
  tane mihne te rusvaian
  mere ghar a dere lae.
  dil laina te mukkar jana
  aj kal lokan shugal banae.
  dil vich teri yad da chanan
  nhere de vich rah rushnae.
  roz tere nainan chon pinda
  Mittar hun kiun theke jae.
\end{verbatim}
(‘Some pains come while others go
    since our eyes became engaged.
Taunts, curses and disgrace
    have come and settled in my house.
To steal the heart and then deny
    have been made a sport by people nowadays.
Memories of you are a light in my heart
    lighting the roads in the darkness.
Now that he drinks daily from your eyes,
    why should Mittar go to the wine shop?’)

Here the style is reduced to its simplest, keeping only the easiest of Persian vocabulary while accommodating unpoetic everyday words like theka ‘wine shop’, rather than the maikada ‘tavern’ of Faiz’s ghazal, and the overall effect owes as much to the folksong as it does to the ghazal.

For purists, such neo-ghazals are of course anathema. But they show how the name ‘ghazal’ continues to inspire so many versifiers and practising poets in Pakistan and India today, along with that large public of avid listeners and would-be connoisseurs who are drawn to ghazal as a cultural icon underpinned by that nostalgia for the glorious past of Urdu culture as it is variously experienced by a significant section of the modern Hindu and Sikh middle class of India21 as well as by the Indian Muslims and Pakistanis who are its most direct heirs.

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Notable evocations by Urdu writers include Muhammad Husain Azad, *Ab-e Hayat: Shaping the Canon of Urdu Poetry*, trans. Frances Pritchett, New Delhi, 2001; the wonderful re-creation by Farhatullah Beg, *The Last Mushai’irah of Delhi*, trans. Akhtar Qamber, New Delhi, 1979; and Muhammad Hadi Rusva’s classic novel


20 Text in Gobindpuri, Panjabi Gazal, p. 491.

21 For the ghazal as cultural icon, cf. the lavishly produced seven volumes of Raj Nigam, ed. The Ghazalnama, New Delhi, 1999 (www.ghazalnama.com).