

Agha Shahid Ali and the Ghazal

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Abstract:

As Agha Shahid Ali tells us, the ghazal is an Urdu poetic form consisting of 'autonomous or semi-autonomous couplets that are united by a strict scheme of rhyme, refrain and line length'. The Kashmiri-American poet exploits his unique diasporic position to use this traditional poetic form to write English poetry. Ali belonged to the beautiful land of Kashmir and his movement to America for higher studies, though a personal choice, pained him on separation from his homeland. He therefore always tried to create the same warm, secular, congenial and syncretic culture in the places he lived and in the poetry he wrote. The last volume of Ali, published posthumously in 2003, Call Me Ishmael Tonight is a book of Ghazals in English. This act of writing ghazals in English was Ali's way of reconciling his two worlds-Kashmir and America.

The paper discusses how Ali helped in the popularizing of a new poetic canon, the English ghazal, in the act of rehabilitating his divided loyalties; how the literary form helped Ali re-form his sense of self even when he was creating a new tradition in American poetry.

Key words: Agha Shahid Ali, English Ghazal, Rebel's Silhouette, Ravishing Disunities, Call Me Ishmael Tonight, Translation Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Diaspora, Identity.

Agha Shahid Ali was born in February 1949 in New Delhi and brought up in the beautiful valley of Kashmir. He belonged to a

family where Persian, Urdu and English were not just spoken but the specific culture each language carries, was imbibed and instilled in the atmosphere by reciting poetry of Shakespeare, Keats, Habba Khatun, Mahjoor, Ghalib, Faraz and Faiz. The legendary Urdu poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz also happened to be a family friend and so was the popular ghazal singer Begum Akhtar. In his introduction to *The Rebel's Silhouette*, Ali mentions that though Urdu is his mother tongue, English was his first language as he used English for "all practical and creative purposes". Therefore when Ali entered the American literary scene as a man of two "nearly equal loyalties" (Rebel's Silhouette, 1991), he felt he had to repay the loan of one language to the other and took upon himself the daunting task of teaching his American colleagues what a ghazal truly is, in spirit and in form.

Let us deal with the form and facts first. The ghazal is an ancient poetic form that emerged in 7th century Arabia from the polythematic panegyric *qasida* to which it was an "amorous prelude". Suzanne Stetkevych in the Introduction to the *Early Islamic Poetry and Poetics* calls ghazal "little step-child" of the *qasida* in the classical Arabic period (Intro, xxi). From there it made its way into Persian and Urdu languages; however German, Hebrew, Spanish, Pashto and Hindi languages can also boast of a tradition in ghazal.

Written in two line stanzas called *she'r*, (nots couplet- because only the first two lines of the ghazal rhyme) the ghazal follows a strict rhyme and refrain scheme. In fact it is the repetition of the refrain in every second line that forms a major qualification of the ghazal. Each ghazal has a minimum of four to five *she'r* which may be and generally are thematically independent. The first *she'r*, called the *matla*, sets the rhyme (or *qafiya* as it is called in Urdu) and the (*radif* or) refrain used in both lines. In the subsequent *she'r*, the *qafiya* and *radif* is used in only the second line. What stands unique about the ghazal is that each *she'r* stands as a complete poem (sometimes a story) in its own- there are no run-throughs, no enjambments.

The ghazal may have ten stanzas or she'r and each of them may be talking about a variety of emotions or engagements and yet the involvement is driven home back and again with the reverberation of the rhyme (*qafiya*) and refrain (*radif*). All the lines have same metrical length and employ the same *beher*, which is the "syllabic system for maintaining consistency in line lengths" (Ravishing Disunities, 2000, 183)

Agha Shahid Ali has talked in great length about the "seeming arbitrariness" (RD, 10), the disunities of the ghazal. There is no maximum length of a ghazal. There is usually no narrative unity, no development of thought and one ghazal may have *aasha'ar* (plural for *she'r*) that are intense, playful, comical, flirtatious, sorrowful or existential in turn. Except for the first sher (*matla*) that sets the *qafiya* and *radif* scheme and the last she'r-the maqta- which usually carries the name of the poet, the rest of the couplets can be easily shuffled, re-arranged or even snatched away without changing the meaning of the ghazal. To Ali, the ghazal is like a necklace of gems- each stone has its own shine but strung together it makes a separate beautiful piece.

The ghazal with its formal strictness and arbitrary content incubated in Ali's mind for a long time and suited Ali best. The paper aims to show how Agha Shahid Ali reached to the culmination point of *English ghazals* after years of chiselling, pruning and experimenting with the English language/poetry so as to make it accommodative of the Urdu emotions as well as the Urdu metrical form; the ghazal.

Ali tells us quite candidly that he took up the translation of Faiz out of cultural snobbery and a poetic ego (RS, xii). Ali felt that he owed the American poetic fraternity a debt to let them know about one of the most popular sub-continental Urdu poet- Faiz Ahmed Faiz- the poet who had transformed the stock figure of the 'beloved/god' into revolution.

To the post-partition Kashmir, Faiz Ahmad Faiz was the greatest literary name. He was a political revolutionary and an exiled poet and had brought a new figure to Urdu ghazal by

extending the metaphor of the archetypal Beloved from woman/lover/God to Revolution. Ali internalized Faiz at an early age. The poems were recited to Ali by his father even though he confesses that he could not understand them at all. Years later, Begum Akhtar (her ghazal renditions) made Ali ponder over the genius of Faiz and he found himself in love with both- the ghazal and its writer; he had been mesmerised by the singer already! Ali felt a deep kinship with Faiz and thought it was his duty to make him known to the Western world. Ali liked to imagine himself in a better position to translate Faiz (as compared to Victor Kiernan and Naomi Lazard, who had already come out with their respective translations of Faiz) because he felt a greater authority in understanding the cultural nuances of the stock phrase/ images that frequent the Urdu ghazal.

What were these cultural differences? I presume Lazard had to learn the nuances of images that would seem too lush to an American poet—images that recur shamelessly in Urdu poetry, among them the moon, the rose, the moth, the flame. She needed to learn their modern implications as well as their uses over the centuries, a formidable task. For example, the Beloved—an archetype in Urdu poetry—can mean friend, woman, God. Faiz not only tapped into these meanings but also extended them so that the beloved could figure as the revolution. The reader begins to infer, through a highly sensuous language, that waiting for revolution can be as agonising and as intoxicating as waiting for one's lover. How is the translator to get all of this across?
(RS, xiv)

Faiz was famous for his Marxist-leftist leanings. His poetry had created a lot of stir for he had completely revolutionised the Urdu ghazal—Ghalib was the last tall figure of ghazal; the theme of his ghazal and of all its practitioners up till Faiz had been love, longing and tragedy—Faiz had all this but with an angle – he had taken the love poetry to a completely different level by making revolution his Beloved. In the hands of Faiz,

the ghazal assumed a different shape altogether. The beloved was no longer captivating enough for the social issues of the period were more pressing. Faiz had witnessed the partition of India, the formation of Pakistan and with it brutalities, bloodshed, political manoeuvrings, indifference to human life and emotions. He lived in a time which had no room for the languor of romantic love and without much fuss he accepts:

A glimpse of your face was evidence of springtime.
The sky, wherever I looked, was nothing but your eyes.
If you'd fall into my arms, Fate would be helpless.
All this I'd thought, all this I'd believed.
But there were other sorrows, comforts other than your love.
....
Bitter threads began to unravel before me
As I went into alleys and in open markets
Saw bodies plastered with ash, bathed in blood.
This too deserves attention.

(*Don't Ask Me*, RS, 5)

This was probably the reason why Ali was so fascinated with Faiz. The translations came in 1991 when Kashmir was burning with political turmoil and as Ali records in *Rebel's Silhouette* he had begun working on them in 1989. The trouble back home in Kashmir pained Ali immensely and he did what all a poet could—compose and create beautiful poetry. (Seven years later, in 1997, Ali comes out with *Country Without Post-Office* which is the poetic record of the exodus of 1990s Kashmir) Faiz was the befitting therapy for the broken hearts and the impassioned spur for the revolutionary minds. In the eight ghazals out of forty-two translations, the beloved is an evasive, unattainable object of desire and could almost easily be replaced by revolution.

I didn't listen when my father
recited your poems to us
by heart. What could it mean to a boy

that you had redefined the cruel
beloved, that figure who already
was Friend, Woman, God? In your hands

she was revolution. You gave
her silver hands, her lips were red.

(*Homage to Faiz*, VS, 57)

But the translation of ghazal into English is almost impossible. Ali sagaciously makes the use of free verse and has adopted a technique of explanation for his translations.

In *Ghazals of Ghalib* (1994), Aijaz Ahmed notes that good translations like good poetry itself are very much a matter of luck. The task of the translator is to convey in a different language “the whole of the original mind” by rendering not only what the poem is saying but also “how it is saying whatever it says”. Ahmed started his translation of Ghalib with the clear notion that translation is “approximation” (Intro, vii-xxx). Ali follows the suit and extends a new arm to it “sometimes explanation may be the best way to translate” (RS, xxiii).

But Ali was aware of the task that he had set for himself—while Ahmed tried to capture the essence of the Ghalib’s ghazal by providing multiple versions by different poets—Ali took a different route—he mostly tried to explain the possible nuances of the Urdu original. One popular piece by Faiz goes like this:

Raat yun dil me teri bhooli hui yaad aayi
Jaisey sehra mein chupke se bahar aayi
Jaisey veerane me chale koi baad-e-nasim
Jaisey beemar ko bewajah qarraar aaye

(*Ashaar*, RS, 2)

Victor Kiernan, one of the first translators of Faiz renders it as

Last night your faded memory filled my heart,
Like spring’s calm advent in the wilderness,
Like the soft desert footfalls of the breeze,
Like peace comes somehow to one in sickness.

(*Word on Translation*, Rahim, 53)

Vikram Seth makes a somewhat similar translation
Last night your faded memory came to me
As in the wilderness spring comes quietly
As, slowly, in the desert moves the breeze
As, to a sick man, without cause, comes peace.

(*Word on Translation*, Rahim, 54)

But here is how Ali's sees it
At night my lost memory of you returned
And I was like the empty field where springtime,
Without being noticed is bringing flowers
I was like the desert over which
the breeze moves gently, with great care;
I was like the dying patient
Who, for no reason, smiles.

(*Last Night*, RS, 3)

As is evident, Ali's methodology is different- elaborate- in the very first line he explains "my lost memory of you" which is the correct Urdu equivalent of 'teri yaad'- its precise implication being that the memory of the beloved was lost in the mind of the lover/poet. The second line is also explained elaborately, 'veeran' is empty field, though to the other two poets it is 'wilderness' which may not necessarily be empty and 'bahaar' is just springtime to Kiernan and Seth but Ali makes it clear to the readers that the springtime is bringing flowers, without being noticed. Ali has certainly taken liberties with Faiz by not confining himself to the use of meters and the explanation/translation shows the authority Ali thought he had over Urdu and over Faiz. Out of the forty-two poems of Faiz, Ali translated some of his famous ghazals-- *Shaam-e-firaq ab na pooch, dono jahan tere sadqe, dil me ab yun tere bhoole huye gham*. Ali's translations are now regarded as one of the standard ones but according to his own verdict, he had not done complete justice to Faiz.

This translation of Faiz's poetry was the first phase of making the grooves of Urdu poetry and English language set in. The process of lending and loaning had started with this volume. Contrary to Ali's own view that in bringing out a work like *Rebel's Silhouette* (1991) he had finally 'forgotten and forgiven the loan of two languages', (RS, xxv) an adept reader of Ali's poetic gamut would realise that it was only the beginning of that process. The next step was the experimenting with the form of ghazal—trying to fit in American sensibility into the oriental structure.

In the year 2000, Ali edits a volume called *Ravishing Disunities*; the disunities are that of the ghazal form—each she'r of the ghazal is independent or disunited but is nonetheless delightful, ravishing.

The human consciousness is like a banyan tree; the various branches grow independently and develop their own roots. The emotions, ideas and experiences of one's lived life are like the various branches of the banyan- each a different chapter, an episode, an identity. They grow into an independent tree and yet are connected to a host tree. The ghazal is just the same. The various she'r of the ghazal are each a unit, an episode, sometimes a whole story in itself and are strung together into the ghazal by the force of the rhyme and refrain.

The volume is a bouquet of '*Real Ghazals in English*' by 107 American poets. Ali lays down the rules of the ghazal clearly and strictly and the poets have adhered to it more or less. John Hollander tries to capture the essence and technicality of the form in the form:

For couplets the ghazal is prime: at the end
Of each one's a refrain like a chime: "at the end"

But in subsequent couplets throughout the whole poem,
It's this second line only which will rhyme at the end.

Two frail arms of your delicate form I pursue,
Inaccessible, vibrant, sublime at the end.

Each new couplet's a different ascent: no great peak,
But a low hill quite easy to climb at the end.

Now Qafia Radif has grown weary, like life,
At the game he's been wasting his time at. THE END.

(*Ghazal on Ghazals*, RD, 76)

The spirit of the Urdu ghazal, however, is not evident in most of the pieces. Urdu to quote Aijaz Ahmed, is “very much a language of abstractions.” The movement in Urdu poetry is *always* away from concreteness. Meaning is not expressed or stated; it is signified”. The language and its poetry are characterised by condensed, reflective lyricism “verbal complexity” and “metaphorical abstraction”. (Ahmed, Introduction, xv) The word ghazal has its etymological origins in the cry of the wounded gazelle; it also means love cooings to the beloved. Thus the dominant mood of the Urdu ghazal is that of desperation, of constant longing of the beloved, the atmosphere is of “sadness and grief” and the occasion for “genuine grief” (RD, 13). The ghazals of Ravishing Disunities are American poems in Urdu-Persian form. The Americans attempting at the form have not adhered to the Urdu original probably because they are not aware of the cultural history and histrionics that the form carries with itself; they have their own stories to tell. Consider this ghazal “Eating the Season” by David Young:

I said I had an urge to greet the spring
And you misheard me, asking “Eat the spring”?

I laughed. “What restaurant features that?”
Special Today! Our Rarest Treat: The Spring.

“You’d probably consume it if you could,”
You charged, “if it would help you defeat the spring.”

“Ah no. Although I always find I wish
Inside myself, I could repeat the spring.

Who wouldn't emulate its raw displays,
Making the red one green, complete: the spring?"

And so we talked, as it went on and on,
Majestic, heady and discreet...The spring.

(RD, 174)

The ghazal reads beautifully, perfect with the form and the technicalities, the first *she'r*; the *matla* sets the rhyme—greet-eat, and the refrain—the spring. However, one cannot dismiss the Eliotisian sardonicism in the very first *she'r* “eat the spring”! To an Orient mind, spring would certainly evoke the emotions of love and romance but this ghazal is a postmodern parody of the idea. For the American poets, the ghazal is the new house where they are to fit in their old furniture:

there was a movie theatre here once
a bar over there where we drank beer once

I remember your cold feet in the bed
how we loved in front of the mirror once

before all this drowning we were so young
didn't you kiss my neck at Kashmir once

there was a time when this nearly slayed you
I saw your eyes hollowed raw by tears once

but that was long ago your *saison d'enfer*
was there a movie theatre here once

(*Drowning Ghazals*, Butson, 29)

The reference to the surrealist prose poem *A Season of Hell* by Arthur Rimbauld gives the above mentioned piece an ironic twist to a love affair which may or may not have happened. This again is very unlike the oriental ghazal where the love affair and the beloved are very grave issues of life and sometimes even a matter of life and death!

Ali has given to the American poetic fraternity an ancient poetic form and the liberty/opportunity to express themselves in that strict-yet-disunited form. The poets were to fit in their ideas, emotions into the house of ghazal. The result is amazing. Many of the ghazals of the volume are brilliant, erotic and beautiful while some are plain poetry which could as well have been written in any other form. One of the most experimental poets who feature in the volume is Paul Muldoon with his 'A Double Ghazal for Seamus Heaney' and 'The Little Black Book' both of which are striking in their adaption to the American voice. Muldoon takes the form of the ghazal as an adept potter and turns it into a beautiful pottery to suit his own needs and aesthetics. Incompliance with the Oriental notion of the ghazal could be noticed again in the Black Book which is not a celebration of his relationships but an affected mention of a philanderer about his string of affairs. It is here that the loan of the two languages, Ali talked of was in active exchange with the fusion of two very divergent cultures. Muldoon completely topsy-turves the notion of the ghazal and makes it compatible with his own need.

The emotion, expression and the language attempted in the ghazals are as varied as its progenitors. There are experiments with the language and expression while some poets have preferred to stick with the Urdu original in both form and content. Several ghazals in the volume are a perfect blend of the theatricality of emotions as expressed in the Urdu ghazal and the experimental or spare postmodern American verse. Craig Arnold, Molly Bendall, Robert Boswell, G. S. Sharat Chandra, Michael Collier, K. N. Daruwalla, Forrest Gander, Sara Suleri, Daniel Hall, Shelli Smith, John R. Reed, Ron Smith, and so many others have been successful in striking the right cord, creating the best of blends. One of them, Rachel Wetzton, deserves to be quoted at least in partial:

I am always in a good mood on the first days of autumn,
unable to do much but brood on the first days of autumn.

Shivering trees lined the streets where I wandered,
married to solitude on the first days of autumn.

All is fullness, ripeness, lushness. How badly I long to spill
the juices in which I've stewed on the first days of autumn!

I will go down the path the fallen leaves make, a carpet
inviting and crimson-hued, on the first days of autumn.

But for every door the wind blows open,
an old fear is renewed on the first days of autumn.

Even in this wild city, where frowns make such good armor,
we're all too thrilled to be rude on the first days of autumn.

(Autumn, 167)

Like the Bhakti poetry in India and the Haiku of Japan, the ghazal too was long in need of re-working—in need of a fresh lease of life and Agha Shahid Ali did just that. The task was easier as well as important to him because; a) he was a practising poet himself b) he was an Asian Muslim who was well-versed in Urdu poetry and its tradition c) he was teaching MFA programmes at various universities in US and d) he felt it was his duty to familiarise the western world with an Oriental beauty.

Multiplicity is the key feature of a ghazal. So is it of American poetry. The history of American literature shows how assimilative, various and divergent its postcolonial tradition has been. The ghazal is just the same. Ali only needed to make the rules of the game known clearly and allow his compatriots to handle it in their own way.

Ali's first attempt was to find the correct expression in English for the poetry of Faiz—a poetry in a language that automatically evokes the notion of love, loss, longing—of ideas and political revolution. Ali was trying to find the pliability of the English language and most critics find him successful.

His next attempt was to fit in the form—find out if the oriental form could be adapted to meet the needs of American poetry. He was again quite successful—the grooves were setting in with some friction some adjustment, sometimes oddly sometimes beautifully.

By the time Ali accomplished this, he was battling brain tumour and knew that end was near. Life was coming to a full circle and the posthumously published *‘Call Me Ishmael Tonight: Book of Ghazals’* (2003) in English-- his last collection is so natural, so obvious to Ali’s poetic oeuvre that one could, while marvelling at its brilliance, only accuse Ali to have held it back for so long! But the volume, one should realise, is a result of years of distillation of learning and yearning, of love, loss, and longing, of involvement with roots and cultures, with languages, with histories, with poetry and with poetic forms.

Ali finally finds his correct expression—the form, the house is oriental, furnished with occidental language and the emotion is that of an in-between, of a diaspora. Ali was finally successful in moulding the language of reason and pragmatism to suit his own character and culture, to express the lushness of an oriental mind. The ghazal provides Ali the necessary and the firm ground on which he could lay the foundations of his diasporic identity.

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.

From exile Mahmoud Darwish writes to the world:

You'll all pass between the fleeting words of Arabic.

At an exhibition of miniatures, such delicate calligraphy:
Kashmiri paisley tied into the golden hair of Arabic!

The Koran prophesied a fire of men and stones.
Well, it's all now come true, as it was said in the Arabic.

When Lorca died, they left the balconies open and saw
his gasidas braided, on the horizon, into knots of Arabic..

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

(*Arabic*, VS, 225)

But the English language is something Ali had to “wage a war with” to make it his own. The process of making the English language ductile began long ago with *Rebel's Silhouette* in 1991. Ali had ripped open the cloistered syntax, lexicons and tropes of English language and like an adept goldsmith hammered the words into new possibilities, nuances and meanings.

No language is old—or young—beyond English.
So what of a common tongue beyond English?

I know some words for war, all of them sharp,
But the sharpest one is *jung*—beyond English.

If you wish to know of a king who loved his slave,
you must learn legends, often sung beyond English.

Go all the way through jungle from aleph to zenith
to see English, like monkeys, swung beyond English.

Could a soul crawl at last unshriveled which
to its “own fusing senses” had clung beyond English?

If someone asks where Shahid has disappeared,

he's waging a war (no, *jung*) beyond English.

(*Beyond English*, VS, 361-2)

Ali's gregarious attitude never made him a misfit anywhere—America was as much a home to him as his birthplace Kashmir, but the love for his homeland, its people and customs, his cultural, linguistic and ancestral roots held a great sway upon him. Ali kept hankering for his homeland although he knew that return was not possible anymore. He groped thus for a mental mollification—a metaphorical territory where he could situate himself. The ghazal form served as a pseudo-homeland to the memory, longing and the nostalgia for the home which constituted a major occupation in Ali's oeuvre.

Memory is no longer confused, it has a homeland—

Says Shammas: Territorialize each confusion in a graceful Arabic.

(Arabic, VS, 225)

But with time, he realises that memory need not find a homeland--for it *is* a homeland. Ali finds a parallel condition in the Israeli-Arab poet Shammas (b. 1950) and accepts his in-between dualistic positioning:

Writes Shammas: Memory, no longer confused, now is a homeland—

his two languages a Hebrew caress in Arabic.

(In Arabic, VS, 372)

Malcolm Woodland explains this difference in Ali's stance with the passage of time;

“they embody two stances toward that thematics: one dominated by nostalgia and the desire for return, and one dominated by an anti-nostalgic acknowledgement of cultural hybridity....this first couplet is not a purely “nativist” artifact: it is written in English; it advocates “return” only in language and memory; and it promises not to eliminate “confusion” but to territorialize it in “a graceful Arabic.” Yet it remains strongly marked by a thematics of nostalgia and return and does not explicitly acknowledge the gaps that divide its

content, form, and language. The second passage is a revision of the first (RD 8-10), and takes up an unmistakably hybrid position. Now, Shammas' search for a homeland leads only to the interstitial territory of two of his languages while being written in the third, thereby affirming a fundamental cultural and linguistic hybridity. In the revision, then, there is a more satisfying (if paradoxical) harmony between the content of the couplet and its dual cultural allegiances (Eastern form, Western language)"

(Woodland, 1-2)

The posthumously published, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals* (2003) is a summation of Ali's entire life. It contains all major as well as the minor preoccupations, his past experiences and thematic ventures. The major themes that run in Ali's poetic oeuvre are loss and longing, nostalgia, roots, languages, culture, religious history, the turmoil in Kashmir, the life in America—these are the concern in CMIT too. The volume both in content and in form is a homecoming.

What a desert we met in—the foliage was lush!—
a cactus was dipped into every moonshine of snow.

One song is so solitaire in our ring of mountains,
its echo climbs to cut itself at each line of snow.

When he drinks in winter, Shahid kisses his enemies.
For peace, then, let bars open at the first sign of snow.

(Of Snow, 351)

The 'echo' in the 'ring of mountains' is that of loss and pain which 'cuts itself' in all his verses. The apparently contrasting images of the first she'r correspond to the contrasting condition of Ali's life. The land may be a desert but the foliage is lush—just like Ali's own life; he may be far away from his homeland but the poetry that he creates is 'lush', beautiful and brimming with his love for the lost land. Elsewhere he writes;

Migrating from me to me the soul asks
a bit seriously: what is our covenant, Bones?

(Bones, 357)

The expression comes to him after years of working, re-working, chiselling, shaving and sifting. The volume is replete in abundance with startling surprises of sheer beauty and one realises that it is with this volume that Ali has finally forgiven and forgotten the loan of the two languages—Urdu and English—that he felt an equal loyalty to. The two worlds where Ali kept moving physically and mentally, the two worlds where he resided simultaneously, the two worlds that were far apart fuse into one new territory in Ali and in Ali's poetry.

The hunt is over, and I hear the Call to Prayer
Fade into that of the wounded gazelle tonight.

(*Tonight*, VS, 374-5)

The search is for the identity, the quest for the right voice, the true sense of self. The call to prayer is the call for submission to a higher authority—in Muslim culture submission to the Almighty Allah. The wounded gazelle is the ghazal of wounded emotions (the etymology has been traced earlier)—of longing and loss. So Ali's search for his identity which had long been schist and fractured, finds a voice in the ghazal- his long battle for the correct voice and expression finds a humble submission in the oriental ghazal; which is like a homecoming, the return to the roots just like the call to prayer demands men to return to the Almighty.

The poems become all the more poignant, the form all the more necessary as Ali was confronting his own mortality during the compilation of this volume. After travelling through continents, living and knowing their histories, imbibing their cultures and venturing into several strict forms (like canzone, sestina, and villanelle), Ali chooses to shape his final words in the ghazal form-a form he had now completely understood and absorbed and a language he had moulded to his own mood.

With a long, consistent and honest attempt, Ali was able to infuse a new idiom to the English poetry, gift a new genre to the English poetic culture. The ghazal with its immensities and its strictness became, for Ali, a site of reconciliation, a location of rehabilitation; it is the land where he could rest his dual loyalties and could “territorialize each confusion”; where after long struggle and battle, he finally reconciles and finds his faith in God and his ways.

Now “god to aggrandise, God to glorify” in
the candle that “clear burns”—glare I can’t come by in.

By the enemy, after battle, I place flowers
and the swords he’d heard the angels lullaby in.

When even God is dead, what is left but prayer?
and this wilderness, the mirrors I multiply in?

Doomsday is over, Eden stretched vast over me—
I see the rooms, all the rooms, I am to die.

Ere he never returns, he whose footsteps are dying,
Shahid, run out weeping, bring that passer-by in.

(In, 359-60)

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