Ghazal: Poetic Conversations across Continents

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

—John Hollander

Maaz Bin Bilal

Author, translator, and scholar Maaz Bin Bilal explores the ghazal, a poetic form that transcends linguistic boundaries. »The ghazal,« he writes, »is a unique genre of poetry in the world in that it is perhaps the only form where there is no requirement for a linear narrative.« From its Arabic roots to Persian refinement to its Urdu resonance – Bilal's own ghazal practice is in English – he emphasizes the ghazal's unique structure and thematic richness and captivating sonic and rhythmic dimensions. As he intertwines his personal experiences with the ghazal tradition, Bilal shares a narrative that echoes the millennium-old poetic and sonic culture.

I begin this essay with my ghazal, »The Ghazal in your Hands«:

The Ghazal in your Hands

The ghazal is conversation, like fragrant mehndi in your hands
The beauty of a gazelle, a subtle coquetry in your hands

In each couplet, a new thought would unravel in a paradox
Your heart lies in the lines of the crescent symmetry in your hands

What more may be said in couplets—*shers*—with rhythm, rhymes, and refrains?
Your histories and cultures are here—it's no folly in your hands

Many idols are loved, and the beauty of women and wine's taste
are praised; praised be God who also lives in the paisley in your hands

Just two moments you know—your birth and death—and then to tackle life
what weapon may be better than the twin prosody in your hands?

›In chaos, order free verse, not a tight form,‹ others always say
but you capture life here, poetry's philosophy in your hands

Rumi, Hafez, Saadi Shirazi—Persians wrote odes to the *jaam*—
wine *goblets* of ecstasy—that's the trajectory in your hands

Mir, Ghalib wrote of the friend-lover—the yaar—but it was just Faiz
who befriended his rival *raqeeb*, the enemy in your hands

A form was thus perfected, will you better Shahid today, Maaz?
Let poetry come and become clay, like soft putty in your hands

The word ghazal comes from Arabic, where one of its meanings is amatory conversations with women or the beloved. It is etymologically related to the English word »gazelle,« which also has roots in Arabic. The original Arabic word *ghazaal* for gazelle also refers to the animal's plaintive call or painful cry. The gazelle is famous in Perso-Arabic tradition for its beautiful eyes.

In my English ghazal above, I take inspiration from these word meanings to write a ghazal about the ghazal, which is a form of poetry dating back to sixth-century Arabia. The ghazal's lyric form is a unique genre of poetry in the world in that it is perhaps the only one for which there is no requirement for a linear narrative. It is written in couplets, and each couplet may present a different idea or can work as a stand-alone poem. Moods, and its tight and demanding form, may tie a ghazal together.

As my ghazal above illustrates, the now widely accepted form of the ghazal demands that the whole poem be written in couplets, *beit* or *sher*, in a fixed rhythm or meter. In the first couplet, both lines end with a refrain, *radeef*, which is preceded by a rhyme, *qaafiya*. Subsequently, every second line of each couplet follows this rhyme and refrain scheme. The final couplet, the *maqta*, carries the poet's nom de plume, their pen name or *takhallus*. This is often treated with irony and becomes a conversation with an alter ego, a humble or boastful reflection upon the self. A ghazal may have from five to fifteen *beits*/*shers*/ distichs/couplets.

The ghazal arose from the lively, playful, and short Arabic poems, *nasib*, which preceded odes known as *qasida*. It then went on to attain fruition in Persian with Rumi (1207–1273), Saadi Shirazi (1210–1291/92), and Hafez (1325–1390) perfecting the form.

Hafez's divan or collection of ghazals became a common means of fortune telling in the Persianate world stretching from the Balkans to Bengal. Many of the subsequently defining characteristics of the ghazal became fixed in Persian. These include the furthering of a wide variety of quantitative meters or rhythm patterns, the *qafiya-radeef* pairing, and the *maqta* with the *takhallus*.

Hafez's Persian ghazals even inspired the great German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) to write his 1819 collection of lyrical poems, *West–östlicher Divan*.

From Arabic, the ghazal also traveled into Turkish and found great acceptance, and further into Iberian Arabic and Hebrew, and began a poetic tradition that was then heralded in Spanish during the twentieth century by Federico García Lorca (1898–1936) who wrote *gacelas* in his *Diván del Tamarit* (1931–36). The ghazal also developed into African languages, such as Fulfulde and Hausa, from its Arabic origins. However, it was via Persian that the ghazal made its way into Urdu and other »South Asian« languages.

As an Indian growing up in Delhi, I first encountered the ghazal in Urdu, intoned in my mother tongue. I heard ghazals through sung renditions played on the record player by my father. Begum Akhtar (1914–1974), Mehdi Hassan (1927–2012), Ghulam Ali (1940–), or Jagjit Singh (1941–2011) were some of the Urdu vocalists singing ghazals penned by the most famous Urdu poets, or *shaayars*, such as Mir Taqi Mir (1723–1810), Mirza Ghalib (1797–1869), Allama Iqbal (1877–1938), and Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911–1984). I also grew up in the same locality of the Shahjehanabad area – the old city of Delhi – where Ghalib, the greatest nineteenth-century poet of the Urdu ghazal, had lived and died. During his lifetime, Ghalib had seen power shift from the Mughal elite, of which he was a part, to the British colonial rule.

In postcolonial India, I grew up with English as the language of professional aspiration. I never formally studied Urdu, my mother tongue. So, even as I grew up with a fascination for reading and writing, it remained largely confined to English. Translation of Urdu poetry into English became one way for me to remedy a sense of lack, my schizophrenic linguistic identity.

An imagined portrait of Hafez by Abolhassan Sadighi.
Source: Wikimedia commons
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *West–östlicher Divan*,
Frontispiece and title page of the first edition, Cotta publishing house, Stuttgart, 1819.
Source: Wikimedia commons

Here is my translation of Ghalib's ghazal from Urdu into English, to give you a sense of Ghalib and my translation praxis of the ghazal:

It Wasn't Our Destiny
(ye na thī hamārī qismat ...)

It wasn't our destiny to be with our lover,
Had we lived anymore, the wait would've been longer!

I live by your promise, knowing it to be false,
Wouldn't I've died of joy, if I were a believer?

Through your caprice we learnt that the pledge was weak,
With such ease would it break if it were any stronger?

They should ask my heart, how your half-drawn arrows,
Could pierce it through, and where'd they get their power?

What friendship is this that friends become counselors?
There should've been a healer, a sympathizer!

Blood would pour unstoppably from the veins of marble,
What you believe to be grief may be scorching fire!

If this torment's heart-breaking, where'd we go hiding?
If it weren't the pain of love, it'd be of our career.

To whom do I complain, of this sad night's refrain?
Death wouldn't be too bad, if only once it were.

This dishonour on death, why didn't we drown instead?
There would've been no tomb, there would've been no bier.

Who can see Him? He is One, the Monad.
Were there any duality, our four eyes would pair.

These matters of mystic thought, these renderings of yours,
Ghalib, we'd call you a saint, were you not a drinker.

Similarly, when I began writing poetry in English, I found it rang hollow for me, as the music of poetry I had grown up listening to was that of the Urdu ghazal. Writing in Western poetic forms or even free verse felt alien, albeit unavoidable, such was its double bind.

It is when I was grappling with this schism that I encountered the Kashmiri-American poet Agha Shahid Ali's English ghazals. Other prominent American poets such as Adrienne Rich (1929–2012) had already been introduced to the ghazal form through prosaic translations by the Marxist critic Aijaz Ahmad (1941–2022). Ahmad had arranged for American poets to render the ghazals into English poems. Adrienne Rich composed her own versions of powerful ghazals, two short collections called *Homage to Ghalib* and *The Blue Ghazals*. Written in couplets and thematically autonomous like the ghazal, however, they lacked the ghazal's classical prosody and sonics.

Mirza Ghalib, 1868.
Source: Wikimedia Commons

Here is an example that illustrates the strength of Rich's lyrical ghazal verse, with its aphoristic quality and strong sense of self:

Ghazal V
Adapted from Mirza Ghalib.

Even when I thought I prayed, I was talking to myself;
when I found the door shut, I simply walked away.

We all accept Your claim to be unique; the stone lips,
the carved limbs, were never your true portrait.

Grief held back from the lips wears at the heart; the
drop that refused to join the river dried up in the dust.

While Rich retained the thematic disunity of the ghazal or the stand-alone quality of each verse, she gave up all rhythm and rhyme, thus, relinquishing the incantatory repetitive rhyme and refrain of the classical ghazal.

And so it was Agha Shahid Ali (1949–2001) who brought the classical ghazal form to fruition in English. With exposure to ghazal poetry sung in Urdu by Begum Akhtar, Shahid developed his own form in English. In the beginning he worked with only end-line refrains, but honed it over time to include rhyme as well preceding the end-line refrains, as in the original Persianate ghazal.

Here are two similar yet different ghazals with the refrain »Arabic« becoming »In Arabic« in the second ghazal, exemplifying how he developed the form over time.

In Arabic

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.

Memory is no longer confused, it has a homeland-
Says Shammas: Territorialize each confusion in a graceful Arabic.

Where there were homes in Deir Yassin, you'll see dense forests—
That village was razed. There's no sign of Arabic.

I too, O Amichai, saw the dresses of beautiful women.
And everything else, just like you, in Death, Hebrew, and Arabic.

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

In the second ghazal developed from the same material given below, the end-line *radeef*/refrain »in Arabic« is preceded by the »ess/es« *qaafiya*/rhyme.

In Arabic
(with revisions of some couplets of »Arabic«)

A language of loss? I have some business in Arabic.
Love letters: calligraphy pitiless in Arabic.

At an exhibit of miniatures, what Kashmiri hairs!
Each paisley inked into a golden tress in Arabic.

This much fuss about a language I don't know? So one day
perfume from a dress may let you digress in Arabic.

A »Guide for the Perplexed« was written—believe me—
by Cordoba's Jew—Maimonides—in Arabic.

Majnoon, by stopped caravans, rips his collars, cries »Laila!«
Pain translated is O! much more—not less—in Arabic.

Writes Shammas: Memory, no longer confused, now is a homeland—
his two languages a Hebrew caress in Arabic.

When Lorca died, they left the balconies open and saw:
On the sea his qasidas, stitched seamless in Arabic.

In the Veiled One's harem, an adultress hanged by eunuchs—
So the rank mirrors revealed to Borges in Arabic.

Ah, bisexual Heaven: wide-eyed houris and immortal youths!
To your each desire they say Yes! O Yes!, in Arabic.

For that excess of sibilance, the last Apocalypse,
so pressing those three forms of S in Arabic.

I too, O Amichai, saw the dresses of beautiful women.
And everything else, just like you, in Death, Hebrew, and Arabic.

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

In Eastern languages such as Arabic, Persian, and Urdu, verbs come the end of syntax. This allows for even wider possibilities for stand-alone couplets to have a thematic disunity from one another, which is somewhat limited in English, since an object or noun is placed at the end of the line in the syntax. Still, it should be evident that each verse of Shahid also expresses a new and often disparate thought, albeit about Arabic. Shahid also commissioned many other well-known American poets to write ghazals such as W. S. Merwin, Paul Muldoon, and John Hollander, and later published the anthology *Ravishing Disunities* (2000).

Reading Shahid's ghazal verse was revelatory for me. It allowed me a thematic vocabulary and a rhythm and syntax that came from my millennium-old poetic and sonic culture, yet exploited English which was the language of my professional life. Gilles Deleuze wrote in *Negotiations, 1972–1990*, »Creation takes place in choked passages. Even in some particular language, even in French for example, a new syntax is a foreign language within the language. A creator who isn't grabbed around the throat by a set of impossibilities is no creator. A creator's someone who creates their own impossibilities and thereby creates possibilities.«[1] Through the ghazal in English I could write poetry in the language I was most at ease writing, yet create newness in it and own it in a way I did not own Western forms. I began writing ghazals of my own and eventually published the collection *Ghazalnama: Poems from Delhi, Belfast, and Urdu* (2019) which received positive critical attention in India, and was shortlisted for the Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar in 2020. It garnered favorable reviews and was taught on genres of poetry, creative writing, and South Asian literature syllabi across continents.

Here is one of my first ghazals from the collection:

Many a memory at stake this night
Do you think of me too, awake, this night?

Shahid stares at me from the book cover
As I tempt a ghazal to fake this night

The moon in the sky and I in my bed
I wish I too could turn a rake this night

This monsoon, with my tears, the driest ever
Would your tears for me form a lake this night?

So much water has flown under the bridge
Why do you not give me a break this night?

Gave even the echoes of my best poems
Would I not get one word, to take this night?

One law shouldn't apply to men and lovers
Will there be born another Blake this night?

Lord made Meraj long to fly seven skies
It appears the same God did make this night

›Ripeness is all‹ and all time passes
So too is dawn about to break this night

Ghalib-o-Faiz couldn't drown grief in ghazals
Then what spires, Maaz, will you Shake this night?

Others, such as the much-lauded, yet lately controversial American poet Robert Bly (1926–2021), innovated the ghazal form too and is credited for inventing the form of the tercet ghazal:

Growing Wings

It's all right if Cezanne goes on painting the same picture.
It's all right if juice tastes bitter in our mouths.
It's all right if the old man drags one useless foot.

The apple on the Tree of Paradise hangs there for months.
We wait for years and years on the lip of the falls;
The blue-gray mountain keeps rising behind the black trees.

It's all right if I feel this same pain until I die.
A pain that we have earned gives more nourishment
Than the joy we won at the lottery last night.

It's all right if the partridge's nest fills with snow.
Why should the hunter complain if his bag is empty
At dusk? It only means the bird will live another night.

It's all right if we turn in all our keys tonight.
It's all right if we give up our longing for the spiral.
It's all right if the boat I love never reaches shore.

If we're already so close to death, why should we complain?
Robert, you've climbed so many trees to reach the nests.
It's all right if you grow your wings on the way down.

(from *My Sentence was a Thousand Years of Joy*)

Like Rich, Bly gave up on the classical ghazal form and syntax while retaining the idea of stand-alone nonlinear verses. But he created a more malleable form of his own, where each verse is written in tercets, and the refrain occurs at the beginning of the line rather than the end. Purists do not think this to be a proper ghazal, yet it, too, introduces a new sound to English.

It is no wonder that Goethe wrote a divan (ghazal) and gave us the concept of *Welt-literatur*, or World Literature. The ghazal has indeed traversed languages and brought its form of rhymes and refrains to readers and listeners across the continents. In Urdu, the ghazal is recited at *Mushairas*, a gathering of poets and listeners stretching to tens of thousands in attendance. Stretching well into the night, where each *sher* is recited in a participatory mode with the audience who responds by giving loud praise through words, shouting for an encore, and warranting against conclusion. I have recently tried to revive this tradition in reciting my ghazals aloud to English speaking audiences too, where I would repeat certain couplets for emphasis and stress. As in Urdu, English audiences similarly have sometimes responded by reciting the refrain along with me, and sometimes preempting the rhyme word.

During my 2022–23 fellowship at Schloss Solitude, I wrote more than fifteen ghazals. I share one about solitude here, to end this essay:

Desire tended in solitude
So I ended in solitude

The sun shines equally on all
But light bended in solitude

Loneliness—the mark of the West
Apprehended in solitude

The winter forest lies barren
Leaves descended in solitude

I call as I drown, but who hears?
My cry blended in solitude

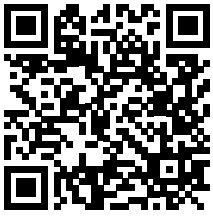
I'm social in virtual life
My truth trended in solitude

Birdsong to keep me going now
Cries appended in solitude

And lines to remember Maaz by
Words befriended in solitude

Maaz Bin Bilal is an Anglophone poet, translator, and academic from India. He uses the pen name »Maaz« for his ghazals and is the author of *Ghazalnama: Poems from Delhi, Belfast, and Urdu*. Maaz holds a PhD from Queen's University Belfast, UK, and was a fellow at Akademie Schloss Solitude in 2022–23.

Listen to the ghazals of Maaz Bin Bilal, read by the author himself on Lyrikline.org:



1 Gilles Deleuze: *Negotiations, 1972–1990,* trans. Martin Joughin. New York 1997, p. 133.