

Exploring English Ghazals: A Brief Study of Jeet Thayil's Ghazals

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Abstract:

The paper examines the ghazals of Jeet Thayil, who is an award-winning Indian English poet. The paper argues that although Jeet Thayil has written a handful of ghazals in English, unlike many Indian English poets, he has craftfully explored and mastered the most stringent form of the poem. It attempts to critically analyze his four ghazals such as 'Malayalam's Ghazal,' 'Blue Ghazal,' 'Ghazal,' and 'For Agha Shahid Ali.' Thayil's ghazals are peculiar in their choices of themes and their conformity with the form. The elements of a ghazal such as 'matla, qafia, radif, maqtaa, etc., can be seen in his ghazals. Arguably his ghazals describe a vivid picture of his surroundings and thematically never hesitate to problematise issues of human kinds. His couplets are like radiant stones that can be easily plucked and read in isolation, yet they retain meaning. His ghazals invoke feelings of love, heartbreak, longing, wit, etc. The paper also highlights the contribution of Agha Shahid Ali and other poets to the English ghazal. The ghazal deals with love, longing, separation, friendship, and spirituality. Thematically, the ghazal also deals with issues like war, partition, poverty, socio-culture, politics, and psychology.

Keywords: Ghazal, Poem, Rhyme, Refrain, Jeet Thayil, and Agha Shahid Ali.

Introduction:

The Arabic word 'ghazal' primarily means 'sweet talk' or 'pleasing talk.' In its modern sense, the word signifies 'a poetic genre' which is a stringent poetic form. It is quite popular in many languages, especially in the Indian subcontinent. The origin of the ghazal, Agha Shahid Ali (2003) argues, can be "*traced back to seventh-century Arabia*" (72). However, its descendants are also found in other languages such as Persian, Hindi, Pashto, Turkish and Urdu. The ghazal has evolved and developed over time; in its present form, the ghazal flourished in the Indian subcontinent and has widely been explored chiefly in Urdu and Hindi.

It is widely believed that the ghazal is a love poem. However, it can substantially be argued that it is more than a mere love poem. Over the centuries, the ghazal poets explored various themes and topics ranging from love to spirituality, from social to cultural, from war to hope, and so forth. A Hindi poet like Adam Gondavi¹ (1947-2011) took the ghazal to the hut and hamlet of tribals and *Dalits* and voiced their concerns and plights through his revolutionary ghazals.

As said, the ghazal is very popular in Urdu, Hindi, Marathi, Malayalam and other regional languages. Many South Asian poets have written ghazals in Urdu and Hindi such as Ghalib, Ahmad Faraz, Muneer Niyaji, Sahir Ludhianvi, Kaifi Azami, Bashir Badr, Nida Fazli, Faiz Ahmad Faiz, Dushyant Kumar, Adam

Gondvi and so on. Many ghazals have been featured in the Hindi cinemas.² For instance, the critically acclaimed film *Pyasa*³ (1957) directed by Guru Dutt featured a ghazal of lyricist and poet Sahir Ludhianvi. There have been many programs where ghazals and other forms of poetry have been recited across the subcontinent. Among others, the Rekhta Foundation stands out for its service to ghazals and Urdu literature in general. The site claims to have an online repository of “30,000 ghazals.”⁴

Agha Shahid Ali on Disunities:

In *Modern Indian Poetry in English*, Bruce King (2013) asserts, “*The re-categorizations of Agha Shahid Ali’s poetry reflect many changes in recent literary history (273).*” As quoted, Ali’s poetry maps and transcends beyond the physical boundaries of the nations. His ‘*The Country Without a Post Office (1997)*’ is appealing and has universal human values. Of ‘in Arabic,’ (a couple of versions of this ghazal are in print) he confessed that he had completely dispensed with what is called ‘qafia’—a rhyming scheme. Nevertheless, it was later revised but his much-talked-about ghazal. ‘*Call Me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals*’ (posthumous 2003) is a collection of ghazals—arguably his best ghazals.

In English, however, reasonably very few established poets have attempted and have written some proper ghazals. The reasons could be varied for a small amount of work, but Indian English Poets and other Western poets have been attempting to write some real ghazals in English. In *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English*⁵—edited by Agha Shahid Ali (2000), nearly 107 (mostly American and some Indian) poets have attempted the strictest form and written some outstanding ghazals. Other than these, a couple of Urdu ghazals of Faiz Ahmad Faiz and Ghalib were translated into English and included in this well-received book.

The well-thought words Agha Shahid Ali chose for the title of the book are quite remarkable and comprehensively postulate the stringent form of ghazals. It can be adduced that the adjective ‘ravishing’ attests to the disunities of the couplets of the ghazals. The disunities seem ‘attractive’ to him. Overall, the disunities seem to have troubled Western poets and readers, as they naturally tend to look for unity in couplets. Furthermore, he had interestingly emphasized the word ‘real.’ The ghazal as a poetic form has often been discussed and debated by poets time and again for its purity and variants. Ali reasonably aimed at prescribing the rules and educating how to faithfully compose the real ghazals in English. His introduction to ‘*Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English*’ provides us with a crisp history of the ghazal. He meticulously discussed how to write real ghazals in English. However, the book looks like an experiment. The couplets of a ghazal do not necessarily have any thematic unities. That is why Agha Sahid Ali refers to the word ‘disunities’ in the title ‘*Ravishing Disunities.*’ He particularly talks about thematic disunities.

Ghazal: A Poetic Form

The ghazal is a poem of five or more autonomous couplets. The form is originally known for its rigid rules. There are several rules the ghazal poets have to follow while dealing with the form. These rules are strict and difficult, nevertheless, the poets enjoy thematic liberty and autonomy. John Hollander, a Sterling Professor at Yale, beautifully explains the ghazal and its typical rules in his ‘*Ghazal on Ghazals.*’ The theme, word choice and unique treatment of this ghazal, partly quoted below, forced a poet like Agha Shahid Ali to discuss it in his crisp introduction to *Ravishing Disunities*. One must note that John Hollander brilliantly points out and educates us about the poetic rules of the ghazals. He writes, 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 will rhyme at the end.
(Ali 2000, 76)

In as much as a prescriptive manner, Agha Shahid Ali argues,
"The ghazal is made up of couplets, each autonomous, thematically and emotionally complete in itself: One couplet may be comic, another tragic, another romantic, another religious, another political." (Ali 2000, 3)

Unlike other poetic couplets, the ghazal couplets are like standalone buildings. In Urdu, these couplets are famously called 'sher.' These couplets are independent in meaning and stand up for varied thoughts and feelings. These thoughts could arguably be either comic or tragic. The first couplet might be tragic whereas the second couplet could be comic. Such couplets allow the ghazal poet to exercise a kind of autonomy while handling any theme. Thus, it can be argued that this allows the poet to freely explore various feelings in one ghazal. These couplets, precisely speaking, possess no context as such, and hence, they liberate the poetic talent.

The ghazal couplets are indisputably quite popular in Hindi and Urdu literary traditions. People often *"pluck a couplet like a stone from a radial necklace"* (Ali 2000, 3) from a ghazal in a public gathering or parliamentary debate. Agha Shahid Ali preferably labels it as a radial stone. In a sense, it justifies a ghazal as a necklace shines with isolated stones. Hyperbolically it can be said and virtually contended that often people remember the couplets rather than the entire ghazal. These vivid stones illuminate alone as well as with other stones.

In ghazals, there are no enjambments or run-on lines. A couplet never runs on to the next couplet. The couplets are complete and concise. The couplet provides us with complete sentences and meaning. Let's look at the couplet from Jeet Thayil's 'Malayalam Ghazal' which gives a reason for the completeness and conciseness of the couplet. This ghazal has appeared in the award-winning collection called 'These Errors are Correct' (2008). The graphic arrangement of a ghazal is quite important, and hence, it is quoted as,
I greet you my ancestors, O scholars and linguists.

My father who recites Baudelaire in Malayalam.

(Collected Poems 2015, 91)

Other than these rules, a ghazal poet has to swear in with some fundamental rules of the ghazal. These rules are quite strict and expected to be followed carefully to come up with a real ghazal that Agha Shahid Ali claims. He advocates for the classically stringent rules by posting—

"The opening couplet (called matla) sets up a scheme (of rhyme called qafia and refrain-called radif by having it occur in both lines-the rhyme IMMEDIATELY preceding the refrain-and then this scheme occurs only in the second line of each succeeding couplet."

(Ali 2000, 3)

It can theoretically be opined that these crisp instructions are enough to have a crystal understanding of the ghazal and its so-called inflexible rules. However, this can be illustrated to clarify the rules with the examples. As has been discussed the opening couplet is called 'matla' which insists on setting up the scheme and tone of the poem. It is undoubtedly the 'matla' of a ghazal that states its 'qafia' and 'radif.' Both lines of 'matla' contain the 'qafia' and 'radif.' The 'Radif' is a refrain word or phrase whereas the 'Qafia' is a rhyming word or syllable. It must without a mistake be remembered that both the matla and the second lines of all subsequent couplets must end with the same refrain or radif, for example, 'tonight'

from Blue Ghazal.

The last couplet of the ghazal is, quite significant, called Maqtaa which certifies and authenticates the poets. Generally, most poets invoke their names in the first or second line of the last couplet of the ghazal. This couplet is also called a signature couplet as it bears the pen name of the poet. It rarely happens in other forms of poetry. The Marathi 'Abhangas' and Hindi 'Dohas' also notably bear the name of the poet.⁶ The maqtaa owns the ghazal. It is like a signed letter. Certainly, it requires creativity to incorporate a name in a couplet. It should not create a gap or loss in the meaning of the couplet. It curtains the ghazal as well as makes it personal. Although a maqtaa demonstrates subjectivity, it allows the poetic voice to be heard profoundly and subtly.

English Ghazals: An Exploration

Writers like Philip Nikolayeu learnt Urdu to 'read Ghalib's ghazals in the original' (Thayil 2006). In an interview with Jeet Thayil, he said it was an enriching experience (Thayil 2006). Philip Nikolayeu explored and translated Ghalib's ghazals into English. Likewise, many Western scholars like Jim Harrison⁷ have explored the ghazals in English.

Although hardly conformed with the prescribed rulebook, Keki N. Daruwala's '*Partition Ghazals*'—included in *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English*—have simply dispensed with a much required 'qafia' here and there. His ghazals also lack the 'maqtaa.' Nonetheless, it infrequently manages to retain a refrain. However, it can strongly be justified that the '*Partition Ghazals*' stand strong thematically. The first ghazal deals with the 'past' which profoundly states the inability to forget and do away with the trauma of partition. As has been referred to earlier the opening couplet of a ghazal goes on setting the tone and scheme of the poem, but after a couple of couplets, it has been observed that the poet makes changes, it seems, to meet the thematic necessity of the poem.

This may pass muster and yet may not pass:

This past we are talking of is not the past.

This should pass muster and yet may not pass.

All tenses are tricky, especially the past.

(Ali 2000, 48)

However, based in New York, Bhagwan Kapoor's 'Ghazal' remained truthful to the form. Other Indian-origin poets include Rafiq Kathwari who translated poems of Sir Iqbal and also writes about Kashmir, Sagaree Sengupta who translates and teaches Hindi and Urdu in Madison, G. S Sharad Chandra who taught English literature in America for three decades, and Padmini Mongia teaches English literature at Franklin and Marshall College. Many of them, as per the subtitle is concerned, had caused their ghazals to faithfully adhere to the form of the ghazal.

Jeet Thayil: A Poet

Born in Kerala in 1959, Jeet Thayil is considered a significant Indian English poet. His poetry collections include *Gemini* (1992), *Apocalypso* (1997), *English* (2003), *These Errors Are Correct* (2008), and *Collected Poems* (2015). For '*These Errors Are Correct*,' he won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2013. Jeet Thayil later shifted to fiction writing and for his first novel '*Narcopolis*' (2012) he was also shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize 2012 and The Hindu Literary Prize 2013.

His four ghazals, undertaken to a discussion here, are 'Malayalam's Ghazal,' 'Blue Ghazal,' 'Ghazal,' and 'For Agha Shahid Ali' from the collection '*These Errors are Correct*' which is dedicated to his late wife,

Shakti Bhatt. Many poems in the collection deal with love, longing and reminiscence. It can straightforwardly be argued that for the composition of ghazals, Jeet Thayil indirectly relied on instructions from his guide Agha Shahid Ali's work and ghazals. Some of the rhymes (qafia) of Blue Ghazal have, as it seems, been influenced by and directly borrowed from some of the ghazals anthologized in Ravishing Disunities. Jeet Thayil considers Shahid as his guide and dedicates a ghazal (*For Agha Shahid Ali*) to him. It goes as

Jeet, meet Shahid, your guide to the future.
He'll teach you to play a baby grand of water.
(Collected Poems 2015, 156)

Ghazals of Jeet Thayil:

Jeet Thayil is well-known for his experiments with various forms of poems such as sestina, pastiche, unconventional sonnets, poems with a borrowed line, ghazals and so forth. Of real ghazals in English, of course, he is not the first Indian poet who has attempted to write ghazals in English. However, his ghazals arguably can prove the test of form, craft, and theme.

Jeet Thayil's ghazals are peculiar in their choices of themes and their conformity with the form. He demonstrates the assimilation of the ghazal form in Indian English Poetry. Quite significantly, Thayil opens his first couplet (matla) of 'Blue Ghazal' as

Give up your pen—you won't make a rhyme tonight.
The moon's cursed. Words are un-sublime tonight.
(Collected Poems 2015, 73).

The opening couplet of Blue Ghazal sets the tone of the poem. As required for the form, it also sets the rhyming pattern and the refrain (qafia and radif) of the ghazal. The rhyming pattern (qafia) is (in italics) 'rhyme-unsublime,' a repeating sound. Sometimes it can be a word phrase or even a syllable. The radif is a refrain which only gets repeated in the second line of subsequent couplets. The repetition makes it more emphatic, accessible and recitable. It perfectly 'delivers on that suspense by amplifying, dramatizing, imploding, exploding' (Ali; 2003). It gives the reader a moment of rest while reading a couplet. Here the word 'tonight,' is a refrain that amplifies the effect and dramatizes the ghazal. Jeet Thayil successfully creates the second lines of all subsequent couplets ending with a well-rhyming qafia and amplifying radif. He further adds the cause of the un-sublimity of words. "*The moon's cursed. Words are un-sublime tonight.*" This line sounds strong and can create a magical impact on a reader. It paints the situation as un-sublime. Arguably words are like weapons for Jeet Thayil. However, he says, '*Words are un-sublime tonight.*' Hence, he reasonably submits his pen. The opening is so subtle as if the cracking of an egg. Human civilisation, it can be seen, has always been preoccupied with the moon and its eclipse. The moon is believed to be the source of poetic imagination. The relationship between the moon and the sun has always fascinated human minds. The curse, a sense of fear, has often seized and restricted minds from doing things. Let's look at some more compact couplets from "Blue Ghazal."

Nobody's to blame, the note said nothing more.
I'm nobody; my love's not worth a *dime* tonight.
All's changed and the same across the black water.
Your mosambi is orange is sweet *lime* tonight.
(Collected Poems 2015, 73)

The words 'dime and lime' are qafia which succinctly provide a ghazal with a musical tone. The qafia

paces up the ghazal and a reader can feel the pace and musicality. Additionally, both couplets have the same metric length. It can be observed that Jeet Thayil has metrically and craftily managed to compose Blue Ghazal while adhering to strict rules.

The note refers to “*nobody’s to blame.*” It can thematically be contended that the absence of a person creates a state of nothingness, and hence, the poet says, “*I’m nobody.*” It reminds us of ‘being and nothingness.’⁸ The poet expresses his grief “*My love’s not worth a dime tonight.*” Words like ‘nobody, nothing, and dime’ delve deeper into the narrowness of negativity. The couplets demonstrate the heartbroken poet who speaks about the meaninglessness of life, and the fruitless activities of human beings. After the death of his wife, a sense of loneliness seems to have gripped the poet.

In the same ghazal, the poet concedes his partner in crime whom he labels a killer who smiles and offers “*Billie and a glass of wine.*” In the next couplet, he superbly problematizes poverty by making poetry and poverty a topic of discussion. Jeet Thayil puts it creatively.

Self-loathing, thy proper name is poverty-
and poetry that wins no Guggenheim tonight.

A mystery to me: why are my friends so broke?
Call Mephisto, I’m ready for the big time tonight.

(Collected Poems 2015, 73)

The poet does not know why and how his friends are so broke and hence sets a social, cultural, political and economic inquiry with a valid question. The question mark has proved vital in ghazals. Moreover, he steps in for an action. He desires to call Mephisto, a biblical character who on behalf of Satan lures and makes deals with a man, who in turn sells his soul.

In a ghazal entitled ‘Malayalam’s Ghazal,’ the poet seeks the careful attention of the readers. The speaker commands us to listen to a prayer someone has been singing. The opening couplet (matla) of this ghazal commands and drags the reader to listen carefully to the voices populated in the prayer. It also sets the rhyming pattern and refrain of the poem. This is how Thayil opens his Malayalam Ghazal,

Listen! Someone’s saying a prayer in Malayalam.

He says there’s no word for ‘despair’ in Malayalam.

(Collected Poems 2015, 91).

In the prayer, the poet says there is no word for despair in Malayalam. Roughly speaking with the help of a radif, the poet stresses his first language which is Malayalam. The refrain (here Malayalam) amplifies and explores the importance of his mother tongue. It can be stated that Malayalam sounds happier and more positive to him. The language is mainly spoken by people who live in Kerala. Furthermore, the poetic speaker describes the beauty of the language, state and people who speak it and live in and outside it. It particularly describes the cultural ethos of the state in the rest of the ghazal.

In another ghazal, Jeet Thayil voices tactfully separation and longing. He expresses a desire of a lover who longs and remembers the days of his love. But the beloved would take all that the lover cherishes and wants to remember, and time would seem shorter. Love, of course, is one of the recurring themes in all of his writings. The opening couplet tacitly marks the scheme and theme of the poem. This is how Thayil begins,

When you leave you’ll take what I remember of love.

Summer will feel like the December of love.

(Collected Poems 2015, 26).

It can be observed that Jeet Thayil has created some remarkable maqtaas at the end to sign his ghazals. He

accurately uses his first name, Jeet, without making a gap or loss of meaning in the couplet. The ending couplet leaves the readers with an explosion of feelings and a sense of loss and longing for a loved one. Let's take a look at the last couplet where Thayil wrote about loss and longing in 'Blue Ghazal':

Jeet, why are you hungry when your bowl is full?

Are you sharing Shakti's paradigm tonight?

(Collected Poems 2015, 73)

Conclusion:

It has been observed that Jeet Thayil has not only explored the ghazal form but also mastered this inflexible form and has creatively and craftily written some (in Agha Shahid Ali's words) real ghazals in English. His ghazals faithfully adhere to the norms and rules of the ghazal. The elements of a ghazal such as 'matla, qafia, radif, maqtaa, etc., can be seen in his selected ghazals. Arguably his ghazals describe a vivid picture of his surroundings and thematically never hesitate to problematize issues of human kinds. His couplets are like radiant stones that can easily be plucked and read in isolation; they retain their meaning. His ghazals invoke the feelings of love, heartbreak, longing, wit, etc. Also, it can be said that his ghazals are full of lyricism.

The ghazal, especially in Urdu and Hindi, as a poetic form, has already made an indelible mark on our psyche. However, an exploration of Ghazal in English is not far behind. The Ghazals written in Urdu and Hindi often read out in public gatherings and parliamentary speeches. It has naturally captured the imagination of people across the globe. Thus, the English Ghazal demands an exploration and a wide readership. The ghazals written in English may catch up with the popularity of Urdu and Hindi sooner or later. The days are countable.

Notes:

1. See, Adam Gondavi's *Samay Se Muthbher*. Delhi: Vani Prakashan. 2023. Gondavi revolutionized the ghazal form by using it to voice the issues of tribals, dalits, and marginalized sections of society.
2. See, the website of Rekhta Foundation. It has listed the ghazals that featured in films. <https://www.rekhta.org/shayari/ghazals-in-films>. Accessed at 18:26 and on 21/06/2024.
3. See, Nasreen Munni Kabir's *The Dialogue of Pyaasa: Guru Dutt's Immortal Classic*. The Hindi word 'Pyaasa' can roughly be translated as 'the thirsty person' is a story of Vijay, a poet and his poems are not welcomed by the Urdu Publisher. It is said that the film benefited from the poetic soul of Sahir Ludhianvi.
4. See, the website of Rekhta Foundation. The site claims to have a wide readership from more than a hundred countries across the world. <https://www.rekhta.org/cms/about-site>. Accessed at 18:44 and on 21/06/2024.
5. See, Agha Shahid Ali's prescriptive introduction to *Ravishing Disunities: Real Ghazals in English* where he explained how to compose a real ghazal in English. Many established American poets tried writing some real ghazals in English.
6. See, Dilip Chitre's 'Says Tuka: Selecte poems of Tukaram.' However, abhang and ghazal are completely different forms which deal with different themes and have altogether different socio-cultural values. Both share nothing in common except the pen name of the poet.

7. See, The collection of poems 'Outlyer and Ghazals Poetry' by Jim Harrison. In a lecture 'English in its tri-cultural moment,' Agha Shahid Ali claimed that Jim Harrison along with other American poets misunderstood and mispracticed the ghazal form in English.
8. See, Jean Paul Sartre's Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology. The twentieth-century philosophical stream discussed the existentialism, meaninglessness of human actions.

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