Revisiting the Canon through the *Ghazal* in English

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Abstract

At the dawn of English education in India the popularity of certain genres led to the adaptation, transformation and assimilation of these forms in the Indian languages. However, in this East-West encounter, not only were the European forms appropriated by the Indian writers, one of the Eastern forms, viz. the ghazal, was taken up by writers in English. This paper traces the origin of the ghazal as a distinct form, its development in the poetry of Mir (c 1723-82) and Ghalib (1797-1869) before discussing how this genre was adapted and experimented with, by some writers in English. In this process we try to address some issues like translation, adaptation and transformation and also what factors affect the composition and institution of a canon.

I

Ghazal as a form is supposed to have originated in Arabia in the late seventh century.[1] It is said to have developed from the *nasib*, which itself was an amorous prelude to the *qasida* (an ode). *Qasida* was a panegyric to the emperor or his noblemen. It has been observed that because of its comparative brevity and concentration, its thematic variety and rich suggestiveness, the *ghazal* soon eclipsed the *qasida* and became the most popular form to be introduced in India from the Persian and Arabic literary traditions: "Ghazal means literally conversation, most often between lovers. It has a strict form

bound by rules, containing from a minimum of five to a maximum of seventeen couplets. Though each couplet expresses a complete unit of thought, a series of them are usually grouped together. Thus the unity of the poem is one not of content but of form, and is achieved by a common meter for all the couplets and a strict rhyme scheme, aa, ba, ca, da etc."[2]

A *ghazal* is thus a series of couplets. Each couplet is a self sufficient unit, detachable and quotable, generally containing the complete expression of an idea. The last couplet of the *ghazal* often includes the pen name of the poet, and is more personal than general in its tone and intent. Here the poet may express her/his own state of mind, or describe her/his religious faith, or pray for her/his beloved, or indulge in poetic self-praise. The poet signs the last couplet ('*makht'*) by including her/his name or pen name ('*takhallus')*. The different couplets of the *ghazal* are not bound by unity and consistency of thought. However, a thematic continuity might also develop in these otherwise independent couplets. Traditionally a *ghazal* focuses on romantic love and mysticism. Both lines of the first couplet (called the "*matla*") and the second line of each succeeding couplet have the same monorhyme ('*qafia'*) and refrain ('*radif'*). The refrain may be the same word or a short phrase or can even be a syllable. All the couplets are in the same meter. *Ghazal* is thus a form which has a potential to transcend its language-specificity.

The *ghazal* came to India with the establishment of Mughal rule in Delhi by Babur in 1526. Babur stationed his Persian army in the capital and this is said to have given rise to a mixed dialect in the military encampment, out of the local dialect spoken by the people and the Persian used by the soldiers. Gradually, this mixed dialect became the language of the larger group of people and was called Urdu, literally meaning the language of the military camp. Eventually, Urdu remained no longer a spoken language alone and

was written, borrowing largely from the Persian court vocabulary and using persianized Arabic script. Finally, Urdu replaced Persian as the court language of the later Mughal period. With this change, the *ghazal* also became a popular form. Although Amir Khusro (1253-1325) is supposed to have been one of the earliest practitioners of the form in northern India, Deccan in the south is said to have been the real home of the *ghazal* in the early stages. It was nursed and trained in the courts of Golconda and Bijapur under the patronage of the Muslim rulers.

Although the *ghazal* deals with the whole spectrum of human experience, its central concern is love. This could be both secular and divine in nature. It is worthwhile at this point to quote one *ghazal* of Mir, who was one of the exponents of the *ghazal* in Urdu in the eighteenth century. Mir mainly chose the theme of love for his *ghazals*:

A Complete Ghazal of Mir

1. All my plans have been overturned, and no medicine has had any effect.
You see? This sickness of the heart (love) has killed me in the end (as I told you it would).
2. I passed the days of my youth in weeping, and in old age I closed my eyes. That is, I passed many nights in wakefulness, and when morning came I rested.
3. I do not question her life-giving power. It is just the excellence of my fortune that the first message that she sent me was my sentence of death.
4. We act under constraint, and you slander us when you say we have free will. It is your will that is done, and we are blamed without cause.
5. All the rakes and profligates of the whole world bow down before you. The proud, the perverse, the awkward, the independent – all have acknowledged you as their leader.

6. If even in my distracted state I have been guilty of any want of respect [in daring to approach her], then it was little enough. For mile after mile I made way towards her, I fell down to worship her at every step.
7. What do we care for the Ka'ba and the direction in which we should turn to pray, and the holy places and the robes of pilgrimage? We who live in her lane have said farewell to all these things.
8. If the Shaikh stands naked in a mosque today it is because he spent the night drinking in the tavern, and in his drunkenness gave his cloak and gown and shirt and hat away.
9. If only she would lift the veil from her face now. What will it profit me if when my eyes are closed (in death) she unveils herself for all to see?
10. What can we do with the black and white of this world? If anything, then only this, that we can see the (black) night out with constant weeping, and bear the toil of the (white) day until evening comes.
11. At morning in the garden she walked out to take the air. Her cheek made the rose her slave, and her graceful stature made the cypress her thrall.
12. I held her silver-white wrists in my hands, but she swore (that she would come to me later), and I let them go. How raw and inexperienced I was to trust her word!
13. Every moment I beseeched her, and this has brought all my efforts to nothing. Her proud indifference increased fourfold with every time I importuned her.
14. Such a timid, fleet gazelle does not easily lose her fear of man. Those who have tamed you have performed a wonder, as though by magic power.
15. Why do you ask at this late hour what Mir's religion is? He has drawn the caste mark on his forehead and sat down in the temple. He abandoned Islam long ago.[3]

Though in translation, this *ghazal* of Mir depicts how both the divine and the human can be accommodated within the scope of

this form. The lack of fulfillment in love is depicted as being the will of the divine plan-maker. Though each couplet can stand independently, they can also be read as a continuous whole. The above *ghazal* reminds one of the Victorian dramatic monologue. The entire piece is in the form of a conversation where the presence of the listener is felt but it is a passive listener. In fact, the addressee in this *ghazal* varies between a 'you' and a 'she'. The 'you' is an omniscient presence – it is the divine, whose will is being executed and the poetic persona is aware of the fact that he has no free will. The 'she' in the *ghazal* is the beloved who has not been won yet – the entire *ghazal* is a celebration of the pangs of love and the realization of human constraint. In this conversational strategy the 'divine' turns out to be a close accomplice of the speaker – one in whom the poetic persona can confide and disclose his failure in love. The translation is largely prosaic in nature unlike the Urdu *ghazals* where the rhyme scheme played an important role – enhancing in a way the appeal of the form.

The other name which deserves special mention in the world of the *ghazal* is that of Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib (1797-1869). Ghalib belonged to a noble family of Turks. His grandfather is said to have migrated to India to join the army of Sha Alam II. Ghalib's father served the Nawab of Oudh, the Nizam of Hyderabad and the Rajah of Alwar. He died in a battle and the young Ghalib was looked after by his uncle Mirza Nasarullah Khan. Ghalib is said to have had his education at Agra but he came and settled in Delhi as a young man and soon became a part of the aristocratic society of the Mughal capital. His financial problems forced him to go to Calcutta in 1826 and it is in Calcutta that Ghalib witnessed a glaring contrast between the old Mughal capital and the new city of the British. He stayed there long enough to admire the British ways of life and the changes brought in by the British rule. But scholars have noted that he was completely unaffected by English literature. As Sisir Kumar Das has pointed out, "he did not take any interest in English literature; nor did he feel any impact of the British civilization as a poet. He wrote

about charming women, elegant buildings, luscious mangoes and fine wines, but not about the intellectual fermentation there."[4]

Nearly all of Ghalib's Urdu poems are in the *ghazal* form whose themes are largely preserved by convention. The predominant theme is love, either love for a mistress or for God. The framework of the Urdu poems was flexible enough to accommodate both the secular and the divine. With respect to forms and themes Ghalib worked within the medieval tradition and his poetry was conditioned by his taste and education as by the contemporary aristocratic view of poetry. He was devoted to the institutions, conventions and practices of the medieval period, of the Mughal period, to be precise. According to Sisir Kumar Das, "The greatest singular contribution of Ghalib to Urdu literature in particular and Indian literature in general, is his complete freedom from any kind of philosophical scheme which had dominated Indian poetry for several centuries. His view of life was not that of a pagan …but it is free from religious inhibitions on the one hand and embraces life, on the other, both as joyous existence and as a dark and painful experience. The dilemmas of existence, the tensions of desires, the contradiction of thought, make his poetry rich and humane…"[5]

Let us examine a ghazal by Ghalib in this context

1. aa, ki meree jaan ko qaraar naheen hai
taaqat-e-bedaad-e-intazaar naheen hai

[qaraar = rest/repose, bedaad = injustice]

2. dete hain jannat hayaat-e-dahar ke badle
nashsha ba_andaaza-e-khummaar naheen hai

[hayaat = life, dahar = world, ba_andaaza = according to,
khummaar = intoxication]

3. giriya nikaale hai teree bazm se mujh ko
haay ! ki roone pe ikhtiyaar naheen hai

[giriya = weeping, ikhtiyaar = control]

4. hamse abas hai gumaan-e-ranjish-e-khaatir
khaak mein ushshaaq kee ghubaar naheen hai

[‘abas = indifferent, gumaan = suspicion, ranjish=unpleasantness, khaak = ashes/dust, ushshaaq = lovers, ghubaar = clouds of dust]

5. dil se uthaa lutf-e-jalva haay ma'anee
ghair-e-gul aainaa-e-bahaar naheen hai

[ma'anee = meanings, ghair-e-gul = blossoms]

6. qatl ka mere kiya hai 'ahad to baare
waae ! akhar 'ahad ustuwaar naheen hai

['ahad = promise, baare = at last, ustuwaar = frim/determined]

7. toone qasam mai_kashee kee khaaee hai ‘Ghalib’
teree qasam ka kuchch 'eitbaar naheen hai !

[mai_kashee = boozing, 'eitbaar = trust/faith][6]

In almost all *ghazals* by Ghalib, the poet signs the last couplet (“*makhta*”) by including her/his name or pen name (“*takhallus*”). The theme revolves around the pangs of love – the restlessness and the sufferings of the beloved, who has relied on the promises that were made by a drunken lover. The rhyme scheme of the *ghazal* is aa, ba, ca, da, ea, fa, ga. The refrain (*radif*) in the above *ghazal* rests in the phrase ‘*naheen hai*’, which is repeated at the end

of the second line of each couplet, thus lending a repetitive negative tone to the entire poem - which reiterates the pangs of love.

II

After having traced a brief history of the *ghazal,* let us examine how this form of composition has inspired writers in the West to write *ghazals* in English. In this context the essay 'On Translating a Form: The Possible/Impossible Ghazal in English', by Anisur Rahman becomes particularly relevant because it deals with the transformation of an Eastern form – the *ghazal*, to suit the tastes of the readers in the West. It is needless to say that a form or a literary genre gains popularity with a particular culture only when the readers of the target culture are able to relate and associate with the genre. Moreover, a genre does not exist in a vacuum; it is integrally related with the content that the form holds. In the case of the *ghazal* as we have already discussed it is the form that holds sway, in which case it is worth examining how different languages and cultures contribute to the maintaining of the form.

Rahman comments on the importance of the form in the final act of reading:

> A literary form that largely validates a text can make much difference in the final act of reading. It is the form that empowers a literary experience in a language, and it is also the form that gets translated in yet another language of an approximate or remote variety with equal measure of success or otherwise. When used in either of the contexts, it calls on its other constituents: an image, a metaphor, a symbol; a history, a culture, a tone of voice. Form also determines its stance with a language, diction, a genre, a structure. While the constituents may be essentially compatible with a cultural, literary, or linguistic framework, they may appear incongruous,

> though justifiably so, in a different tradition, or in a tradition of the “other”. It may be derived, therefore, that a writer in a source language operates on one level of primary representation, whereas a translator operates on multiple levels with the form and all its baggage, both in the source and the target language. In whatever way a literary form may conduct itself (and it does not conduct itself in isolation), it is, in a major way, conditioned by all its constituents together. It may be derived further that the form, along with its constituents, creates its own modes of signification and helps the location of culture.[7]

Likewise in the case of the *ghazal,* the form had a fundamental role to play when adapted by a different culture. The *ghazals* of Ghalib inspired writers from different parts of the world who tried their hands at *ghazal* writing. Writers like Adrienne Rich, Judith Wright, Jim Harrison, John Thompson, D.G. Jones, Phyllis Webb, Douglas Barbour, Max Plater, and others experimented with *ghazal* writing. According to Rahman, the English *ghazal* writers can be divided into two distinct groups: one group consists of those who adhere to the form of the couplet, where the couplets are often independent of one another; the other group consists of poets who do not use the couplet but deploy the other aspects of the form, such as the rhyme scheme, and also try to approximate to the original thematic models.

Why was it that the *ghazal* became a popular form in the West? The *ghazal* as already discussed is a form that was terse, expressing in a couplet structure ideas about love both human and divine. It is noteworthy that the two English *ghazal* writers to be examined in this paper, Adrienne Rich and Phyllis Webb, both were fascinated by the lyric form and the aural appeal of poetry. Phyllis Webb was fascinated by the music of poetry and its conversational tone: ‘I think there is increasingly in my poetry a “you” who is not necessarily the reader. It’s like having a ghost of one’s own in the room. I know there’s some sort of person-presence I’m addressing

the poem to. More and more I want to involve that 'you' in the poem, say, "You're here. Don't go away"…I control the use of this other presence to make a more social environment for the poem, so that it is not just a statement of an isolated person, but assumes an audience, assumes an involved presence whom one desperately hopes is there somewhere when the work is done.'[8] Adrienne Rich in the essay 'Blood, Bread and Poetry', admits that she was, 'easily entranced by pure sound and still am, no matter what it is saying; and any poet who mixes poetry of the actual world with the poetry of sound interests and excites me more than I am able to say.'[9] The *ghazal* readily afforded these American writers with a form that had its roots in a different culture but was capable of fulfilling their requirements. The flexibility and novelty of the *ghazal* appealed to Adrienne Rich, who was in quest of a new form. In '*What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*' (1993), Rich comments on her quest thus:

> What poetry is made of is so old, so familiar, that it's easy to forget that it's not just the words, but polyrhythmic sounds, speech in its endeavours (every poem breaks a silence that had to be overcome), prismatic meanings lit by each other's light, stained by each other's shadows. In the wash of poetry the old, beaten, worn stones of language take on colours that disappear when you sieve them up out of the streambed and try to sort them out.[10]

In this quest for a form, which could give proper shape to her ideas, a form that was flexible enough to accommodate her views on life and woman emancipation, Adrienne Rich was inspired by the writings of Ghalib and chose to write *ghazals* using the couplet form in the collection called *Leaflets* (1969). Rich acknowledged her debt to Ghalib when she wrote: 'My *ghazals* are personal and public, American and twentieth century; but they owe much to the presence of Ghalib in my mind: a poet, self-educated

and profoundly learned, who owned no property and borrowed his books, writing in an age of political and cultural break up.'[11]

Rich and the other American writers could perhaps identify themselves with the situation in which Ghalib had composed his verses and how the *ghazal* had facilitated the expression of his moods and thoughts. It was a time of cultural and political breakup and Ghalib found the *ghazal* form to be the most suitable in so far as the couplet structure easily afforded a switch of moods without in any way disturbing the appeal of the whole. Similar was the case with Rich. Rich recalls her growing-up years as overtly dominated by the intellectual presence and demands of her father, while covertly marked by the submerged tensions and silences arising from the conflicts between the religious and cultural heritage of her father's Jewish background and her mother's southern Protestantism. Her relationship with her father was one of strong identification and desire for approval, yet it was adversarial in many ways. Under his tutelage Rich first began to write poetry, conforming to his standards well past her early successes and publications.

Rich's poetry has clearly recorded, imagined, and forecast her personal and political journeys with searing power. In 1956, she began dating her poems to underscore their existence within a context, and to argue against the idea that poetry existed separately from the poet's life. Stylistically, she began to draw on contemporary rhythms and images, especially those derived from the cinematic techniques of jump cuts and collage. *Leaflets* (1969), *The Will to Change* (1971), and *Diving into the Wreck* (1973) demonstrate a progressive coming to power as Rich contends against the desolation patriarchy enacts on literal and psychic landscape. Intimately connected with this struggle for empowerment and action, is the deepening of her determination 'to write directly and overtly as a woman, out of a woman's body and experience.'[12]

In an interview in 1994, Rich expressed how the language of poetry was not and could not be severed from the language of politics. She did not agree to the traditional ivory tower view of poetry and disagreed to the fact that 'political poetry is suspected of immense subversive power, yet accused of being by definition, bad writing, impotent, lacking in breadth. No wonder the North American poet finds herself or himself slightly crazed by the double messages.'[13] She did not agree to the term political poetry and was of the opinion that, '[I]nstead of political poetry, we might want to say poetry of witness, poetry of dissent, poetry that is the voice of those and on behalf of those who are generally unheard. I'm reading poetry all the time that is enormously accessible in its language. And I don't mean by that using the smallest possible vocabulary. We're living in a country now where the range of articulateness has really diminished down to almost a TV level, where to hear people speaking with rich figures of speech, which used to be the property of everybody, is increasingly rare.'[14] Her *ghazals* are also illustrative of her general view of poetry:

> Last night you wrote on the wall: Revolution is poetry.
> Today you needn't write; the wall has tumbled down.
> (From *Ghazals : Homage to Ghalib*, lines 1-2, 1968)

In her *ghazals*, Rich often invokes Ghalib to depict both her allegiance to and departure from his poetry. The following *ghazal* by Rich bears testimony to this fact:

> Not all, only a few, return as the rose or the tulip;
> What faces there must be still veiled by the dust!
>
> The three stars, three daughters, stayed veiled and secret by day;
> What word did the darkness speak to bring them forth in their nakedness?

> Sleep is his, and peace of mind, and the nights belong to him
> across whose arms you spread the veils of your hair.
>
> We are the forerunners; breaking the pattern is our way of life.
> Whenever the races blurred they entered the stream of reality.
>
> If Ghalib must go on shedding these tears, you who inhabit the world
> will see these cities blotted into the wilderness.[15]

The very use of the phrase 'breaking the pattern is our way of life' in a way summarizes the way in which the *ghazals* in English need to be viewed. Twentieth century American poets have omitted the rhyme while retaining the couplet form and the approximate length. They also emphasize disconnectedness between couplets, juxtaposing apparently unrelated observations, placing insights or images side by side without explaining their connection. In the above *ghazal* by Rich, the disjointedness of the couplets themselves convey the need to break the pattern – a desire to conform only to the bare minimum and still retain the generic label. Rich models her *ghazals* on those of Mirza Ghalib. She follows Ghalib's use of minimum five couplets, where each couplet is autonomous and independent of the others. The continuity and unity flow from the associations and images playing back and forth among the couplets in any single *ghazal*. The image that lends a unity to the above *ghazal* and in a way holds it together is that of the 'veil'. It also lends a degree of secrecy and mystery to the *ghazal* – the notion of the unknown and the unfathomable.

The other writer whose experimentations with the *ghazal* require special attention is Phyllis Webb. Her collection is titled *Water and Light: Ghazals and Anti Ghazals*. Phyllis Webb further subtitles the collection. The deliberate use or the need felt to refer to

the *ghazals* as ‘poems’ is significant indeed. In a way, therefore, Webb is not satisfied in calling her *ghazals* anti ghazals. Largely they are poems. The very title ‘Anti-Ghazals’ also explains “her desire for seeking a subversive way of testing the limits of her poetic material and form.”[16]

In fact, the notion of the English *ghazal* or the *anti ghazal* being accommodated within the boundaries of the canonical English literature is worth examining. The canonical may exist only in a specific point in history – it implies an idea of fixity, and a related idea of selection, both of which are prompted by a historical exigency. The canon is always threatened and subverted by the dynamics of genres. For example, an epic written by Virgil has the generic markers of an epic by Homer, recorded and utilized in the light of Virgil’s (and his readers’) expectations. Thus even though a genre becomes intelligible by conforming to the ‘horizon of expectation’ of its readers, the extension of this horizon by individual texts is a sign of the genre’s vitality its ability to participate in the process of shaping emotion, experience, perception into literature. Even if a genre like the epic, or tragedy or the novel is enshrined in a canon, the proof of the genre’s life is its dynamism in response to history. This dynamism may involve its reconstitution by peripheral genres – it may also involve the canonized genres’ interaction with the periphery, and its consequent change. Thus arises the question whether this newly realigned genre is still admissible in the canon, whether the genre is now excluded from the canon or whether the canon breaks itself down to accommodate a newly emerged genre. Similar is the case of the *ghazal* in English. *Ghazal* as a genre had no place in the English literary canon prior to the cultural contact with the East. Thus, the English *ghazal* may be regarded as a peripheral genre, so far as the English literary canon is concerned.

Webb's *ghazals* show that she is concerned with both the form and the literary heritage to which she belonged. Webb's handling of the form certainly reveals the transformation that a genre is expected to undergo when treated by a foreign culture. *Water and Light: Ghazals and Anti-Ghazals* is a revision of the *ghazal* where Webb creates a marginal text of female poetics which challenges the conventions and the authority of male writing. In terms of its form, the *ghazal* is perhaps ideally suited to Webb's revisionist pursuit. In medieval lyrics of courtship and love, the woman has always been the object of the male desire. In fact, it is the male who sings the praise of his lady love – she is not only desired but her identity is also a subject of the male gaze. In her poems, Webb seeks to redefine that gaze and thus reorient the notion of desire altogether, this time from a feminist perspective. The collection is divided into five sections each with an independent title. The sections are as follows: Sunday Water: Thirteen Anti Ghazals; The Birds; I Daniel; Frivolities; Middle Distance. Let us take a poem from Webb's collection to illustrate the above point:

> Mulberry tree with innocent eyes,
> Catalpa with your huge hands,
>
> I am looking at you
> so why can't you look back?
>
> Seduce me, Mulberry, with your silk-spun eyelashes,
> applaud, Catalpa, with leafy ambuscades.
>
> I am a patient person from time to time,
> willingly would I fall into your entrapments
>
> of silk stockings and flowery candelabra.
> Or should I save myself with long voyages
>
> interstellar longings
> where we might meet as pure event

and I would say Mulberry tree, Catalpa,
and you would say, simply, Phyllis.[17]

In the above *ghazal*, the rigid conventions of the form, like those of a Petrarchan sonnet, that addresses an idealized beloved who personifies all the cherished 'universal' qualities of woman as lover, are broken. Here, the equation of seduction is disturbed in that the seduction takes place between the poetic persona and two species of trees: the mulberry and the catalpa. The desire to be seduced dwells with the poetic persona, whose name is not disclosed till the end of the poem, when we learn it is someone called Phyllis. The conversational tone of the poem cannot be missed. There is a determination to challenge conventional poetic structures. As she herself notes, "But as I learnt more about *ghazals*, I saw I was actually defying some of the traditional rules, constraints, and pleasure laid down so long ago," she writes in the preface. The traditional *ghazal* was composed of couplets linked with a lyrical element in it. Webb's anti-ghazals focus on the particular, the local, the dialectal, and the private. Rather than directing her attention to woman as love object, Webb concentrates on the woman as writing subject, on the construction of the female self, which is intrinsically bound to the development of a new kind of language. The language is deliberately disjointed, evocative, impressionistic, experiential, and sensuous, in a marked departure from the generalized romantic conventions of earlier *ghazals*. Focusing on simplicity, Webb seems fascinated with nature, ancient ritual, and the sublime and mysterious rhythms, which create the female self; hence she writes anti-ghazals. She is deliberately discordant and asymmetrical, blending elevated with colloquial language in a fruitful dialectic. She employs varying line lengths, and does not always observe a set rhyme scheme, preferring instead to write fragments like:

"Drunken and amatory, illogical, stoned, mellifluous
journey of the ten lines." (p.20)

Webb also challenges the subject matter, the mystical seriousness, of the early lyric form by inserting various "trivial," irreverent or mocking humorous incidents in her anti-ghazals:

> Ah Ghalib, you are drinking too much,
> Your lines are becoming maudlin.
>
> Here, take this tea and sober up. The moon
> is full tonight, and I can't sleep.
>
> And look – this small branch of cherry
> blossoms, picked today, and it's only February.
>
> You could use a few cool Japanese images
> to put you on the straight and narrow.
>
> Still, I love to study your graceful script,
> Urdu amorous, flowing across the page.
>
> There were nights I watched you dip your pen
> into the old Persian too, inscribe 'Asad'
>
> with a youthful flourish. Remember Asad,
> Ghalib?
>
> Mirza Asadullah Beg Khan, who are you really?
> Born in Agra, of Turkish ancestry,
>
> Fond of women, politics, money, wine.
> 'Losses and consequent grief' a recurring
>
> theme, also 'a poetry…of what was,
> what could have been possible.'
>
> Ah! Ghalib, you are almost asleep,
> head on the table, hand flung out,
>
> upturned. In the blue and white jar

a cherry branch, dark pink in moonlight –

from the land of
only what is (pp 60-61).

The *ghazal* form is expanded in Webb's verse to incorporate the very reality which it traditionally seeks to distance itself from, to elevate the ordinary to the realm of the distinct. The object is no longer a passive woman, who is instead mocked by Webb as "the Beloved in her bored flesh," as she writes in another anti-ghazal. The traditional *ghazal* as a form is reduced to "this stringy instrument scraping away, / Whining about love's ultimate perfection" (p.20), while the conventional conceptualization of transcendental love itself is undermined by a playful tone. The centrality of male creativity and male sexual response is displaced, its authority neutralized through ridicule, contradiction, and disparity. What the anti-ghazals reflect instead is a spirit of female self-affirmation, the result of Webb's long struggle towards personal, poetic, and spiritual autonomy.

Webb celebrates common domestic experience, the way that womens' tasks (including the task of writing) focus on the interruption of "wholeness":

"The women writers, their heads bent under the light,
work late at their kitchen tables" (p.12).

Or

"My morning poem destroyed by the good neighbour policy.
Mrs. Olsson, organic gardener, lectures me on the good life.

Oh this is cozy, all of us together "(p.13).

For Webb, writing is not a retreat from reality, it is a process:

> "The pull, this way and that, ultimately into the pull
> of the pen across the page.
>
> Sniffing for poems, the forward memory
> of hand beyond the grasp" (p 18).

The easy blend of the line lengths facilitates Webb's task in taking the line "across the page" or not, as she chooses, without resorting to male "yawp". Writing is not the creation of a passive object or an artifact to be preserved for posterity, but rather it is a continuum centered on the present moment,

> "the flow, flux, even the effluent stormy
> in high wind" (p.16).

Writing is interrupted by the welcome intrusion of women neighbours who teach the poet something about daily life; it is the ability to "relate disconnectedly". The real insight Webb offers us here is that genuine writing is done, not by blocking out the world, but by allowing it to exist. And this is a revelation with profound spiritual implications.

Webb's writing demonstrates the development of a feminist poet who rises from the ashes of her past, a past shaped by patriarchal perceptions of the divine and of art (there are conscious references to characters in T.S. Eliot's poems where the genders have been reversed like Ms. Prufrock). Her repeated emphasis on "breaking" leads us to recognize the necessity of shattering outworn myths.

III

In the two English *ghazal* writers that we have looked at, the *ghazal* appears to be largely prosaic; the theme and the content of most of the English *ghazals* concentrate on the contemporary socio-political scenario of the writer – largely twentieth century and American. In the anti-ghazals of Webb in particular the 'canonical' in the form of frequent references to T.S. Eliot's poems peeps into this otherwise peripheral genre. Largely, what defines a canon is primarily a set of power relations. Thus, whatever does not follow the generic or thematic dictates of the canon or fulfill the needs of the canon-markers will be rendered peripheral. However, as we have argued earlier – a canon may exist only in a specific point in history. Thus, the peripheral may seek to deconstruct the existing canon and find a place for itself in the new canon.

Nevertheless, one question keeps recurring. It goes without saying that some texts are enjoyed, studied, returned to – that is they survive irrespective of a reorganization or breaking down of canonical boundaries. Do these individual texts or a collection of them remain thus because of canonization by extra literary forces? Or is there something inherent in them that explain their continued relevance? Their survival is dependant on their ability to resonate with aspects of experience in the context of their reception, perhaps centuries after their composition. The Urdu *ghazals* of Mir and Ghalib undoubtedly had this capacity and this is reflected in the way interest in the *ghazals* was revived by writers in the West. What is yet to be seen is whether this peripheral genre is able to enter the canon of English literature and how. In this sense, to decide on the peripheral and the central, we will have to apply the test of time. The literary value of a text or genre can be judged after many years. However, more than that, any idea of 'canon' and 'periphery' is necessarily based on limited judgment and an attempt to universalize and institutionalize that limited judgment. That is to say, what is

worth canonizing to us may not seem worth canonizing to somebody else. What constitutes the canon, then, is not the superiority of any judgment but the ability to exercise power, coercive or otherwise to make one's judgment acceptable. In the case of the English *ghazal*, similar forces will be at work to decide the fate of this newly emerged genre in the English literary canon.

NOTES

1. Information on the 'ghazal' is a combination of material available in the following sources:

    (a) The site http://www.msci.memphis.edu/ramamurt/ghazal.html;
    (b) The entry on 'ghazal' in *A History of Indian Literature*, by Sisir Kumar Das (In two volumes)
    (c) *An Anthology of Indian Literatures* (ed) K. Santhanam;
    (d) *An Anthology of Indian Literature* (ed) John B. Alphonso-Karkala;
    (e) *Merriam Websters' Encyclopedia of Literature*;
    (f) *Dictionary of World Literature* ed. Joseph T. Shipley; and
    (g) *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* ed. Alex Preminger and T.V.F. Brogan.

2. *An Anthology of Indian Literature* (ed) John B. Alphonso-Karkala Noida: Indian Council for Cultural Relations.1987 p 496.
3. Ibid. pp 500-501.
4. See Das, Sisir Kumar *A History of Indian Literature* (1800-1910). Delhi: Sahitya Akademi. 1991, 2000.
5. ibid
6. The ghazal by Ghalib is from the following site http://www.cs.wisc.edu/~navin/india/songs/ghalib/44.g.

7. Rahman, Anisur ‘On Translating a Form: The Possible/Impossible Ghazal in English’, in *Translation Poetics and Practice*. p 120 New Delhi: Creative Books.

8. *20th century Poetry and Poetics, Fourth Edition*, p 340 (ed) by Garry Geddes.
9. Ibid. p 283.
10. Ibid. p 899.
11. Ibid. p123.
12. Information on Rich’s life and works are available on the site http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/rich/bio.htm and also from the anthology *20th century Poetry and Poetics*, edited by Garry Geddes.
13. Cited in *20th century Poetry and Poetics, Fourth Edition*, edited by Garry Geddes pp 282-283.
14. From the site http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/rich/progressive.htm.
15. Adrienne Rich in Aijaz Ahmad edited *Ghazals of Ghalib* New York: Columbia University Press, 1971. p 78.
16. *Water and Light: Ghazals and Anti Ghazals*, Poems by Phyllis Webb Toronto: Coach House Press. 1984. p 45.
17. Ibid. p 133. .

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