



Coalescence of Form and Content in Ali's English Ghazal: The Trauma of Kashmir in *The Country without a Post Office*

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Sabir Hussain*

Pinkish Zahra†

Ghulam Murtaza‡

Abstract

This paper investigates the enunciation of meaning in the coalescence of form and content in the ghazals of Agha Shahid Ali. In the last decade of the twentieth-century escalation of political and civil clashes handicapped the social system in Kashmir; all the government institutions remained closed for months. Post offices were one of those institutions which remained shut and the letters piled on without finding reaching their addressees. In this backdrop Ali wrote the collection, *The Country Without a Post Office*, where Ali mourns the state oppression. This research explores through literary stylistics the chaos and trauma inextricably interwoven in the form-content synchronization in the English ghazals of this collection. The form and content of these ghazals have aptly enunciated the trauma of Kashmir. Although ghazals to-date have been sung to mourn the unrequited love and separation of lover yet Ali has given this a novel thematic dimension by incorporating the blood and shreds, cannons and sticks, and nostalgia and dreams.

Key Words: Urdu Ghazal, English Ghazal, Chaos, Trauma, Kashmir, Literary stylistics

Introduction

Political and social chaos has misshapen the occupied Kashmir into a limbo resulting in the trauma of the generations of Kashmir. The global world has failed to resolve the Kashmir dispute for decades. To liberate themselves, the indigenous people of Kashmir resorted to terror tactics but could not translate their dream of independence. The world viewed them as terrorists and nurtured sympathies for the oppressive India government. In view of the criticality of the issue, Agha Shahid Ali transformed the war of weapons into the war of pen. In the last decade of the twentieth century Kashmir witnessed colossal devastation and bloodshed. During these mass killings and mass kidnapping Ali advocated the case of Kashmir in *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997). This collection of Ali has a number of poetic forms other than ghazals. The versatility of poetic forms in *The Country Without a Post Office* portrays the political complexity of Indian Occupied Kashmir. The intricate poetic forms contain clues to the intricacies of political issues. This study through literary stylistics as an analytical methodology investigates the synchronization of content and form inextricably blended to depict oppressive tyranny juxtaposed with Kashmir's natural beauty through masterly appropriation of English language. Though Agha Shahid is the master of the forms of various sub-genres of poetry, his greatest contribution lies in revitalization of ghazal form in English maintaining its traditional stringent rhyme scheme. He as a Kashmiri-American poet is the first Kashmiri with hyphenated identity to win international acclaim. Ali's contribution paved way for quality creative work in English by young Kashmiri writers and equipped them with new modes of expression. Taking inspiration from Ali, Basharat Peer borrowed the image from *The Country Without a Post Office* to create *The Curfew Night*. Mirza Waheed's *The Collaborators* finds inspiration from the same collection. Both these works full of chaotic and bleak images focus on the resistance of the Kashmiri rebels to the Indian state violence. Ali took up ghazal in English actualizing his very strong tendency towards this genre, an innovation never attempted before him except a few translations from Urdu, Persian, and Arabic into English. Shahid traces

* Visiting Lecturer, Department of English Literature, Government College University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.

† Visiting Lecturer, Department of English Literature, Government College University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.
Email: pinkishzahra@hotmail.com

‡ Associate Professor, Department of English Literature, Government College University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan

the history of ghazal to Arabia of the 7th century (2000, p.1). Arabs with established creative history had rich literary tradition even before Islam. Ghazal was transformed over the centuries and reached its perfection in Hafiz (1325-1389), who has been a touchstone for the subsequent ghazal poets. Ali, in the introduction to his edited anthology, discusses the technique and themes of ghazal. The word ghazal literally means the cry of a gazelle before its death in hunting. By implication ghazal is a mournful expression of loss and separation.

A ghazal comprises autonomous couplets semantically and emotionally complete in themselves, hence discarding thematic coherence amongst various couplets freely shifting from tragic to comic to romantic, with no end to this thematic diversity. But, to Ali, these couplets have cultural unity that holds the whole ghazal together. He compares the aptness and self-sufficiency of a couplet with a stone plucked from a necklace; it continues to shine brilliantly even in isolation; however, its charm and luster are far greater as a part of the whole. Ghazal does not allow enjambment between couplets (2000, pp. 2-3). Here are some of the stringent rules of this genre: it begins with *matla*, the first couplet that sets the rhyme scheme pattern (*qafia*) and refrain (*radeef*), recurring in both lines. The rhyme following the refrain is a fixed pattern of ghazal. This fixity enslaves the poet and keeps his expression restricted throughout the piece: the result is that the poet is enslaved by the form and keeps struggling to overcome this master (2000, p. 3). Though it is not fixed in length, it should have at least five couplets and may pile them up as far as rhymes and the poet's creative vigor can be stretched. It ends with *maqta*, the final couplet that bears the poet's pen name. Despite thematic independence of the couplets, the form holds them together; absence of coherence is not fragmentariness. In fact, it expresses deep cultural roots. The ghazal is meant for genuine grief, not for angst, says Sabitha (2000, p. 13). The form holds precedence over content in ghazal. No less than the content of his ghazals, his poetic form is the assertion of his political statement, she adds (2000, p. 182). Ali's form speaks louder than his content. Hence, study of form is inevitable to understand his poetry.

Literature Review

Ghazal has been widely studied. Ali's adaptation of the genre into English stretching its reach beyond the Atlantic Ocean epitomizes its adaptation history from Arabic to Persian, And from Persian to Urdu. Ali adopts the form of ghazal but also overcomes some of its formal features to adapt it to new discoveries in the language to bridge the two heterogeneous cultures (Al-Douri, 2012, pp. 60-61). Khalid opines that this hybridity appropriately expresses Ali's own hybrid identity (2013, p. 3). As he does not want to be identified with any specific religion, cast or region, his identity as Kashmiri appropriated with his Americanness finds expression in the merger of an Eastern form with Western language, thereby transcending all boundaries. He primarily considers himself an English poet. He owns his hyphenated designations but does not let them restrict him (Benvenuto, 2002, p. 267). In the same vein, Khalid notes that his adaptation of ghazal should not be interpreted as a restricted affiliation with some particular people or principles. His eastern form blended with western language becomes a medium for the expression of general human situation. His achievement as a proponent of this "immigrant genre" is that he familiarized it with readers from diverse backgrounds, thus covering the issue of "detached reading", hallmark of a lot of immigrant work (2013, p. 31). Also, with its versatility and diversity, his poetry reflects the cultural diversity of the Subcontinent. Ali's poetry, says Nishat Zaidi, bridges two different civilizations that he experienced and he retains his identity in his foreign context (2008, p. 56). Ali's presentation of events is non-linear and elliptic, not sequential. His ghazals, Zaidi continues, introduced new poetic idiom, new expressions, extended semantic range and rhythmic contours (2008, p. 63). Fatima Noori has insightfully analyzed the hybrid nature of his contribution to English ghazal form: with hybrid emotion of a diaspora, he furnishes his oriental house with occidental language (2014). Malcolm Woodland makes similar observations on Ali's ghazals. Woodland (2005) rightly observes that he keeps shifting between his cultural origin and diasporic identity.

Ghazal has traditionally not used refrain as mere embellishment for rhythm and repetition; it has multidimensional functions: it creates unceasing cyclic meaning; it also has the capacity to "accrue new meaning," observes Hollander (1985, p. 77). Nostalgia is a recurring theme in Ali's ghazal but his intensity of emotion varies with one constant factor: mournfulness for his loss. Iffat Maqbool (2012) contradicts Woodland. She thinks that his relationship with his roots is stronger than nostalgia (p. 2). His passion comes from his agony at what has been done to the paradise valley of Kashmir, the inhuman torment of its people, the genocide of the innocent and

ceaseless harassment of women. More than the beauty of the land, the sufferings of the Kashmiris are his reminiscences.

Methodology

In order to trace the form and content of ghazals, this article employs literary stylistics as a theoretical framework. It mainly deals with the evocative and figurative use of language which illustrates the interpretation of the message (Ogunsiji, 2013, p. 18). Finding both the surface and underlying meanings of the literary language is the quintessence of literary stylistics. The conceptual framework of literary stylistics became more famous in reaction to the linguistic stylistics which mainly deals with the explication, exploration of linguistic devices of a literary text whereas literary stylistics gives equal importance to both textual clues and intuition. Norgaard et al (2010) define literary stylistics as the method of studying how meaning is produced via language and other textual features. There is a clear binary between the linguistic stylistics and literary stylistics. Literary stylistics should not be replaced or swapped with linguistic stylistics: the latter exclusively deals with Metalanguage and its purpose is solely to describe the language of a literary text, whereas literary stylistics deals not only with the writer's style but also with the meaning and message implied in that style; metalanguage is the presentation and description of language. Literary stylistics abridged the gap between literary criticism and stylistics and it also blends science with intuition by unfolding the literary text scientifically as well as construing it intuitively. It is, however, necessary to understand linguistic stylistics for the complete understanding of the methodology. The scholarship of stylistics is to view the literary text from linguistic orientation. For Widdowson (1975), stylistics is the study of literary text from a linguistic perspective.

Structurally and thematically ghazals are different from other poetic forms. This thematic and structural difference demands a framework that is different for the analysis of ghazals. A recurrent feature of the ghazal is thematic diversity; one couplet may be religious, another may be tragic, another may be comic and still another may be romantic. Likewise, a ghazal deals with diverse themes and issues. Ali (2000) explains that each couplet of the ghazal is complete in itself and holds complete meaning in isolation and continues to shine vividly in isolation by giving a significant holistic description. Selected ghazals deal with diverse themes including political chaos. The selected couplets from each ghazal are, therefore, analyzed under two heads: form and content. The form of each ghazal is dissected for its meaning and its synchronization with the content, whereas the content of these ghazals is analyzed from three dimensions: contextual, grammatical and lexic-semantic.

Content Analysis

The lines of ghazals are terse and aphoristic. A couplet may contain one or two sentences and each line of the couplet constitutes a complete sentence, mostly. To follow the rigorous and defined rules of structure, one needs to select words and phrases diligently. This diligence and perfectionism are observed in the ghazal *Tonight* as it strictly follows the rules in its formation. It has meticulously terse and epigrammatic expression. This ghazal deals with a variety of themes and diverse recurrent motifs ranging from religious skepticism and exile to the sense of uncertainty or insecurity as the consequence of political conflict at home. The beginning of the fourth couplet of the ghazal is with a declarative sentence and shortly it follows the imperative mood which addresses anthropomorphically a non-human entity:

I beg for haven: Prisons, let open your gates ---
A refugee from Belief seeks a cell tonight. (p 26)

Here "tonight" is a refrain (radeef) and it creates a kind of restriction for the usage of tense. In this context, the poet's usage of simple tense offers a sense of generalized relevance. There is a lexical deviation in the second line of the couplet: the first letter of 'Belief' is capitalized in the mid of the sentence. The deviation from the prescribed rules is meaningful; it metaphorically refers to his religion. This couplet depicts a deep feeling of deprivation and hopelessness. In the haze of political instability and mass massacre the misuse of religious apparatus makes him skeptic. Despite the fact that confusion and terror controlled the region, fugitives and criminals found the dwellings for carrying out their abominating activities by using the label of Islam to exploit the situation and get advantage from both the ends. Gangahar (2013) claims that this type of criminals destroyed the Kashmir cause and the struggle of mujahedeen and common Kashmiris who were the custodians of all living

in Kashmir. Ali's description of Islam and Islamic values are in the following of the teachings of the Prophet (PBUH): Muslims and non-Muslims lived with each other by creating a harmonious and peaceful relationship without bothering each other. He was depressed by dogmatic religious beliefs causing enmity and hatred. He never endorsed the calls of ousting the non-Muslims (Pundits of Jammu) from Kashmir; he seeks refuge in coexistence. Instead of practicing a modified and distorted Belief he opts for a dark prison cell. This profanity in the language emerges from the anguish caused by chaos in Kashmir and suspension of communication. The next semantically complex couplet has two Biblical allusions:

Executioners near the women at the window.

Damn you, Elijah, I'll bless Jezebel tonight. (p. 26)

In the above couplet, the poet depicts an incident of far past dramatically by creating dramatic and pictorial imagery. In the aforementioned couplet, the present tense refers to future and past but here – in 'I'll bless Jezebel tonight' – he uses future tense which suggests that he is in an in-between state; his will is staggering. This overwhelming determination of blessing Jezebel (Biblical blasphemer), appears to be affected by the fright of blasphemy and refers to the agony of the poet. Ali was insistent to seek a cell in tainted Belief but here, he rejects belief by showing utter resolve to idolize a blasphemer. Elijah, a representative of Lord, was a prophet of Jews, while Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab, was a princess. Jezebel forcefully convinced her husband to abandon Lord's worship; he accedes obediently and gets killed in a battle. Jezebel still disobeys prophets and the Lord and offends a number of Prophets. A large number of people of her own court are enraged in reaction to her evil deeds and they throw her out of the window (Bible, 2009). In this metaphorical couplet the assassins are self-claimed Islamists while Jezebel, with circumstantial horrific deeds, represents the security agencies. 'Executioners' in the metaphor, is vehicle and their viciousness is the tenor; Jezebel, likewise, is the vehicle and evil is the tenor. 'I'll bless Jezebel tonight' is a paradoxical clause: it hyperbolizes the cruelty of both local criminals and Indian army and it appears to be ironical; it also represents his hatred for the self-claimed Islamists: to him, they are a smudge on the role of freedom fighters.

The poet presents a gloomy picture in the aforementioned couplets but *maqta*, the last couplet of the ghazal, presents his emphatic resilience to raising a voice against the annihilations. The couplet starts with an indicative sentence but it concludes with imperative mood:

And I, Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee---

God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight. (p. 26)

The imperative mood in the last sentence of the second line significantly suggests the desired role of the poet. The three short sentences used in this couplet contain a world of symbolism in aphoristic expression. Ali wants a revival of peace and tranquility among Kashmiris. He wants to orient this new nation towards past culture and traditions. He is Ishmael: he intends to found a new nation as Ishmael did in the Arabian desert.

Another ghazal "Arabic" in the collection abounds with a number of literary and political allusions. In this ghazal the poet presents a stark picture of Kashmir through direct and indirect references and paints a gloomy picture to describe the doom of Kashmir in the sixth couplet of the ghazal:

The sky is stunned, it's become a ceiling of stone.

I tell you it must weep. So kneel, pray for rain in Arabic. (p. 63)

The couplet begins with indicative mood followed by subjunctive mood but concludes with an imperative mood. In the beginning the poet simply sets the background by stating the situation, and then expresses his desires and concludes it with a command that directly addresses the issue he states in the beginning. The 'sky' symbolizes hope: it can relieve the anxiety and sorrow of the people, but the poet personifies the sky as the tragic disaster which was fallen on the people of Kashmir. The sterility of the sky connotes the indifference of the onlookers: Organization of Islamic Cooperation, South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation and, most important, the United Nations. The final line suggests the vulnerability of Kashmiris who have been suffering the atrocities for more than six decades in the region. Their continuous struggle has not materialized their dream of liberation. They are left with a single way out: to pray for rain. Their supplications are for an unprejudiced mediator to win the world's sympathy.

Ali's poetry compares other oppressed regions afflicted with injustice and brutality to the stark environment of Kashmir. The poet in the eleventh couplet refers to the massacre in Palestine:

Where there were homes in Deir Yassein, you'll see dense forests---

That village was razed. There's no sign of Arabic. (p. 64)

Ali's writing keeps shifting between past, present and future: he immersed himself in the past, mourns over the valley's annihilation and foresees the inevitable drastic repercussions, and then recounts the loss of Arabic language in the present. One of the most inhuman events of recent history is Deir Yassein massacre in which hundreds of people were killed mercilessly by Stern Gang and Irgun, Jewish extremist groups that vacated the whole village (Zeitawi, 1987, p. 57). The destiny of Kashmir passes through the same experiences at the hands of Indian state actors; villages have forcibly been evacuated and were resettled with people of other ethnicities and religions to disturb the ratio of Muslim and Hindu population. In both cases of Deir Yassein and Kashmir, the state-actors, (and extremist groups) evacuated and destroyed the region; the assaulters will soon populate the evacuated places. Furthermore, Kashmir witnessed the loss of identification, language and the rich culture as the people of Deir Yassein saw the disappearance of Arabic. The final autobiographical couplet (*maqta*) reflects his spiritual and psychological state of mind. It starts with an interrogative-cum-indicative mood:

They ask me to tell them what *Shahid* means---?

Listen: it means 'The Beloved' in Persia, 'witness' in Arabic. (p. 64)

This ghazal comes to end with an imperative word 'listen' in the succeeding line of the couplet and this line is preceded by an interrogative mood suggesting Ali's twofold identity: beloved and witness. But this divided self is not meaningless; it has many positive connotations. The words 'The Beloved' and 'witness' are appropriate signifiers of his being beloved of the land and witness of the chaos. Ali, in this unceasing restlessness, has been an eyewitness of disputed history of Kashmir. While dwelling across the Atlantic, he has always been a close observer of the disturbing circumstances in Kashmir. Kashmir dwells in his memory as a burning region. So far as 'The Beloved' is concerned, Ali's aching heart feels the agony of his land's turbulent circumstances of war and unrest. His love for his land is sublime; his imagination cannot afford to eclipse the picture of Kashmir and he reappropriates the shattered picture of the Kashmir valley in his disciplined writing and disjointed memories. Though in all his poetic oeuvre, Ali demonstrates his unparalleled Love for his soil yet the collections: *The Country Without a Post Office* (1997) and *The Beloved Witness: Selected Poems* (1992) mark his unflinching relation with his land.

Ali has adapted one of Makhdoom Mohiuddin's ghazals from his collection. As a renowned ghazalist from India, Mohiuddin has composed ghazals in a traditional way, addressing the lover. He laments the separation of his beloved and mourns the existence of peace, ephemeral evanescent. What the beloved anticipates in the world, where the forces are in a situation of tug of war for power, is mere rumors of spring, not the sojourn of spring:

Rumors of spring --- they last dawn till dusk ---

All eyes decipher branches for blossoms. (p. 68)

Even these rumors entice the people; the revival of peace has been awaited passionately but the utopian dreams are exhausted and the hope of any change in the abysmal disappointment recedes shortly:

Hope extinguished, now nothing else remains ---

Only nights of anguish, these ochre dawns. (p. 68)

Everything is lost: life, land, home, and even a tinge of optimism for a bloodless time in future. Each day the sun rises with shots of fire and sets with bullet-ridden bodies of guiltless Kashmiris, and each coming day echoes a chorus of impending death. But at the same time the eyes are delving for the blossoms; trees of optimism have got branches but they are yet to bloom; rather, branches are mistaken for flowers.

The time and history are in constant flux but, for the oppressors, the present moment seems to have a sense of eternity; the oppressors perpetrate brutalities with a conviction that the world would come to an end with a slight nod of their head. However, the time will expose their lusty hallucination for inhuman power. The time will come, Ali hopes, when the sun lights all the dark nooks and corners of this land and its heat equally warms the frozen relationships of all Kashmiris irrespective of their caste and class; the drops of rain will moisture every deserted part of Kashmir and will make it fertile. There will be a day when this land does not permit any plunderer to extort its precious jewels; there will be a day when peace finds refuge only in Kashmir, Ali prays. That would

be the time when the people of Kashmir will liberate themselves from the shackles of neocolonialism which is colonial continuum in Kashmir.

Analysis of Form

Agha Shahid Ali's distinctive dexterity lies in his adaptation of ghazal in English, and indigenous form in a foreign language. The appropriation of the ghazal form, which is peculiar to Eastern poetic tradition, into a Western language is a unique phenomenon but with the introduction of this poetic genre in the Western literary context, ghazal has earned much popularity among audience as well as poets. The distinguishing feature of this poetic form is its disunity and stringent form among couplets and hence, both form and disunity of ghazal contribute to the production of meaning.

"Tonight" follows the strict form of ghazal both in rhyme (*qafia*) and refrain (*radeef*) set in first two lines of the first couplet, *matla*. The rhyme and refrain appear in each of the succeeding lines of each couplet. The rhyming syllable of this ghazal is 'el' as a spell, expel, tell, etc., while the word 'tonight' is the refrain appearing at the end of each succeeding line in the couplet; this refrain is preceded by the rhymes as 'cell', 'knell' etc. All the rhyming words occurring before the refrain seem to be reverberating throughout the ghazal while most of these rhyming words draw a horrific picture as 'spell', 'cell', 'farewell', 'expel', 'infidel', 'Jezebel', 'well' (water well), 'Hell' and 'knell'. The connotations of these words have implications of ominous time ahead and an impending catastrophe. Despite that all the rhyming words entail a terrible time, the ending rhyming word 'Ishmael' in the last couplet relieves the ghazal from the negative connotations of chaos, destruction, and vandalism by producing a sacred image with positive connotations of revitalization and re-creation of harmonious past which never witnessed such unimaginable disintegration in a pluralistic society. Moreover, the refrain 'tonight' reverberates throughout the poem accompanied by distressing rhyming words. Thus the repetition perpetuates the impression of frequency and recurrence of horrific events which do not come to play once a year, once or twice a month or once or twice a week; rather each falling night and rising day witnesses the traumatic events. Apart from the regular rhyme in this ghazal we find an internal rhyme; 'tell thee' and 'call me'. Moreover, iambic hexameter has been used in most of the lines in which the weak/unstressed syllable is followed by strong/stressed syllable. The resultant rising effect connotes the accelerating unease in the region.

The ghazal "Arabic" does not follow the traditional form and deviates from the tradition of ghazal writing. The beginning of the couplet is set with the refrain 'Arabic' but this refrain is not preceded by a regular rhyming word. The recurring word 'Arabic' seems to imply a sense of loss; loss of Kashmiri identity is juxtaposed with this implied loss. Furthermore, metrical unity is violated in this ghazal and neither a meter nor a stress pattern is followed. Hence, this ghazal is closer to free-verse than a traditional Eastern poetic form. Moreover, the adapted ghazal lacks unity and form; an adapted form can hardly be knit in a skeleton of a foreign language.

The content of his ghazal displays a concrete picture of calamitous events while its form portrays the intensity of barbarity. It also brings to fore the ways of brutal acts and their traumatic effects on individuals. Parveen is right to comment that "Shahid Ali performs hybrid ghazal --- [a traditional Eastern] poetic composition in English and the idealization of the form is as political as the representation of political massacres that frequent Kashmir" (2014, p. 5).

Conclusion

Ghazal has historically been used to mourn the separation between lover and beloved but with the passage of time, there have been transformations and variations in themes and structure. Agha Shahid Ali was the first poet of English ghazal to enumerate the bleak and stark facts of Kashmir. His ghazals are replete with the images of bloodshed and kidnapping. A blend of Western language with Eastern poetic form serves to advocate both the case of Kashmir and the literary diversity of East in West. Kashmir reached the West through the media whose strings are in the hands of Indian government, and the picture the state has depicted the indigenous people is very negative. Without knowing the ground realities of Kashmir, West deemed the stone throwers as terrorists against the well-equipped forces of India. There was none to portray the real picture of Kashmir but late fifties of the twentieth century produced the towering personality of Agha Shahid Ali who waged a literary war from the front. His literary war brought about a realistic and positive picture of Kashmir in West. He yearned to eliminate all

injustice and bloodshed from Kashmir and dreamt of a tranquil piece of land, a heaven on earth, but unfortunately, his dreams could not be materialized in his life. All of his ghazals and other poems, after detailing the heinous crimes, foretell the end of oppression and injustice from Kashmir. In the prevailing circumstances Kashmir does not seem to be heading towards a viable solution. Today the people of Kashmir are looking towards the world peace forums; they are looking for self-proclaimed peace-makers and waiting for the solution of disputed region with the intervention of the United Nations Organization. The fate of these oppressed people is in the hands of three states: India, China, and Pakistan. Each state needs to budge a bit from its stringent stance in order to reach a unanimous conclusion on the issue of Kashmir. The most viable solution is to hold a referendum in all three regions: Indian occupied Kashmir, Ladakh and Pakistani administered Jammu & Kashmir. India had already promised to hold referendum in the occupied regions; Pakistan is also willing on referendum in both the regions; both India and Pakistan can either convince or compel China to agree on the referendum of all the three parts of Kashmir. Now the time is to ponder over the choices and ways to liberate the region from the shackles of despotic rule. It is the dream not only of Ali but of all Kashmiris to be the real owners of their own fate, soul and soil.

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APPENDIX (I)

Ghazal (Tonight)

Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell tonight?
Whom else from rapture's road will you expel tonight?

Those "Fabrics of Cashmere—" "to make Me beautiful—" "Trinket"—to gem—"Me to adorn—How tell"—tonight?

I beg for haven: Prisons, let open your gates—
A refugee from Belief seeks a cell tonight.

Executioners near the woman at the window.
Damn you, Elijah, I'll bless Jezebel tonight.

Has God's vintage loneliness turned to vinegar?
He's poured rust into the Sacred Well tonight.

Lord, cried out the idols, Don't let us be broken;
Only we can convert the infidel tonight.

He's freed some fire from ice in pity for Heaven.
He's left open—for God—the doors of Hell tonight.

In the heart's veined temple, all statues have been smashed.
No priest in saffron's left to toll its knell tonight.

And I, Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee—
God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight.

APPENDIX (II)

Ghazal (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 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.

The sky is stunned, it's become a ceiling of stone.
I tell you it must weep. So kneel, pray for rain in Arabic.

At an exhibition of miniatures, such delicate calligraphy:
Kashmiri paisleys ties 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 qasidas 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 Yassein, 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

APPENDIX (III)

Ghazal

(Adapted from Makhdoom Mohiuddin)

Rumors of spring--- they last from dawn till dusk---
All eyes decipher branches for blossoms.

Your legend now equals our thirst, Beloved---
Your word has spread across broken nations.

Wherever each night I'm lost to myself,
they hear for me of Her--- of Her alone.

Hope extinguished, now nothing else remains---
only nights of anguish these ochre dawns.

The garden's eyes well up, the flower's heart beats
when we speak, just speak of O! forever.

So it has, end forever it should last---
this rumor the Beloved shares our pain.