



Oriental Pearls: Adaptation of Ghazals in Modern American Poetry

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Abstract

Ghazal poetry is a poetic genre which expresses the pains of loss and separation as well as the beauty of the beloved. The form is ancient, originating in Arabic, Hindu and Persian poetry. Ghazal poetry has been introduced into modern American poetry since the midst of the twentieth century after translating some Ghazal poems by the Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib. This paper examines the American adaptations of Ghazal poetry by outstanding modern American poets since the second part of the twentieth century. It argues that “transcultural Orientalism”, which is the product of integration between orientals and occidentals in cross-cultural societies, is a key factor that illustrates the reason behind the American adaptation of Ghazal poetry. Adaptation of Ghazal poetry, by modern American poets intensifies an attempt to dominate the “other” through revisiting the literary trends of its exotic culture. These poets also attempted to create a cultural dialogue through imposing a cross-cultural poetic genre. They introduced Ghazal poetry in a new context which suits more the contemporary issues. However, many American Ghazal poets fell in the trap of infidelity since they viewed it through an outsider’s eyes, ignoring its artistic value and its intellectual substance.

Key words: Adaptation; Exotic; Ghazals; Intellectual intersection; Love; Political issues; Separation

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GHAZAL POETRY IN THE WHEEL OF ADAPTATION

Literary adaptation is a form of intertextuality which encompasses a creative revisiting of recognizable canonical works. It is a process which often “transcodes” the work into a new “set of conventions” in a way that fits in the cultural dimensions of the newly produced text. Hutcheon and O’Flynn’s book *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006) views literary adaptation as a theoretical “revisitations of texts” which frames “dialogic relations among texts.” (p.xiv) It is a multi-layered process which involves a necessary artistic mastery to deconstruct texts, exploring new zones of significance in it. In her book *Adaptation and Appropriation*, Julie Sanders links adaptation to hybridity and she identifies certain techniques related to it as: parallelism, mimicry, amplification, reduction and proximation. She explains that adaptation is a form of reinterpretation or a reworking on texts, determined by the relationship between the “hypotexts” (source texts) and the “hypertexts” (original texts) through which controversial issues can be tackled by refashioning prior texts that have been widely enjoyed by the audience (Sanders, 2000, pp.19-22).

The translation of Ghazal poetry since the second half of the twentieth Century, has resulted in the adaptation of this classical poetic genre by many modern American poets as Adrienne Rich and W. S. Merwin whose Ghazals practiced adjustments to a new literary form despite its metrical complexity and enigmatic nature. The story of Ghazals in modern American poetry; hence began since the 1969 when the Pakistani-American poet Aziz Ahmed invited several well-known poets to work on a pamphlet translating some poems of the Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib, subtitled *Ghazals of Ghalib*. These poems, aside of being love poems which lament the desertion of the beloved, are dimensional explorations of the Indian philosophy and

politics, representing the state of India as it came under British colonialism.

I wish to build,
One such house,
Without a door to enter,
Without the boundary walls,
Thus there will be no neighbours,
And there will be no guard (qtd. In Pollock, 2003, p.34)

Ghazals of Ghalib received certain stature in the American literary community; then several American poets began writing their own Ghazals exploring issues related to their contemporary context within the frame of this original genre.

Ghazal poetry, in general, is a call for freedom since it seeks to liberate suppressed feelings of love and longing which are forbidden from classical Eastern cultures. It has a musical quality, dynamism and rebellious mood which attracted the modern American poets to it as an exotic trend through which they could explore controversial issues as politics, homosexuality and feminine equality. Ghazal poetry, which can be lexically translated as poetry of “flirtation”, is a principal form of Urdu poetry. It is an important lyric form in Arabic, Persian and Hindu poetry which provides the basis for popular love songs. It spread into south Asia in the twelfth century under the influence of the new Islamic Sultanate courts and Sufi mystics. It was also echoed widely in Europe during the early nineteenth century especially in Germany which witnessed the first imitations of Persian Ghazals by Goethe and other German poets.

Ghazals often reveal feelings of pain, sorrow out of separation and the beauty of the “mahboba” despite that pain. The speaker in a Ghazal poem is usually a deserted lover who suffers from an unattainable love or unfaithful beloved. Many Ghazal poems are sometimes mystical in the sense that the beloved becomes a “metaphorical image of God”; Divine love becomes a model for all the other forms of love that are found in Ghazal poetry, evoking emotions of “melancholy and longing”. (Baldick, 2001, p.105).

Radif (refrain) and *Qaafiyaa* (rhyme) are the main formal conventions of Ghazal poetry. *Radif*, which is claimed to be invented by Baghdadis as a poetic tradition in colloquial verse to narrate public tales and legends, is a one-word or few words, repeated at the second line of each couplet of a Ghazal poem preceded by a “rhyme”. Like the sonnet, Ghazal poetry follows a special system of rhyme-scheme. It consists a series of couplets held together by a refrain and its rhyme scheme is (a/a, b/a, c/a, d/a). Its rhythm is common but loosely related in theme or subject. Beside the refrain, it has alternative rhyming couplets. It usually has five or more couplets which may lack thematic unity with each other, except for the formal unity derived from a strict rhyme and rhythmic metre. *Takhallus* is one of the conventions of Ghazal poetry,

wherein the name of the poet is sometimes mentioned somewhere at the end of the poem to fulfill “the metrical uniqueness of the poem.” (Hawley, 2001, p.106)

Adaptation of Ghazals in modern American poetry has been projected by “orientalists” aspirations for transcultural societies to attain deeper insights into the exotic culture of the “other”. Transcultural Orientalism is a further and more flexible step beyond European Orientalism. It is the product of cultural integration between occidentals and postcolonial orientals, producing a “transcultural approach that acknowledges cultural relativism and humanitarianism” (Nakamura, 1997, p.7) In his seminal book *Orientalism*, Edward Said explores the meaning of orientalism as a “Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority” over the East, through bringing it into Western Consciousness. He refers to the Orient as “the stage on which the whole East is confined.” (Said, 2003, p.17) Said affirms that the East is represented through the imaginative insight of the Western average as an alien, exotic and backward culture. It exists only to intensify the idea of the cultural supremacy of the West which is always seen as moral, rational, good and strong. Transcultural Orientalism explores the values which are produced by intercultural differences in transcultural societies.

Being a country of the highest immigration rate, the USA has been developed into a transcultural society where the possibility of learning different cultural and educational trends has been developed. This fact has impacted the literary scene there, where authors from different ethnic groups have practiced adjustments to new literary forms and traditions. In her essay *Arts of the Contact Zone* Mary Louise Pratt discusses the idea of “contact zone” as the point where cultures meet other or clash with each other often in a context of highly symmetrical relations of power such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today. She explores the power of language as a key factor in the concept of “transculturation” and as part of the contact zone:

Languages were seen as living in “speech communities”, and these tended to be theorized as discrete, self-defined, coherent entities, held together by a homogeneous competence or grammar shared identically and equally among all the members. (Pratt & Petrosky, 1999, p.6)

Pratt’s essay shows how ideas can be transmitted from an alien culture and re-introduced in a way that suits a new cultural context. Trans-culturalism, in this sense, gives an opportunity of cultural interaction, correspondence and exchanging of ideas. One example of this is the adaptation of Ghazal poetry by modern American poets who attempted to manipulate it in a way that fits into the modern American context. American Ghazals, for this reason, are part of the cultural intersection, using the

poetic frame of the Ghazal to impose specific American ideologies.

Ghazal poetry has a special form of its own and it explores subjects of love, Sufism and colonial resistance since the addressee is not necessarily a woman, but rather God or the speaker's nation. American Ghazal poets could not, perfectly, handle this genre since most of their poems deviate from the rhythmic form and they deviated from the idea of Platonic and mystical love to explore other themes as homosexuality and intellectual intersection. Adrienne Rich, as a case in point, sought to re-inscribe the traditional form of Ghazal poetry, introducing it into a new feminist and political context. Being a lesbian, a feminist and a rebel against the prevailing social standards, Rich wrote Ghazal poems which express her voice of resentment. She published two collections of this genre: *Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib* (1968), and *The Blue Ghazals* (1969). Then in 1994, Rich published one more Ghazal poem entitled "Late Ghazal" which appeared in her collection *Dark Fields of the Republic* (1995). Rich, who claimed modeling her Ghazals on those of Ghalib, attempted to present "American and Twentieth-century Ghazals" without defeating the traditional strategy of this form, offering a balance between the modern American experience and the verse techniques of Ghazal poetry (Bermann, p.101). She aspired to employ this form to express issues of feminist consciousness and solidarity in addition to political issues related to her age. She found in the rebellious mood of Ghazal poetry the vehicle through which she could develop a feminist language that defied the established conventional system. She explored images and themes to resist the dominant narrative of patriarchy and to explore new modes of feminist experience. Rich describes her Ghazal poems saying:

My Ghazals are personal and public, American and twentieth-century; but they owe much to the presence of Ghalib in my mind: A poet who owned no property and borrowed his books, writing in an age of political and cultural break-up. (quoted in: Pollock, 2003, p.37)

Rich aimed at bringing together "Oriental with western needs"; however many critics agree that she couldn't attain fully "cultural reconciliation and cross racial identification." (Caplan, 2004, p.115) In her poem "Late Ghazal", Rich revisits the theme of separation of lovers and the pain it causes, which is pivotal in traditional Ghazal poetry, to evoke the idea of separation between a poet and his verse. Poets grasp the music of life in words which serve as the afterthoughts of experience:

Life always pulsed harder than the lines.
Do you remember the strands that ran from eye to eye?
The tongue, that reached everywhere, speaking all the parts?
Everything there was cast in an image of desire.
The imagination's cry is a sexual cry.
I took my body anyplace with me.
In the thickets of abstraction my skin ran with blood.

Life was always stronger . . . the critics couldn't get it.
Memory says the music always ran ahead of the words.

(qtd.in Caplan, 2004, p.118)

A separation occurs between a poet and his poetry when he/she is unable to create a transformative way of writing that would change the mentality of generations of readers. A poet, according to Rich should use a liberal language in writing poetry that would "connect the fragments within us and replenish our desires" otherwise a poet would be separated from his writings (Ibid., p.122). Rich suggests the idea that separation between a poet and his poetry is a painful loss

In her collection *The Blue Ghazals*, Rich employs the genre of Ghazal poetry for the sake of call and response, which are one of the important literary traditions of Afro-American literature. Her blue Ghazals, in other words, are a response to the blues of the Afro-American poet Amiri Baraka. The tone of Baraka's blues is full of grief and pain, usually in a woman's voice, Rich, for this reason, uses a tone that is full of energy and vitality in her blue Ghazals to respond to those of Baraka. She uses images of the sea in these poems to signify the idea of nature's fluidity. Women, like the sea, are sources of fluidity and life's continuity. The blue color, in this sense, becomes a source of life and vitality, rather than a reference to sadness and stagnation. In a Ghazal poem in this collection, Rich explores the power of love which can transform people, highlighting the parallelism between male's dominance and female's powerlessness. She uses images of "sea", "float" and "tide" to suggest transformation as opposed to the images of the "old house", "night" and 'dead man' which symbolize the unchanging, outworn conventions:

Violently asleep in the old house.
A clock stays awake all night ticking.
Turning, turning their bruised leaves
The trees stay awake all night in the wood
Talk to me with your body through my dreams
Tell me what we are going through.
To float like a dead man in a sea of dreams
And half those dreams being
dreamed by someone else.
Fifteen years of sleepwalking with you
Wading against the tide, and with the tide.

The speaker has a dream of change that would wade against the tide of old conventions and with the tide of newness.

Despite the fact that the title of *The Blue Ghazals* has an intertextual relation with Ghazal poetry and the poet herself mentions that its poems are modeled after those of Ghalib, these poems are poor examples of Ghazal poetry since they deviate both from its form and content. They lack the rhyme and refrain, which a true Ghazal poem should have, and their content expresses no feelings of separation except that they could signify the separation which exists between "what is" and "what should be" or

separation between liberty and old conventions. These poems can be described, as the Kashmiri- American poet Agha Shahid Ali puts it “an insult to the true tradition of his culture...” (Hawley, 2001, p.38) Agha, though, acknowledges his admiration to the translations of some American poets, as Rich, to Ghazal poetry, considering them “real accomplishments”, affirms that these poets “simply did not bother themselves with the form” when they wrote their own Ghazals, probably because the original form did not suit the political context of the sixties and seventies of the Twentieth century (Shahid, 2000, p.11).

Unlike, Rich, W. S. Merwin confines himself more to the main conventions of Ghazal poetry like Radif, Qaafiyaa and couplets’ disunity. He also adapts the theme of loss and separation in Ghazal poetry, introducing it in a way that serves the modern American context. In his poem *The Cause Way*, Merwin explores the theme of cultural isolation at cross-cultural communities and the bridge between the East and the West that are passed with fear and worry. Loss of love and separation of lovers in traditional Ghazal poetry become a loss of integration and cultural separation at cross-cultural communities:

This is the bridge where at dusk they hear Voices
Far out in the meres and marshes or they Say they hear voices
The bridge shakes and no one else is Crossing at this hour
Somewhere along here is where they hear voices
The sounds pronounce an older utterance out of the shadows
Sometimes stifled sometimes carried from clear voices
(qtd. In Fraizer, 1999, p.46)

This poem is composed of fourteen lines. It is closer to the original form of Ghazals in its monorhyme (qafiya) and the repetition of the word “voices” as a refrain (radif) at the end of the second line of each couplet. However, Merwin frees himself of the traditional form of Takallus when he says “my own name” without direct reference to his name:

Some may have spoken in my own name in
an earlier language
when last they drew breath in the kingdom
of their voices

Merwin’s poem evokes the theme of disintegration and interrelatedness of the American society, despite its cross-cultural nature. It is a true revisit of Ghazal poetry for he recalls the traditional mood of Ghazal poetry, taking into account the socio-political changes.

CONCLUSION

Ghazal poetry has been increasingly becoming popular in American poetry as a result of transcultural orientalism, despite the metrical complexity and the enigmatic nature of this form which makes its adaptation a challenge to American Ghazal poets. Most of American Ghazal poems could not observe the same degree of fidelity to the original form since they lack cohesion, symmetry and understanding of the original structure and of the native culture in which it evolved. The Modern American poets who experimented with the genre of Ghazal viewed it with an eye of an outsider who could not fully comprehend the Eastern literary tradition. Despite their deviations, the modern American poets who experimented with Ghazal poetry sought to construct a trans-cultural poetic genre that would confront the contradictions of the modern age.

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