

Urdu Ghazal

The Poetic String of Pearls

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‘iṣq par zor nahīm hai yah vah ātiś ḡālib
ki lagāye na lage aur bujhāye na bane
Ghalib! love is a fire that lights itself
and dies out of itself, beyond our wills.

The theme of love (*‘iṣq*) and the poetic genre of ghazal (*ḡazal*) have been inseparably tied to each other since the times when pre-Islamic Bedouin poets started expressing their overwhelming feelings of passion and loneliness in this intricate form. But although the literary tradition of ghazal can be traced as far back as the times of the Abbasids’ court and its most famous poet Abū Nuvās who lived and wrote his ghazals at the turn of the 8th century (d. 814), the actual blossoming of this genre in its complex and sublime form took place in medieval Persia. The great Persian poet Rūdakī (858-941) is considered to be the true originator of the ghazal in its classical shape. Among other important authors who composed Persian ghazals are Amīr Xusrau (1253-1325), Sa‘dī Šīrāzī (d. 1291), Jāmī (1414-1492), ‘Urfī (1555-1590) and, above all, the greatest master of the art of ghazal, Ḥāfīz Šīrāzī (1320-1389). The Urdu ghazal has emerged from its Persian model both in structure and in texture, becoming one of the major elements of the Indo-Persian culture.

During hundreds of years of its evolution, the Urdu ghazal developed a set of expressions and vocabulary legitimated by tradition and manifesting itself in a vast array of allusions, similes, metaphors, and historical or legendary references. The whole selection of semantic tools known as *taǧazzul* embodies such key concepts as: the tavern (*maixāna*, *šarāb-xāna*) and drinker (*maikaš*, *sarmast*, *šarābī*), wine (*bāda*, *mai*, *šarāb*, *šahbā*), goblet (*paimāna*, *jām*, *pyāla*, *sāsar*), a cup-bearer at the wine-party (*sāqī*), intoxication (*bad-mastī*, *xumār*, *naša*), spiritual mentor (*pīr*, *šaix*), madness (*junūn*, *saudā*), the candle (*čirās*, *qindīl*, *šam*^c) and the moth (*parvāna*), the rose (*gul*) and the nightingale (*bulbul*), the falcon (*jurra*, *šāhbāz*, *šikra*) and the hunted bird, the lightning (*bijlī*, *barq*) striking the nest (*āšiyāna*), and many more, as well as the historical or legendary figures, like Joseph (famous for his beauty), Jesus (the giver of life), Solomon (the wise), famous Arabian lovers Qays (known also as Majnūn – the madman) and Laila or their Persian counterparts Farhād and Širīn, etc. All these, used as catalytic agents, are arranged and employed according to a poet's imagination and sensibility with only one aim: to describe his love and the whole range of associate feelings like sadness, loneliness, yearning, longing, desire or devotion.

Love is the central theme of the ghazal and its conception is highly idealistic and sensuous. This peculiar kind of love, being one of the ghazal's hallmarks, is often contrasted by the critics and connoisseurs with sensual love manifested in typical love poems, in which love and the loved one are identified and never separated. However, love depicted in the ghazal is first and foremost one-sided and unrequited, platonic (or even spiritual) but at the same time irresistible, sublime and idealising both the object of love and the lover's emotion. The probable crucial reason which has motivated the evolution of such a concept of love was the fact that love pictured in ghazals was illicit in its character, as for the member of the purdah society there existed only three possibilities to experience love, and all three of them were socially not allowed: love for a woman

betrothed or married to another man, love for a courtesan, and homosexual love for a young and beautiful boy.

On the other hand, it must be remembered that the greatest mystics and masters of Persian ghazal of 11th-12th centuries used this poetic form as a medium for voicing and disseminating their ideas and – as the Urdu ghazal exactly follows the Persian model – sometimes the feelings that are expressed in it are not directed towards a human beloved (*‘išq-e majāzī*) but towards God, Supreme Power, the absolute (*‘išq-e ḥaqīqī*). It is not always obvious who is the beloved described by a poet – quite often the object of affection might be equally either human or divine (or sometimes even both in the same ghazal). This uncertainty of the beloved’s identity is deepened additionally by the Urdu convention of using the masculine gender equally for the lover (*‘āšiq*) and the beloved (*ma‘šūq*), which is again a consequence of the faithful imitating of the Persian pattern, where the lack of grammatical gender implies the lack of definition of the beloved’s sex. As Faruqi recapitulates aptly: “The liberation of the beloved from the constraints of gender identity enabled the poet to use all possibilities as it suited him” (Faruqi 1999: 18).

What might be really surprising for the Western reader of the ghazal is the fact that the technical term for mystic love is *ḥaqīqī*, meaning ‘real’, while earthly love is defined as *majāzī*, ‘metaphorical’. However, the difference in terminology reflects the major distinction between worldly love and divine love as it was understood by Çūfī mystics (again the idea which has come to Urdu poetry from its Persian elder sibling). The first one (*‘išq-e majāzī*), conceived as mortal and being so – not lasting forever but having its definite ending point, cannot be real or genuine. Arising from the beauty of transient forms, this temporal love is also transient, but at the same time it plays a very important role, serving as a model for the divine-human relationship, and being the first step towards the other type of love, the true one (*‘išq-e ḥaqīqī*), it can ultimately lead to the complete and eternal union of the lover (devotee) and the beloved (God).

Such a twofold perception of the idea of love is based partly on the Çūfī belief that all earthly phenomena reflect the beauty of God (so the poetic image of a beautiful woman can reveal the divine enchantment very well), and partly on the deep conviction (borrowed from Arabian scholars, but originating from Greek medicine and philosophy) that love in its human dimension is a kind of a serious disease, a physical illness located in the heart or the liver, for which there is no cure but to unite the sufferer with the beloved (it was a fundamental remedy for love-sickness, recommended e.g. by Avicenna). And due to the fact that such unification in real life was absolutely unattainable because of social circumstances, the only solution would be to replace the impossible to fulfill, illicit passion with mystical love that eventually consolidates the lover with the Supreme Beloved in his infinity, eternity and immortality.

The beauty of the beloved in the ghazal is always described in incredibly exaggerated and exceedingly conventional terms, with the use of a whole collection of similes and metaphors. Her figure therefore resembles a slender cypress, her eyes are like narcissus and ears like rose petals:

ruk se gul kar mūl liyā qāmat se sarv gulām kiyā

Her face more precious than a rose, her figure enslaves a cypress.

nargis kī ānkh kī qasm, aur gul ke kān kī

I swear on the eye of a narcissus, and on the ear of a rose.

The curled locks of the beloved are likened to a hyacinth or to the coils of a snake:

gesū kī kis ke laṭ nazar āī, jo bās meñ

mār-e siyāh ṭurra sunbul ne gāš kiyā

Because of the curls of her locks that came into sight in the garden

the black serpent swooned and the ringlets of the hyacinth fainted.

A nose to a jasmine bud:

tujh ko qasm hai sunča-e zanbaq kī nāk kī

You have my oath sworn on the nose of a white jasmine bud!
A chin to a well (and a dimple in the chin is compared to the
lustre of water in a well):

tuj nīr-e ṭhuḍḍī kī phabī hai °īse kā bārā

The grace of water in the well of your chin is the power of Jesus
Radiant prettiness of her face might be compared only to the
sunshine:

°araq kī būnd us kī zulf se ruxsār par ṭapkī

ta°ajjub kī hai jāgah yah puṛī xūršīd par šabnam

A bead of sweat dropped from her lock on her cheek.

How astonishing! The dew fell down on the sun!

It overshadows every other light in the same way, as the real
beauty of God eclipses the insignificant and worthless earthly
splendour:

rāt-e majlis meñ tere ḥusn ke šu°le ke ḥuzūr

šam° ke munh pe jo dekhā to kahīñ nūr na thā

Last night in the attendance of the flames of your splendour

the countenance of the candle which I looked at had no radiance

at all.

The beloved is the most beautiful of all the beauties:

garči sab xūbrū haiñ xūb vale

qatl kartī hai mīrzā kī adā

Even though all beauties are beautiful,

the charm of my beloved is deadly.

jag ke xūbāñ kā namak ho ke namak parvardah

čhup rahā ā ke tere lab ke namakdān meñ ā

The piquancy of the earth's beauties has become your servant,
and remains concealed in the salt-cellar of your lips.

However, the sight of her killing beauty is impossible to bear for
the lover and is so powerful, that it might appear deadly even for
herself:

dašna-e samza jāñ satāñ, nāvak-e nāz be panāh

terā hī°aks-e rux sahī, sāmne tere ā°e kyoñ?

The dagger of the amorous glance torments the soul, the arrow of coquetry makes refuge impossible, indeed, how it is possible that the reflection of your face could appear in front of you?

*tāb-e naz̄āra nahīn āina kiyā dekhne dūn
aur bin jā'eñge taṣvīr jo ḥairān hoñge*

I shall not let her ogle in the mirror and cast these burning glances at herself

lest she utterly bewildered turn into a picture.

Love, this incapacitating affection, unfulfilled and never reciprocated, indicates a compelling wish of the lover to stay with or even possess the beloved. And although he is well aware of the fact that it must never happen, that he is not allowed even to see or to touch his *ma'sūq* (beloved), yet he is begging for any kind of sensual contact – let it be visual:

*tujh ghar kī ṭaraf sundar ātā hai valī dā'im
muštāq hai daršan kā ṭuk daras dikhātī jā*

O my beautiful! Vali comes constantly near your house, desiring only to see you, so give him sometimes a glance! auditory:

*Is rain andherī meñ mat bhūl parūn tis sūn
ṭuk pā'oñ ke bičhvoñ kī āvāz sunātī jā*

Still I may lose my mind in the darknes of that night so at least let me hear the sound of the toe-rings on your feet. or physical:

deṭī je-kuč tūñ gāliyāñ de bose dilāve nā

Among all the abuses you give me why don't you give me a kiss!

The experience of this love, closely intertwined with the deepest suffering of the lover, has in fact a physical dimension and its effects on him are apparent in physical symptoms. The lover can neither sleep nor eat, he does not find pleasure in anything unconnected with his beloved:

piyārī terī bičhṛe the rain munj nīnd āve nā

tūñ qudrat kī ghaṛī tuj bin ghaṛī pīrat mū bhāve nā

O my dear one, sleep does not come to me at night since we are parted.

Nature has created you so that without you I cannot find even a little pleasure in love

The reason which causes the most terrible tortures for the lover is the insufferable separation from the beloved:

*piyā bāj piyālā piyā jā^oe nā
piyā bāj yak til jiyā jā^oe nā
kahethe piyā bin ṣabūrī karūñ
kahiya jā^oe ammā kiyā jā^oe nā*

Without my beloved to drink from the cup is impossible.

Without my beloved to live even for a split second is impossible.

How can I be forbearing without my beloved?

It is possible to declare but to do – impossible.

*jū-e xūñ ānkhoñ se bahne do ki hai šām firāq
maiñ yah samjhūñga ki šam^e en do furozān ho ga^oñ*

This is the night of separation and regret so let the stream of blood flow down my eyes.

I would fancy them as two inflamed candles.

Because of the insatiable longing and permanent soreness, the order of his bodily functions becomes disturbed and their proper balance is upset to such a degree that even a physical illness can ensue. The disease of love-sickness starts affecting the whole body and can be potentially lethal to the sufferer:

*ulṭī ho ga^oñ sab tadbīreñ kuch na davā ne kām kiyā
dekhā is bīmārī-e dil ne āxir kām tamām kiyā*

All my judgments have been changed and no cure was effective.

See, the heart-sickness has finally put an end to my life!

The cure for this dreaded disease does not lie in the compendium of medical knowledge and the specialists are unable even to diagnose the ailment:

prīt tere kūñ luqmān bhī sake nā dārū dene kūñ

For your love nobody can provide the remedy, even Lukman can not.

Only the beloved appears to possess both the skill to diagnose and the power to cure:

junūn-e ʿišq meñ mujkūñ nahīñ zanjīr kī ḥājat

agar merī xabar lene kūñ vah zulf darāz āve

I would need no chain in the madness of love,
if only that lady with long curls pays me a call!

The life-giving power of the beloved, correlated with the sense of seeing (or hearing), could easily heal the lover and annihilate the symptoms and effects of disease (i.e. of love-sickness):

Muḥabbat meñ nahīm hai farq jine aur marne kā

Us ko dekhkar jite haiñ jis kāfir par dam nikle

In affection to live and to die makes no difference.

We live while seeing the beloved for whom we are dying.

kyā zidd hai xudā jānte mujh sath va gar nā

kāfī hai tasallī ko merī ek nazr bhī

God knows how wicked she is to me, and if it were otherwise,
even her one glance at me would be consoling.

kyoñ tū ne āxir āxir is vaqt munh dikhāyā

dī jān mīr ne jo ḥasrat se ik nigah kar

Why you let me see your face at this very last moment?

Mir yielded up his life desiring just one glance.

But the object of a poet's passion in the ghazal remains cold, indifferent, even cruel to the lover. Her cruelty may be genuine, or may be used as a metaphor of her indifference or physical distance from the lover. He however, would prefer death at the hands of the beloved rather than her indifference, all the more so because to die for the beloved is regarded by him as good fortune:

sun le ek bāt merī tū ki ramaq hai bāqī
phir suxan tujh se sitam gār karūñ yā na karūñ
 Listen to one thing I say, as I have the very last breath left.
 Should I then speak to you or not, o cruel tyrant?
ḥarf nahīñ jāñ baxšī meñ us kī xūbī apnī qismat kī
ham se jo pahle ki bhejā so marne kā paisām kiyā

No harm that she distributes her life-giving goodness.
 The first message she sent me was my death-sentence.

The more persistently the lover tries to get her favours, the more unmoved and unreachable is the beloved:

kām hūñ haiñ sāre zā'e har sāt kī samājat se
istisnā kī cau-gunī un ne jūñ jūñ maiñ ibrām kiyā

All my doings have been fruitless for I spent every moment on flattery.

Her haughtiness increased fourfold the more I was pestering.

Even if she sees his torments and hears his lamentations, she would do nothing to alleviate the lover's suffering:

mat guṣṣe ke šu'le sūñ jalte kūñ jalātī jā
ṭuk mihr ke pāñī sūñ yah āg bujhātī jā

Do not let the flames of anger burn the one already aflame,
 rather with the water of affection try to quench this fire!

And when she has had enough adoration, she mercilessly sends him far away, although she is well aware of the fact that for a lover this can be tantamount to death from love-sickness:

saudā terī faryād se ānkhoñ meñ kaṭī rāt
āñ ho saḥar hone ko ṭuk tū kahīñ mar bhī

Sauda, I had a sleepless night because of your lamentation.

Now the dawn has almost come, you also go and die somewhere!

Overwhelmed by the feeling of the deepest pain and calamity, the lover little by little withdraws from the real world and sinks into a madness-like state, letting the inner fervency consume both his body and his mind:

*tujh^c iṣq meñ jal jal kar sab tan ko kiyā kajāl
yah rošnī afzā hai ankhen ko lagātī jā*

In love for you my entire body has burnt and turned to soot.
Put it on your eyes, it makes the glance brighter

*rain-dīn kūj jāne nā jo koṛī jīv^c āṣiq hai terā
lagayā hai yād yūñ terā ki bhaṛī kuj yād āve nā*

Your true lover discerns nothing for all the days and nights.

And while he starts to remember you he can remember nothing

He cares no more for the earthly existence, leaves his friends and family and wanders into the real or allegorical desert, where he lives the life of a recluse. The lover's fever of passion is fired to such a heat that his subjectivity is being melted down. He suffers the love's torment "only to find on the other side a desert expanse with no identifiable features, in which one can never establish one's orientation" (Kugle 2007: 575):

*dardmandān ko bajuz dard nahīñ ṣaid murād
ae, ṣah, malik-e junūñ, sam ke biyābān meñ ā!*

Without pain those who are afflicted cannot capture their prey.

O, lord of madness, come into the wilderness of grief!

barsoñ^c azāb dekhe qarnoñ ta^c ab uṭhāte

yah dil ḥazīñ huvā hai kyā kyā jafāṛīñ sah kar

For years we suffered torments, for ages experienced grief,
after so many injuries the heart has been mourning.

His madness, caused by deepest suffering of unfulfilled love, is rather a spiritual state resulting from absolute resignation, which is the highest form of love. Finally, the lover burns in the flame of separation, becoming at the same time liberated from every earthly

affair and cleansing his sinful heart of all longing for the world, which is a necessary condition for experiencing the real, mystic love:

quṭb šah na de muj divāne ko pand

divāne kūñ kuč pand diyā jā^e nā

Do not give, Qutb Shah, any counsel to me – a madman.

To a madman no counsel could be given.

ranj se xo-gar huva insān, to miṭ jā^{tā} hai ranj

muškileñ mujh par paṛeñ itnī ki āsān ho ga^eñ

When a man gets used to suffer grief, the grief becomes obliterated.

I have had to endure many troubles and now they are easy to bear.

He is like a moth that flutters around the blaze of the candle which symbolises the absolute. The relative existence of the lover is burned in the beloved's fire in the same way as a moth burns in the flame of a candle:

majlis meñ rāt ek tere partave basair

kyā šam^c kyā patang har ek be ḥuṣūr thā

At the gathering last night deprived of your splendour,

there was no candle, no moth, there was nobody at all.

jān se bezār hūñ ik šam^c rū ke ^cišq meñ

sāth lekar mujh ko kar de āg meñ parvāna āj

I am displeased with life, with love for her with the face radiant as candlelight.

Let today the moth carry me away and immolate me in the fire!

Death is therefore the greatest success for a lover, the most desirable achievement, which brings him respite and release from suffering, and gives him hope for the future everlasting union with his beloved. The lover perishes when he abandons himself and becomes alive while he inclines towards the absolute. Emptied of himself, changed into nothing, the lover finally finds eternal love and eternal life.

* * *

In conclusion, perhaps it would be worth to ask a question: why ghazal, this poetic ‘string of pearls’, which is characterised by so highly conventionalised aesthetics, and which has a natural tendency to being complex, metaphysical, even philosophical – why does this very form today still enjoy great prestige as well as immense popularity among both South Asian authors and incredibly large numbers of recipients?

The fundamental secret of success which Urdu ghazal has been enjoying for the last several hundred years is probably the fact, that it also very strongly corresponds to the less sophisticated, but absolutely basic human needs: the need for love and the need for being loved. Even though ‘*išq*’ depicted in ghazal – be it earthly or divine – is experienced in separation and can never be fulfilled, and even though pain and anguish are their distinctive marks – still, or perhaps because of that, the challenges of this love are considered to constitute the very essence of humanity, and to create the emotional core of every human being.

Leaving such love unexpressed would not be possible. This is the obvious truth for all those individuals, who love with passion although without hope for fulfilment, who suffer endless longing and insatiable desire, who in a physical, sensuous way can feel the inconsolable soreness of being separated by the distance or social bounds from the one they love.

The poetic and metaphorical space of ghazal becomes the right expanse where all these feelings and all these experiences can be manifested and communicated, expressed, found and compared...

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