Ghazals in Malayalam

Translated by Ibrahim Badshah

Translator's Preface

In my teenage years of living in Kerala, the southwest coast of the Indian subcontinent, the word *ghazal* for me was synonymous with the songs sung by Umbayee, the legendary Malayalam ghazal singer. In my imagination of ghazals, the performers always used a harmonium and tabla. They sat on the stage, wearing kurtas and sleeveless jackets with shawls around their necks, and sang melodies about love and longing. Any such performances of love songs in this style, sitting down and accompanied by the harmonium, became ghazals in my imagination. It was only after moving to Delhi in 2017 that I got to know the genre of ghazals up close, the expanse of their sensibilities, and their rich tradition in Urdu. I spent days and nights obsessing over the magical feel of singers such as Mehdi Hassan, Ghulam Ali, Jagjit Singh, Farida Khanum, and Abida Parveen. The city also gave me the occasional chance to listen to performances by popular singers such as Radhika Chopra, Shakeel Ahmad, and Sithara. I encountered numerous such singers and poets as I frequented literary festivals in Central Park and Urdu Ghar, such as the Jashn-e-Rekhta festival.

Yet it took me many more years to learn about the history of ghazals and the strict formal characteristics that Urdu poets followed, as well as the evolution of ghazals across the languages and literary traditions. Years later, taking a graduate seminar on medieval poetics at the University of Houston, I decided to connect all these dots—my decade-long interests in classical Arabic poetry, Urdu ghazals, and the Malayalam ghazal albums—and wrote a paper delineating the journey of ghazal. My translations here, therefore, were initially the results of that critical pursuit. The attempt to translate them is part of the activity of connecting the dots: an attempt to see the larger picture, to see these poems in relation to one another. Particularly from the vantage point of the world literature debate, this "peripheral" channel of literary circulation—which was "central" in the precolonial times—is indeed an interesting case. Such comparison, however, is not an attempt to privilege one form over the other or to pass judgment on which of these is real and which is imposter. Rather, I want to look at these distinct traditions on their own terms, which

are influencing and being influenced by adjacent traditions. To this end, it is generative to begin this inquiry from classical Arabic poetry.

Ghazal is believed to have derived from pre-Islamic Arabic qasida tradition. The classical qasida, a polythematic ode that can be traced back to circa 500 CE, started with a *nasib*, in which the poet would lament the loss of a beloved and recall his romantic adventures in an erotic manner, often recollecting their conversations. During the Umayyad period (seventh–eighth centuries CE), a major shift happened in this tradition. According to the literary historian Hanna Al-Fakhouri,[1] four major changes happened during this period: (a) The ghazal became a stand-alone genre, composed for its own sake, and called thus; (b) it became more meaningful compared to the nasib; (c) it became more vernacular, using layman's language; and (d) its rhythm became more sophisticated. Nasibs, which narrated the external realities of separation and the details of sexual encounters, gave way to ghazals, which are more emotional and reflect the poet's interiority in an everyday language. Notably, the ghazal did not have a distinct form besides the form of classical Arabic poetry.

This, however, changed when ghazal traveled to Persia. As Thomas Bauer and Angelika Neuwirth explain, the ghazal came to be defined "exclusively through formal criteria: five to twelve verses; continuous rhyme plus a double rhyme in the first verse; often echo rhyme (*radif*) as well as the mentioning of the poet's pen-name in the last verse (*takhallus*)."[2] In the Persian tradition, a couplet was called *sher*, the first couplet *matla*, and the concluding couplet *maqta*. As another major shift, the theme of love was often replaced by several other subjects, including wine, devotion, and panegyrics (composed by later poets, such as Jalaluddin Rumi in the 13th century and Hafiz Shirazi in the 14th century). These two new trends were instrumental in bringing about the understanding of the genre of ghazal based solely on form, rather than subject matter, especially as the genre

[1] See Hanna Al-Fakhouri, *Tarīkh al-Adab al-ʿArabi* (تاريخ الأدب العربي) (*The History of Arabic Literature*), (St. Paul Press, 1951), 247–52.

[2] Couplets in these ghazals end with the same word, which will be the *radif* of the ghazal. Right before the *radif*, there will be a rhyme, known as *qāfiya*. See Thomas Bauer and Angelika Neuwirth's introduction to *Ghazal as World Literature I: Transformations of a Literary Genre* (Ergon Verlag, 2005), 19.

traveled to the Indian subcontinent. As Anisur Rahman puts it, "It was in India that the ghazal found its most hospitable destination."[3] Ghazals in India were first written in Persian, then in Urdu starting in the 16th century, rigorously following the formal characteristics brought by the Persian tradition. A significant shift in Urdu tradition was an increase in musical adaptations of ghazals. From the mid-20th century, ghazal was closely associated with the performances by singers who specialized in this genre, gaining an unprecedented scale of fame and recognition arguably due to the prevalence of recording technology.

It is from this singing tradition or genre of music, rather than the age-old poetic tradition, that Malayalam ghazals took their inspiration. This history is crucial to understanding Malayalam ghazals. P. A. Ibrahim, known by his pseudonym Umbayee, popularized ghazals in Kerala, first by singing Urdu ghazals and later by producing Malayalam ghazal albums. However, the first album of ghazals that he produced in Kerala, titled *Aadaab* (1992), was in Urdu, a language the vast majority of the Kerala population did not understand. Malayalam ghazal had to wait a few more years to appear. It was Venu V. Desam who wrote the first known ghazals in Malayalam, and Umbayee rendered them and produced the album in 1998 titled *Pranamam*. This album set the trend for the ones to come, by inventing a unique style that blended nature and love, and by not adhering to the rules of Urdu ghazal form. That is not to say the album was denouncing the ghazal's characteristics. These compositions were mostly written as independent couplets, as was the case in all the preceding traditions, including the qasida tradition of Arabic. They also follow a meter and have rhymes; some of them have the echo rhyme at least in part, and some even include the poet's name in the final couplet. That was the beginning; the following years witnessed several ghazal albums appearing in Malayalam, in which the poets experimented with the form in varying degrees. The translations included here are representative of these various trends in Malayalam ghazals, and they make a fair attempt to show

[3] See Anisur Rahman, ed. and trans., *Hazaaron Khwahishein Aisi: The Wonderful World of Urdu Ghazals* (HarperCollins Publishers India, 2019), 15.

the formal characteristics of these compositions, while also showing the thematic unity they have maintained.

Umbayee had a monopoly in Malayalam ghazal performances for over a decade and produced more than 20 albums of ghazals during his lifetime, collaborating with prominent poets such as ONV Kurup, K. Satchidanandan, and Yusufali Kechery. Sachidanandan's collection of ghazals, titled *Ghazalukal Geethangal* (2004), attempted to present the Malayalam ghazal as a unique form of its kind, which the author defined as something closer to Azad Ghazal (free ghazal) and Rabindra Sangeet (the songs by Rabindranath Tagore). Moreover, Satchidanandan expressed his skepticism toward bringing political themes into ghazals. His compositions centered on the themes of love, longing, nature, childhood, and nostalgia. ONV Kurup also wrote ghazals in a similar fashion—around the theme of love—and built the longest partnership with Umbayee. The latter's fame as the singer of love songs also defined ghazals, and despite the awareness of the question of form, these songs were daringly called ghazals. As the case of these poets shows, early compositions of Malayalam ghazals were defined thematically.

According to Shabeer Rarangoth,[4] the first Malayalam ghazal in the "true sense of the term" was Shahabaz Aman's "Sajini," included in a 2011 album with the same title. Sticking with the rules of *radif*, *qāfiya*, and *takhallus*, the poet challenged claims that the Malayalam language was inadequate to follow the rules of Urdu ghazal. Rafeeq Ahamed and Vijay Sursen also attempted to write ghazals in a similar fashion. Written in couplets, they included *radif* and *qāfiya*. Sursen included *takhallus* as well. Significantly, their compositions closely adhere to the poetic tradition of Malayalam, as they invoke several familiar images from nature and blend them with the theme of love. That is the main element that connects these compositions with their predecessors.

[4] Rarangoth's study of ghazals titled *Ghazal: Pranayaksharangalude Athmabhashanam* (Ghazal: A soliloquy of love letters) was immensely helpful in my research. While providing a history of ghazals alongside translations of Urdu ghazals in Malayalam, it also narrates the history of ghazal writing in Malayalam.

With the renewed interest in and critical engagement with the form, there came a new awareness of ghazals as a poetic genre in Kerala. However, there also came renewed questioning of the ghazal's status among early Malayalam compositions. Such an engagement proves counterproductive, as it comes at the cost of understanding the reality of the Malayalam ghazal. It is perhaps generative to diversify the definition of ghazal, using the Arabic tradition as a point of departure and invoking the foundational essence of the ghazal being a lyrical expression of love and longing. Otherwise, considering the history of Malayalam ghazal, a revival of formalism will necessarily be accompanied by a rigorous literary engagement, which will be capable of surpassing it both in quantity and quality. Yet the case of ghazal writing in Malayalam raises a number of questions: How do we account for the change that happens to a poetic form or genre when it travels across languages and literary traditions? What are the social, political, and cultural factors that influence the migration of a genre or form? What caused the late arrival of ghazals into Malayalam specifically? And do we have to essentialize a form based on the most prominent tradition, when there have been exceptions that were accepted—as is the case of ghazals in Arabic that did not have the separate formal rules and the case of the ghazals in Persian that did not follow the rule of *takhallus* for a long time—on this journey of the form?

In these translations of Malayalam ghazals, I have tried to retain the form and style of the original compositions as they appear in Malayalam. I have made an honest attempt to bring *radif* and *qāfiya*—two formal characteristics that are considered extremely relevant in any discussion of ghazals—into the translations. The couplets that have a *radif* in Malayalam include a translation of the same *radif* in English. When the lyrics are written in couplets, they appear in English as couplets. The style of these ghazals is peculiar with the invocation of images from nature, and the use of a flowery language that is not otherwise commonly used in contemporary Malayalam poetry. My English translations attempt to bring that peculiarity to the readers.

"Nin Mandahasam" (Your smile) (1998)

Venu V. Desam

I live on your memories now since I saw that smile on you
Humming a melancholy love song, I've been awaiting you

Upon seeing your face again, on a serene full moon night
I broke into a soulful ghazal of love, involuntarily, for you

Like a fledgling lost in the dark woods for many lifetimes
O angel, I have been wandering in your shadows, hopeless

The love song I long wanted to pour out afflicts my heart
Did you know such great sorrows brimmed over my soul?

"Madhurame" (Sweetness!) (2004)

Satchidanandan

Sweetness, your face, a wildflower-on-a-sunny-winter-morning like
Sweetness, your forehead, travelers-camping moony Nila banks like

Sweetness, your sharp gaze, fire and diamond pouring waterfall like
Sweetness, your lips, the morning and fruit in the singer's lyrics like

Sweetness, your pretty hands, honey and gold running springs like
Sweetness, your walk, a wind that blows right before the rain like

"Njanariyathen" (Without my knowledge) (2006)

ONV Kurup

O damsel, soul of my soul, who stole my heart
and fled, without my knowledge
What should I say you smell like, to the wind,
my messenger, out there looking for you?

Should I say, you smell of the fresh soil
sweating in the summer rain?
Or the intoxicating smell of the mango tree
blooming like jasmine at night in my backyard?
Is it the smell of the cooling oil on curly hair?
Or the smell of cardamom seeds on lips?

Is it the fresh smell of new clothes
Rubbed with the heavenly pandan flowers?
Or the fragrance of the golden elengi
that you pile on your lap?
The smell of jasmine in your hair?
Or the smell of the nectar of kadali on your lips?

"Sajini" (2011)

Shahabaz Aman

Sajini, the fate to live apart from you brings pain
To a thorn guarding roses, mockery becomes pain

Friends who long listened to my songs and wept
On the day of their leaving, our love hums pain

A path silvered by moonlight, stretching deep
My heart's desire to wander there plumbs pain

On the village road by the slender summer river
My solitary walk to your damp heart drums pain

Unbearable yearning, raag of unreadable desires,
Unfathomable prayers, Shahabaz, all that is pain!

"Manassin Marubhumiyil" (In the mind's desert) (2011)

Vijay Sursen

In my mind's desert, I wander seeking you, alone
Tossing burning sand futilely I search for you, alone

Did you not promise to come this way, some day?
Life after life, I am burning like a streetlamp, alone

Does the sun know of my shadowy heart, Sursen
Looking for my shadows at night, I get hurt, alone

“Ee Nilavil” (In the moonlight) (2016)

Rafeeq Ahamed

In the snow, fallen on a moonlit night, I heard your voice
On each of the strings of my memory, I played your voice

Days withered like wilted leaves; many nights passed by
In each trickling grain of sand, I remembered your voice

As the branches shivered, overwhelmed by a rain’s call
To the calm rustling sound of leaves, I added your voice

Saying goodbye on the grass carpet that the day spreads
Lonely, the scattering pearly raindrops imitated your voice