



Ghazals of Jeet Thayil as Cultural Performance

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Abstract

This paper presents the study of the ghazals of Jeet Thayil, an Indian poet in English writing, as cultural performance. Ghazals, since time immemorial, have been a performing art having an overt link with culture. In due course of performance, it also emerged with music and became one of the most interesting and entertaining genre of poetry. It is obvious that any poetic art is the representation of the then prevailing culture. Hence when Jeet Thayil composed his ghazals, undoubtedly, there is the presence of culture in them as well as poetic performance also became a culture in the world of readers and audience covering print, electronic and Social media in the concurrent scenario. With a strong cultural foundation in India and a resonance with universal issues, Thayil's work presents a singular artistic expression that combines ancient ghazal forms with contemporary sensibilities. This study investigates how Thayil's ghazals serve as vibrant cultural performances that reflect and interact with the complexity of modern Indian society through a detailed examination of his poetic devices, topics, and cultural allusions. This study examines how Thayil's ghazals participate in larger discussions about tradition and modernity, negotiate linguistic traditions, and enact cultural identities. It does this by drawing on themes from performance studies, literary analysis, and cultural studies. Through an analysis of the performative aspects of Thayil's poetry, this paper illuminates the ways in which his works interact with and reflect upon India's cultural milieu, leading to a deeper comprehension of the function of literature as a medium for cultural expression and interpretation.

KEYWORDS: Ghazals, poetic art, poetic performance, cultural performance, genre of poetry.

INTRODUCTION:

Ghazal, an Arabic love poem with a recurring rhyme and a limited number of two line verses (they aren't technically 'couplets', since in most of them the two lines don't rhyme) generally five to seven, an odd number of them has been a poetic performance since its beginning, and it originated in Asian countries in tenth century. In fact it originated from Persian term 'Qasida'-Praise of kings or his nobles. Way back in the twelfth century ghazal emerged in the Indian sub-continental with the advent of Mughals –representative of Persian culture and civilization. With this Persian influence in India with the arrival of Muslims Urdu also spread across the country and developed as a language providing large scope for poetry and it has greater impact on Indian culture giving birth to a new culture in India, Indo-Iranian culture. As Persian and later on Urdu ghazal

flourished, it got popularity by increasing appreciations of compression as well as the concentration of its richness in themes and suggestions.

Literally ghazal means 'conversations with women'. The earliest form had two major and broad themes generally- either an elegiac lament over lost love or the rakish (amorous) celebration which consists of women, wine (tasavvuf) and songs. Where as in Urdu ghazal has two themes- one showing love to God and another showing physical love. As ghazal passed into Persian from the early eleventh century onward, the theme of the elegiac lament had come to have mystical overtones: separation and suffering were at the heart of love, while the faithful, longing lover was even a kind of martyr. With the widespread popularity in the 'Persian cosmopolis', the early modern ghazal also came to develop major traditions in Turkish and Urdu. Early Urdu which cultivated in the Deccan during Mughal period, included a substantial body of ghazal poetry, where as the northward migration of urdu poetry around the beginning of the eighteenth century was a complex and contested process. When ghazal came to India it flourished in different Indian languages and the languages of abroad too, like Hindi, Telugu, Marathi, Gujarati, Punjabi, English, German etc. Though it can be formulated in any language today, its most famous discourse is in Urdu.

All forms of poetry can trace its origin from certain form of poetry. Ghazals have rich treasure of earlier Persian and Urdu verses and so have English ghazals. Ghazal, in fact, was popularized in the English speaking world during 1960s by Indian musicians such as Ravi Shankar and Beghum Akhtar. However, it was Agha Shahid Ali who introduced it to Americans. This introduction arose some queries within the minds of the western poets while writing or interpreting ghazals. The major query was about the unity. And formally, a ghazal is to be unified as its verses contain rhyme, meter, and typically end refrain also. It is a strong symmetry and cohesion. Every verse in a couplet is a freelance, free-standing literary work, creating its result with its internal resources. Other languages that have embraced the ghazal are Hindi, Pashto, Turkish, and Hebrew. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, a German poet and philosopher, and Federico García Lorca, a Spanish poet, both experimented with the form. During the 1960s, Indian musicians like Ravi Shankar and Begum Akhtar popularised ghazals in English-speaking countries. Agha Shahid Ali, a poet, brought the classical form to Americans.

In the postcolonial era migration was identified to seek employment, or may be for higher education, because of political problems resulting global free enterprise and permanent stay which is called diaspora. Diasporic writing show amazing connection and a striking balance between native culture and the migrated culture during attaining a hybrid identity for the individual. Agha Shahid Ali when introduced ghazals to Americans especially English ghazals, which have also the aforementioned balance. Such writing also influenced other poets like Jeet Thayil, an Indian poet writing in English. Since ghazal is a form of poetry not music, yet it has been brought to musical rhythm. In earlier days it was the subject matter of reciting in some poetry symposium generally called *Mussairah*. Under this culture of performance ghazal has overt link with audience. The more it came in reciting, the more it tempted audience providing poets an inspiration to compose. Ghazals in fact saw variety of changes with variety of audience appeared down the ages. English Ghazals have also the same appearance during the course of time.

Ghazal as Cultural Performance

Ghazals, a poetic style that emerged in Arabic and later flourished in Persian and Urdu literature, have crossed linguistic and cultural boundaries to become a thriving cultural practice in a variety of languages, including English. Ghazals, which are based on themes of love, longing, and existential reflections, offer artists with a poetic canvas on which to convey complex emotions with in a structure. The confluence of cultural aspects inside the ghazal demonstrates its wide range of applications. Agha Shahid Ali, a pioneer in introducing the ghazal to English poetry, shows this fusion by smoothly combining his Kashmiri ancestry with Western influences. His paintings, such as "The Beloved Witness," capture the complex interplay of different identities, encouraging interaction among cultures.

English poets such as John Hollander, W. S. Merwin, and Adrienne Rich have made significant contributions to the growing popularity of ghazals as cultural performances. They tweak with conventional structures, integrating innovation while retaining the form's essence. This balance between loyalty to tradition and the ability to explore new dimensions enables the ghazal to function as a dynamic medium for cultural expression.

Beyond language adaptations, the thematic universality of ghazals ensures their resonance in a variety of

cultural contexts. Love, sorrow, and introspection are universal themes that resonate with readers throughout cultures. Ghazals, thus, act as a conduit for shared human experiences, instilling a sense of cultural oneness.

John Austin's theory of performatives, as presented in his book "How to Do Things with Words," investigates the notion that particular utterances not only carry information but also execute an action. This idea demonstrates how the poetry form functions as both a language and cultural act, embodying more than just representation. In ghazals, poetic expression becomes a performative speech that engages with cultural components, emotions, and identity, rather than simply conveying meaning. The process of writing and performing a ghazal is a performative gesture, an artistic performance that embodies the emotions and subtle cultural differences conveyed in the rhyme.

Agha Shahid Ali's contribution to English ghazals serves as a good exemplar. When he expertly combines his Kashmiri cultural background with Western influences in his ghazals, the act of writing these poetry becomes a performative one. The poet is actively acting in a cultural performance by building and changing cultural identities through words, rather than simply conveying emotions or experiences.

Furthermore, the recitation or performance of ghazals in different cultural situations strengthens their performative quality. The act of performing ghazals, whether through spoken word or musical interpretations, adds another depth to Austin's notion. The recitation itself becomes a performative act, as the poet or performer uses their voice and artistic interpretation to embody the emotions and cultural resonances buried in the ghazal. Austin's theory of performatives assures that ghazals portray cultural performance by emphasising how the process of producing, reciting, and performing these literary forms is more than just conveying message. Ghazals, with their grammatical and emotional depth, have a performative dimension that actively engages with and shapes cultural manifestations. The poetry act evolves into a cultural performance, and the ghazal, as a genre, captures this dynamic interplay of language, emotion, and cultural identity. There are various fundamental factors that contribute to the cultural depth and relevance of the English ghazal, which have been transformed into a cultural performance.

Cross-Cultural Adaptation: A dynamic interaction between many cultural and linguistic contexts is involved in the adaptation of the traditional ghazal form to the English language. Poetry that crosses cultural boundaries, especially in the English ghazal genre, offers an intriguing synthesis of several cultural influences and literary traditions. The ghazal is a poetry form that originated in Arabic and Persian. It has experienced major changes as it has spread across various languages and cultures, especially in English. The English translation of the ghazal illustrates the difficulties and potential of overcoming linguistic and cultural divides in modern poetry. On the one hand, it makes it possible to investigate and value many cultural viewpoints, enhancing the canon of English poetry with a wide range of topics, forms, and imagery. It offers a forum for discussion and cultural interaction, encouraging a greater comprehension and appreciation of diverse customs. Authenticity and loyalty to the original form and essence of ghazal are further issues brought up by the adaptation process. The structure of English ghazals is frequently altered to conform to linguistic patterns and traditions, which inevitably causes deviations from the original metre, rhyme scheme, and thematic components of the form. The spirit of the ghazal may be lost in such versions, according to purists, who see it as little more than a copy lacking the subtle cultural and artistic elements that originally made it.

However, effective adaptations show poets' inventiveness and creativity in reinterpreting and modifying classic forms to fit modern linguistic circumstances and sensibilities. They add fresh ideas, images, and meanings to the ghazal that are appropriate for contemporary audiences, all while preserving its essential qualities. The contemporary adaptation of ghazal into English poetry presents poets with chances and challenges to interact with various cultural traditions and produce avant-garde pieces that transcend cultural boundaries. Some may be critical of these modifications for departing from the original form, but others see them as important advancements in the development of creative expression in a globalised society. Frequently regarded as a trailblazer in this adaptation, Agha Shahid Ali emphasises the merging of cultures in his creations, connecting his Kashmiri roots with Western inspirations. Khalvati is an English-born poet of Iranian and British descent. Her English ghazals are well-known for their exploration of identity, love, and exile while adhering to the classic ghazal's formal structure. American poet John Hollander has experimented with the English ghazal form, modifying its structure to fit his own subjects and poetic voice. English-language ghazals by American poet Marilyn Hacker, who has a deep appreciation for French and Arabic literature, combine aspects of several literary traditions with a focus on current issues. The English ghazals of Pakistani-American poet Raza Ali Hasan frequently address themes of diaspora, belonging, and cultural identity and reflect his multicultural

upbringing.

Innovative Expression within Conventional Restraints: English ghazal poets who preserve the core of the conventional ghazal structure, such as Adrienne Rich and W. S. Merwin, experiment with it. The creative use of form makes it possible to strike a balance between following custom and having the freedom to represent a wide range of cultural experiences. Particularly, Hollander has written a great deal about ghazals and other poetry traditions and genres, and his own ghazals frequently show a delightful playfulness with language and structure. Merwin's distinct poetic voice and concerns are evident in his ghazals, which are typically more contemplative and introspective.

English ghazals provide an opportunity for creative expression within traditional boundaries that accomplishes multiple goals. First of all, it gives poets an opportunity to interact with the rich history of the ghazal and help it develop and evolve into other languages and cultural situations. Second, it promotes intercultural communication and understanding since English-language poets honour and draw inspiration from the Persian and Urdu ghazal traditions. Last but not least, it gives poets the opportunity to investigate universal topics and experiences within the unique formal limits of the ghazal, producing works that connect with readers beyond linguistic and cultural barriers.

Poets can interact with tradition, play with language and form, and contribute to the continuous development of one of the most enduring poetic traditions in the world by utilising the ghazal form in English poetry. English-language poets broaden the scope of poetic expression and enhance the cultural landscape with their creative expression within traditional constraints.

Exploration of Universal Themes: By tackling universal topics like love, grief, and existential reflection, the English ghazal becomes into a cultural performance. This makes it possible for readers of different cultural backgrounds to relate to the poem and share an emotional experience. The English ghazal explores universal issues and breaks down linguistic and cultural barriers to become a cultural performance. Because of its involvement with global topics, the English ghazal can facilitate cross-cultural dialogue and mutual understanding. In "Call Me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals," Agha Shahid Ali skillfully delves into ghazal-based themes including love, loss, longing, and exile. His ghazals are approachable to people of many cultural backgrounds because they frequently draw on personal experiences while also touching on more universal human emotions and experiences.

Ali's ghazals in "Call Me Ishmael Tonight," which mirror the realities of diasporic communities and people struggling with issues of identification and belonging, usually arouse feelings of displacement and desire.

Within a veil a secret is,
within a secret, a heart is.
Within the heart, a sun is;
within the sun, fire is.

Call Me Ishmael Tonight: A Book of Ghazals

Here, Ali's investigation into concepts like inner turmoil, longing, and secret connects with readers on a global scale, surpassing the particular cultural setting of the ghazal genre. Ali crafts a cultural performance that inspires readers to consider their own experiences with love, longing, and self-discovery through his poetic language and powerful imagery.

Multilingualism and Cultural Identity: The English ghazal is a potent tool for conjuring cultural performance because of its exceptional capacity to embrace multilingualism and represent cultural identity. The English ghazal emphasises the connections between various cultural experiences and celebrates diversity by fusing aspects from many language and cultural traditions. The use of terms, expressions, or ideas from languages other than English in English ghazals is one way that they symbolise multilingualism. Poets frequently use a wide variety of languages, from Urdu and Persian to Spanish, French, and other languages, into their ghazals by drawing on their own linguistic upbringings or cultural influences. The ghazal gains depth and resonance from its multilingualism, which also encourages readers to interact with various linguistic traditions and consider the challenges of cross-cultural communication.

The English ghazal is a medium for exploring cultural identity and legacy in addition to multilingualism. Poets frequently consider their own cultural backgrounds, experiences with migration, displacement, and belonging, as well as more general issues of identity and belonging, through the form of the ghazal. Poets address these issues within the ghazal's structure, allowing readers to consider their own connections to culture, legacy, and identity in addition to expressing their own cultural identities.

In her collection "Ghazals of Ghalib," Mimi Khalvati uses the English ghazal form to examine issues of longing, relocation, and cultural legacy. Khalvati weaves together threads of Persian and English language and culture to create a lively and evocative poetic tapestry in her ghazals, drawing from her experiences as a diasporic poet and her Iranian ancestry.

The English ghazal encourages readers to interact with the difficulties of linguistic and cultural hybridity by promoting a dynamic cultural performance that celebrates variety and stimulates cross-cultural dialogue through its representation of multilingualism and cultural identity. By accomplishing this, the English ghazal transcends linguistic and cultural barriers and bears witness to the depth and complexity of the human experience.

The English ghazal is enhanced by the distinct cultural identity and multilingual viewpoint of poets such as Jeet Thayil. The form's richness in culture is enhanced by Thayil's investigation of Indian cultural components and linguistic diversity.

Interplay between Tradition and Modernity: The English ghazal is a dynamic cultural act that connects historical foundations and modern expression through the interplay of tradition and modernity. The English ghazal exhibits this interaction in a number of ways, such as its theme development, grammatical flexibility, and innovative artistic elements. The literary roots of ghazal are in Persian and Urdu traditions, and it frequently explores themes of love, longing, spirituality, and metaphysics. English-language ghazals still have these ageless themes at their core, but current poets have given them new perspectives and issues. English ghazals frequently address issues like globalisation, identity, urban life, and existentialism; they do this by reflecting the intricacies of contemporary society while maintaining a link to the genre's rich cultural past. A common theme in many English ghazals is the conflict between tradition and modernity. Poets negotiate this dynamic, representing how cultural expression and identity change in the modern world.

The linguistic adaption of ghazal to the English language reflects the interaction between tradition and modernity. Traditional ghazals were written in Persian and Urdu, but poets writing in English have adopted the form and modified it to fit their own linguistic and cultural settings. In addition to translating traditional ghazals into English, this linguistic adaptation also incorporates idiomatic phraseology, rhyme schemes, and metres from English poetry. In order to create a sense of linguistic hybridity that reflects the multiculturalism and multilingualism of the modern world, some poets even combine numerous languages inside a single ghazal.

The stylistic interaction of English ghazal between tradition and modernity is seen in the way poets respond to formal restrictions. Although conventional guidelines like the rigid rhyme pattern and the usage of the "sher" or couplet are still followed, poets frequently play around with these restrictions to produce fresh and modern expressions. This could entail altering the line lengths, adding free verse components, or integrating fresh thematic ideas inside the ghazal's structure. Poets create a rich cultural performance that connects with audiences everywhere by using these stylistic innovations to create a dynamic conversation between tradition and innovation, the past and present.

The English ghazal is a cultural performance that embraces the vitality of modern life while celebrating the continuation of literary legacy. It reflects the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernity. The English ghazal is a tribute to the poetry tradition's adaptability and continued relevance in a world that is always changing, with its theme investigation, linguistic adaptation, and stylistic invention.

Ghazals of Jeet Thayil as Cultural Performance:

In order to create 'instant rapport' with his audience, Jeet Thayil through his ghazals- Blue Ghazal, Malyalam Ghazal, and For Agha shahid Ali- projects 'graphic picture' of the prevailing scenario. Ambience has been set i.e. moon's cursed in order to give shock treatment to audience and transport them to a different place. Broken moon, of broken blue and white China, project something that is highly mysterious. Intellectual hunger overpowers his creative urge. Initially he is disillusioned and distraught-

"You won't make a rhyme tonight"-

Arundhathi Subramaniam observes, "Thayil's Poetry leaves the reader with a sense of danger, of

language teetering wildly on the edge of some precipice, between centuries, between continents, between fleetingly improvised realms, suspended somewhere between history and invention, reality and nowhere-ness." But despite widower's song in Malayalam he eventually meets his future guide Agha Shahid Ali. With this a ray of hope starts simmering and flickering. In-sync with cultural tenets viz. garba, prayer in Malayalam etc. his despair evaporates.

Give up your pen-you won't make a rhyme tonight.
The moon's cursed. Words are unsublime tonight.

-Blue Ghazal (These Errors Are Correct) pp.9

The strength of a ghazal is in its construction and from structuralist point of view its words and sentences indicate the sense of the poet. As here the phrase 'Give up your pen' denotes poet's disheartening condition how he is frustrated with his present surrounding which reveals less importance of writing due to the worse quality being produced. The imagery 'moon' presents the culture which is prevailing unworthy condition of people's practice. Thayil is a twenty first century poet and he observes the trend of practicing numerous of things in Indian culture. After projecting a very dismal scenario which initially halted his overtures with his audience, he swings to the other side of the pendulum riding on cultural hand wagon and starts performing. Jeet Thayil's "Blue Ghazal" is a moving illustration of how modern poets use the ghazal form to enhance cultural performance. Thayil's ghazal demonstrates how classic ghazal components are combined with contemporary topics and language to create a dynamic cultural performance. Poets of the modern era, such as Thayil, promote linguistic and cultural diversity through their use of the ghazal form in cultural performances. Thayil's ghazal showcases the diversity and complexity of India's linguistic and cultural terrain by fusing traditional ghazal ingredients with contemporary topics and language. His "Malayalam's Ghazal" is an excellent illustration of how modern poets employ the ghazal form to craft a performance that honours linguistic and cultural variety. India's linguistic and cultural landscape is vast and multifaceted, as evidenced by Thayil's ghazal, which combines traditional ghazal ingredients with contemporary themes and language. The line "Sometimes at daybreak you sing a Gujarati garba" (Malayalam's Ghazal pp.29) conjures up images of a traditional dance from Gujarat that is done on special occasions like Navratri. The mention of the Gujarati garba is a celebration of Gujarati customs and culture, illustrating India's rich and varied cultural diversity. Thayil honours Gujarat's and the Indian subcontinent's rich cultural heritage by including this allusion in the ghazal. Similarly, the phrase "At night you open your hair in Malayalam" also makes reference to the Malayalam language, which is mostly spoken in the Indian state of Kerala. In Malayalam, the act of parting one's hair may be a sign of intimacy or liberation, implying a closer ties to Kerala's customs and cultural legacy. By making this allusion, Thayil celebrates the distinct identity and accomplishments of the Malayalam-speaking population while highlighting the linguistic and cultural diversity of India. Jeet Thayil's ghazal "For Agha Shahid Ali" exemplifies how poetry, especially in the ghazal form, can be a potent medium for cultural performance by eliciting feelings and mutual cultural experiences. Thayil uses water as the main element in these lines to express themes of loss, impermanence, and communal sorrow. Throughout history, water has been deeply symbolic of life, purification, and rebirth in many communities. But it can also stand for loss, sadness, and the passing of time.

Who among us will escape the hand of water?

No cheek, no eye is dry in the land of water.

-For Agha Shahid Ali (These Errors Are Correct) pp.109

A universal reality is implied by the first line, "Who among us will escape the hand of water?" All people are subject to the laws of nature, which include the impermanence of existence and the certainty of death. A variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds felt connected to this existential meditation since it cuts beyond cultural barriers. Line two, "No cheek, no eye is dry in the land of water," accentuates the idea of shared loss and communal grieving even further. The term "land of water" may allude to a particular geographic area distinguished by its bodies of water, but it also alludes to the more universal human experience of sadness and loss.

Thayil's ghazal creates a cultural performance that strengthens empathy and sense of community. He transcends particular cultural contexts by focusing on universal ideas and emotions, which helps people appreciate and comprehend their shared humanity more deeply across a wide range of customs and civilizations. By doing this, Thayil's ghazal enhances our shared understanding of the human condition and advances a wider cultural conversation that cuts across linguistic and geographic divides. Thayil's ghazal explores common human situations in a modern setting, which is one way it promotes cultural performance.

Though Thayil's ghazals explore darker and more existential topics like despair, disillusionment, and the search for meaning in an increasingly fragmented world, traditional ghazals frequently centre on themes like love, longing, and spirituality.

Studying Jeet Thayil's ghazals emphasises the great influence of poetry as a medium for cultural performance, especially when viewed through the prism of his moving examination of topics and cultural quirks. In addition to beautifully capturing the essence of our shared human experiences, Thayil's deft use of the ghazal form also highlights the rich tapestry of language and cultural diversity. Thayil's ghazals acknowledge the enduring legacy of cultural heritage while bridging the gap between tradition and modernity through compelling imagery, universal themes, and language hybridity. This allows readers to engage with the intricacies of contemporary life. Thus, Thayil's contribution to the cultural performance through his ghazals is evidence of the poetry's transforming potential in promoting empathy, appreciation, and cross-cultural understanding in a world growing more interconnected by the day. When one examines Jeet Thayil's ghazals and their role in cultural performance, it is clear that his contributions act as a stimulant for the English ghazal's ongoing development as a form of culture expression. The skillful amalgamation of modern topics and linguistic hybridity with conventional aspects by Thayil enhances the ghazal form and broadens its appeal to a vast range of global listeners. English ghazals are positioned to play a bigger part in cultural performance as long as they embrace linguistic diversity, multiculturalism, and creative expression. They can act as a bridge for intercultural communication, understanding, and appreciation. Thus, Thayil's legacy is not only limited to his own works but also includes his encouragement of poets of later generations to investigate the limitless potential of the English ghazal as a vibrant and all-encompassing mode of cultural expression.

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